

***Framework for creating a culture of learning and knowledge sharing in libraries and information services***\*

**Dr. Octavia-Luciana Madge**

Department of Information and Documentation Sciences

Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest

E-mail: octavialuciana@yahoo.com

*Dr. Octavia-Luciana Madge is associate professor at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters, Department of Information and Documentation Sciences. She teaches the courses knowledge management, information users, reference services, and quality management in the information transfer. Her current research interests are academic libraries as learning organizations, and users' behaviour in the process of information seeking and retrieval.*

**Abstract**

The performance of an organization, including an infodocumentary structure such as a library or an information service, depends largely on its organizational culture, on the values it promotes. The competition on the market of information transfer has made libraries and information services orientate towards managerial processes aimed at the most important resources nowadays – the knowledge resources. Such a process is the knowledge management, and an essential role in its implementation in an institution has the organizational culture. A culture that supports learning and knowledge sharing supports organizations for such an approach and also helps them obtain performance and enjoy success in their environment. The article presents elements of a framework for creating a culture of learning and knowledge sharing in the infodocumentary structures. These elements were identified through a research on knowledge management in Romanian academic libraries which also had as a result the development of a model for the implementation of this process in the infodocumentary structures.

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## **Introduction**

Among the major themes investigated in recent literature on knowledge management, that referring to the transformation of organizations in learning organizations and the change of organizational culture so as to create a culture that promotes learning has a special place. The concept of the learning organization is essential for any knowledge management project because the improvement of knowledge sharing and learning in organizations is at the basis of knowledge management (1). Researchers and managers have realized that organizations good at learning will range ahead of the competition (2), and the strong links between learning and knowledge management are often pointed out in literature (3, 4, 5). Learning is intrinsic for knowledge management, contributing to the ability of individuals to share knowledge (6). Some analysts understand knowledge management as facilitating interaction among people and groups, this interaction being the real source of knowledge creation and sharing (7). An organizational culture oriented towards learning, innovation and performance, supporting communication, collaboration, participation, creativity and sharing of knowledge is essential and facilitate any knowledge management initiative or approach.

## **Learning and knowledge sharing in organizations**

Experts agree on the need to maximize the responsiveness of organizations to the complexity of the challenges both in the external and internal environment. Learning with the aim of regeneration and development of organizational knowledge is seen as the appropriate response of organizations to what some researchers call the endemic change in society (8). Turoff believes that organizations will succeed based on their ability to learn and adapt (9).

No matter how we choose to call the successful organization, competent organization (10), intelligent organization (11), open organization (12) etc., this is based on learning, it is an organization with a culture where people can interact and share knowledge. The learning

organization appears to be the ideal model to which all structures should turn, although building a learning organization is considered a risky activity (13) in that it involves creating a new organizational culture. But what is a learning organization? In short, we remember the five main activities which Garvin considers as defining for learning organizations: “systematic problem solving, experimentation with new approaches, learning from past experiences, learning from the best practices of others, and transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization” (14).

Many researchers make references to the individual as a decisive successful factor for knowledge management, despite the importance which is given to teams and groups (15). And indeed when it comes to learning and knowledge creation and sharing, one must start from the individual and then reach organizational culture which must support these processes intensely (16), the individual being the one who can interpret and communicate knowledge with other individuals, groups and organizations (17). But even if individual talent and creativity are at the basis of learning and innovation, ultimately it is the organizational culture that supports these processes (18).

Learning is seen as a very complex creative process (19), it is a social activity (20) and “the natural connection between working and innovating” (21). Some experts even speak of generative learning, i.e. learning that “increases the organization's ability to adapt to dynamic and unexpected situations and to respond creatively to them” (22).

Learning takes place at three different levels: individual, group/team and organizational level and specialists often refer to the circular interaction between the individual level and the group/organizational level (23, 24). There have been created many models in this sense. For example, Sanchez proposed the model of the five learning cycles according to which “individuals in organizations create knowledge, individuals and the groups they work in interact to create shared knowledge and to generate new knowledge and groups use their knowledge to undertake coordinated action and to jointly develop new organizational competences” (25). For some specialists it seems more appropriate to talk about organizational learning, ie “the ability of the organization to renew itself by changing its values, practices and processes” (26) than about the learning organization. Analysts of the learning process forewarn not only about the importance and difficulty of learning how to learn, but also about the need to unlearn, to leave behind old knowledge and practices that would not be useful in the future but could represent obstacles to new activities and new forms of management at organizational level (27, 28).

## **Organizational culture**

The greatest influence on an organization's performance is exerted by the organizational culture with all its components, and its transformation, meaning a greater emphasis on knowledge sharing, must be the key point in the organization's strategy (29). The elements of organizational culture exert their influence on the way organization "thinks, feels and acts" (30). This influence is exercised not only on the organization long-term activity, it also refers to the daily work and thus reflects on the organization's overall performance. A thoroughly investigation and understanding of organizational culture must cover all its components and also all levels on which they manifest, from physical features of the organization, to perceptions, relationships between employees, practices, habits and values promoted within the organization.

The existence of a shared vision guides the organization in one direction, creates an environment that allows and encourages learning. The same workculture as well as common language and ground lead to better communication and better sharing of knowledge (31) and actually create competitive advantage. Because the essential difference between organizations and which leads eventually to market advantage and success is given by the state in which these resources are found, namely, whether knowledge is found only in the minds of certain employees, if shared among employees or recognized and used throughout the organization (32).

Generating new knowledge is dependent on the organizational culture and in order to improve knowledge sharing and generation an interactive context must be developed and maintained. Because only when organizational culture allows and encourages change, expression of ideas, participation, communication, and dialogue, then learning and knowledge sharing are possible.

When discussing about knowledge resources and their flow in organizations, cultural, physical and organizational barriers should not be overlooked (33). In terms of knowledge sharing, studying and understanding how this takes place can provide ways to identify and overcome these barriers (34). However there are researchers (35) who do not consider that failure of knowledge sharing in organizations is due to cultural barriers and they do not give so much importance to the process of changing the organizational culture for implementing knowledge management in that it would have only a minor role and there are many other factors that influence knowledge management processes.

In the context of all these issues discussed in recent literature that analyzes the knowledge economy with its global competition and continuous changes, the process of knowledge management and the importance of organizational culture, we turned our attention to a particular type of organizations that play a key role in the knowledge-based society, namely libraries and information services.

Developing organizational practices and a culture centered on the ability to create and assimilate new knowledge and to share knowledge will assist libraries and information services with protecting themselves in front of changes and redesigning their management systems.

In this study we address some of the issues to be considered when we want to transform the organizational culture in libraries and information services and orientate it towards learning and knowledge sharing.

Libraries and information services should encourage and support at organizational level training and development of well-knit communities that collaborate and learn. They should encourage employees to develop and express new ideas, to participate in all activities and decisions within the organization. Participation and knowledge sharing contribute to the development and transformation of libraries and information services into learning and also long-term successful organizations.

### **Conducting the research**

This study is based on research conducted between October 2004 and December 2009. We proposed initially to carry out a study on knowledge management in Romanian libraries and information services (36) and starting from the first results we focused on the organizational culture in Romanian academic libraries and on the aspects that could lead to the transformation of the organizational culture in one that encourages learning and knowledge sharing, but also on the elements of a model for implementing knowledge management in libraries and information services (37, 38, 39).

### **Framework for creating a culture of learning and knowledge sharing in libraries and information services**

Orientation of organizational culture towards learning and knowledge sharing will help ensure success and long-term development of organizations, including libraries and information services. If the knowledge

manager or the chief knowledge officer is generally considered to have three major responsibilities which involve creating a knowledge management infrastructure, creating a knowledge culture and making these structures pay off economically (40), we believe that in libraries and information services and in the context of the strategic model that we proposed in 2006, the knowledge manager should firstly focus his efforts and start his approach of managing the knowledge resources' strategy from issues related to building an adequate organizational culture. Such an organizational culture should support libraries and information services in the future in the sense of adapting to the globalized environment by reinventing themselves continuously. This could allow them to respond creatively to change and maintain an important position on the market of information transfer.

In the specific context of libraries and information services as key players in this market, everything must be designed taking into account the challenges which the information and knowledge society has brought in their domain, the impact it has had on the role of librarians and on the information needs of users, then the fast development of information and communication technologies and the explosion of digital information resources to which libraries have increasingly turned, aspect which has led to significant changes of the way in which information services are provided to users (41, 42). Libraries must use to their advantage all these changes regarding digital resources and networks.

The importance of organizational culture comes also from the fact that it has influence on so many organizational elements: mission and objectives, policies and procedures, decision making, communication process, continuing professional development of employees, employee attitudes and behavior, values promoted by the organization, management style, the position libraries and information services occupy in their domain, relationships with the external environment, employee motivation, performance etc.

According to our model, the knowledge manager tasks and responsibilities are the following (Figure 1):

- to identify necessary changes at the organizational culture level and to find ways to implement these changes;
- to support and promote organizational learning;
- to work for building a culture that fosters open communication, experts networking, etc., in short a culture oriented towards learning and knowledge sharing;
- to work for developing forms of co-operation;

- to design the knowledge strategy at the level of the whole organization;
- to work for building a knowledge management infrastructure (design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation of human, library, and technological resources, etc.);
- to handle the identification, acquirement, organization, protection, distribution, and sharing of knowledge resources;
- to coordinate knowledge management programs and systems;
- to coordinate the process of creating and using knowledge (development of new products and services, market research etc.);
- to coordinate the relationships with external partners and providers of information and knowledge.

Vision and leadership are essential for this whole approach because they will support achievement of these tasks and responsibilities.

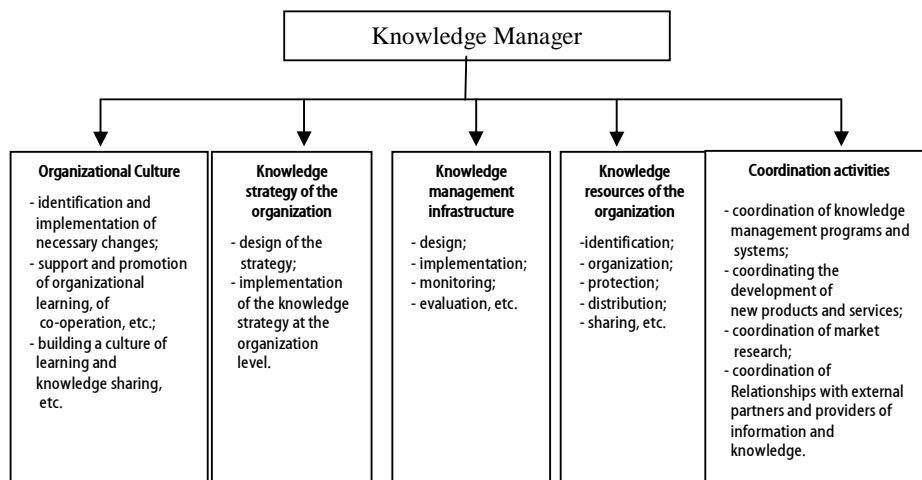


Fig. 1. Tasks and responsibilities of the knowledge manager

For creating a culture of learning and knowledge sharing in libraries and information services we believe that action must be taken in four major directions (Figure 2) aimed at:

- the communication process at organizational level;
- the motivation and reward system for employees;
- the policy on training and continuing professional development of employees;
- the system of the values promoted at organizational level.

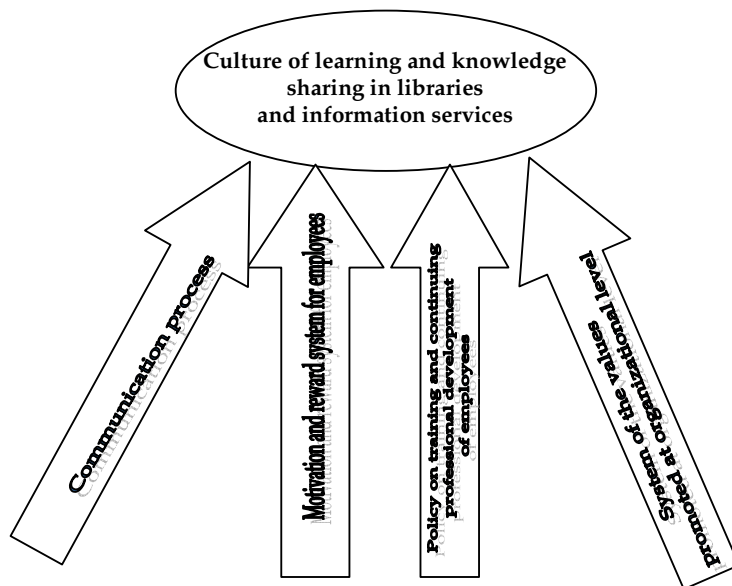


Fig. 2. Major directions of action for creating a culture of learning and knowledge sharing in libraries and information services

Communication plays a vital role in the efficient functioning of any organization. The existence of a shared vision depends on how communication occurs in the organization. It is not possible to know and understand very good the library mission, its objectives, and policies etc. without effective communication. Participation, involvement, dialogue, expressing new ideas, empowering employees should be encouraged, but this is not possible without creating conditions for effective communication and facilitating multidirectional communication channels. Development of a strategy that reflects the shared vision of the employees in that library must be based on a process of open and effective communication.

The communication process is also crucial in terms of employee perception of their organization, the values promoted within that organization and how this is perceived by the external environment. Benefits that new information and communication technologies currently offer can be exploited to create fast, open and multidirectional communication channels. A communication strategy that takes into account support for learning, knowledge sharing, and in fact knowledge management systems, should consider creating the necessary conditions for developing communities of practice and an interactive environment within the library. In promoting and facilitating



learning opportunities, the knowledge manager can play a key role by encouraging communities of practice and developing teams in order to learn and generate knowledge (43, 44).

In the action of improving communication process in libraries and information services, both formal and informal communication together with their related channels should be considered. Informal communication, face to face, group and team meetings must be encouraged because people communicate and learn better in an informal context. Informal communication also contributes to the confidence that library staff develops in each other. Managers should also not neglect the barriers of various types that may occur in communication and also the complexity of this process that can take place in so many ways and forms (45).

The values and attitudes promoted in libraries and information services, their encouragement and development at the employee level have a major influence in supporting processes such as learning and knowledge sharing. Among the values with a key role in the success of organizations on the globalized knowledge market (Figure 3), libraries and information services should give great importance to the following: open communication, knowledge sharing, learning, collaboration, dialogue, performance, creativity, flexibility, change, responsiveness to new ideas, teamwork, professional co-operation, exchange of experience, transparency, empowerment, participation, etc.

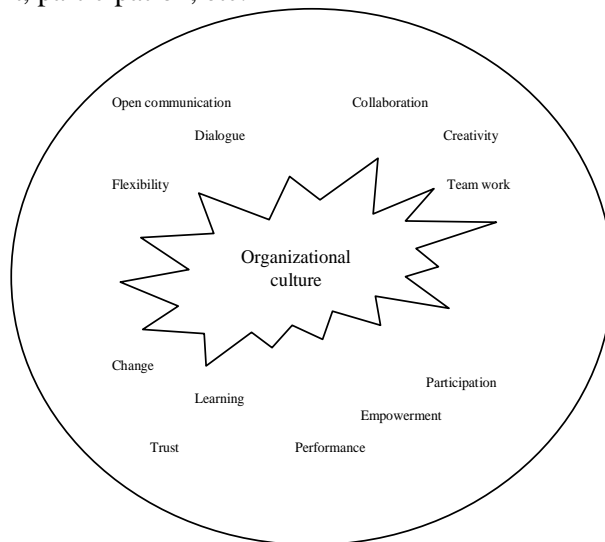


Fig. 3. Values which should be promoted by the organizational culture in libraries and information services

But in the field of libraries and information services, we can also talk about professional values specific to these organizations (46) which should not be overlooked by managers: the value of information, accessibility to information and services, user orientation, social inclusion, providing selective information, that is evaluated, validated, directly exploitable, current and quickly obtained information, etc. Promoting these values which facilitate and stimulate learning and knowledge sharing among employees is very important in libraries.

The policy of training and professional development of employees in libraries and information services strongly influences the learning process. Libraries have the advantage of various tools for continuing professional development: reading and updating, coaching or mentoring, job exchanges or job shadowing, conferences, distance education, training others, meetings, networking, learning from others, etc. (47). How employees will pertain and respond to growth and improvement of their speciality knowledge, their involvement in various forms of training and professional development, their active/passive attitude towards these aspects of professional development are influenced by the organization policy and the importance libraries and information services give to these issues. Developing programmes of training and professional development at internal level, encouraging employee participation in external training and professional development programmes, offering them material support to participate in such programmes, encouragement of their participation in conferences, and preparation of communications and articles, their involvement in research concerning the library's activity should be taken into consideration because learning and increasing employee knowledge are supported by such actions.

In libraries, learning at individual, group/team and organizational level and also knowledge sharing need to take into account the existing types of groups and teams in these organizations, namely: operational teams, strategic teams, multi-skill teams, virtual teams, networks and communities of practice, etc. (48).

The motivation and reward system for employees is very important in the process of sharing knowledge. Staff should be motivated to learn, develop professionally, enhance their expertise, be active professionally. Rewarding employee performance may be at material level or by promoting their career, by supporting their participation in various professional events, etc. In libraries and information services, for increasing employee satisfaction we have at hand specific approaches, namely creation of new roles, of new teams, introduction of various new practices and patterns of

work like flexible working, job sharing, etc. (49). The factors that motivate the staff and which impact on their activities, and the management practices and methods that support performance among employees have been investigated (50), but the motivation and reward system for employees must be well developed and be based on the analysis and the specific situation of each organization and its employees.

The data collected between 2004–2009 in our research and the results from these data analysis sent us to the conclusion that for creating a culture of learning and knowledge sharing in Romanian infodocumentary structures, all these issues should be considered, action being necessary in these four directions.

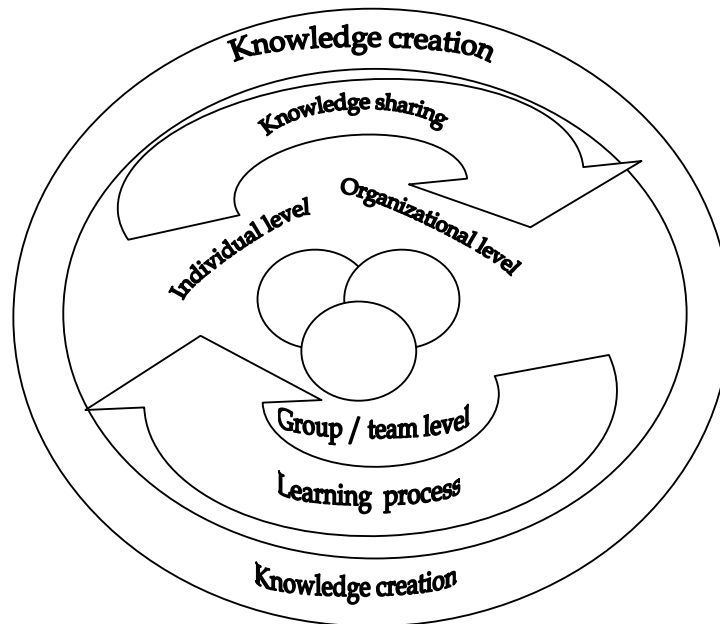


Fig. 4. Learning and knowledge sharing in libraries and information services

The model from 2006 and the framework from 2010 which we propose offer a possible solution to implement knowledge management and to create a culture of learning and knowledge sharing in libraries and information services (Figure 4). Their novelty, importance and usefulness stay in that they are general, allowing adjustments depending on the peculiarity and scale of each institution. They are flexible and can be used in any infodocumentary structure with the necessary adaptations, they can lead

to improvement of performance and are a starting point for developing other specific models.

## Conclusions

Our study provides a starting point for future research to explore in greater depth and go in more details about the elements of the model and framework we proposed and answer questions such as How should be developed a system to motivate staff in Romanian libraries? How communication can be improved at the library level? Etc. The model and the framework we designed starting from our research offer the basis for understanding the context of libraries and for creating a culture of learning and knowledge sharing in these infodocumentary structures. Future research should develop more systematic and detailed approaches and ways to manage and improve knowledge sharing in libraries. This could bring great advantages by increasing the efficiency of these organizations in the globalized knowledge-based society.

Recent literature is rich in researches that analyze, present and underline the benefits of applying the knowledge management process in organizations, the need to change the organizational culture and improve the organizational learning. The importance of these issues is evident for the future of organizations. And as Stoica says “By implementing knowledge management organizations gain intelligence, learn, adapt, change themselves and change the environment, produce not only specific performance, but a special kind of tacit performance that penetrates gradually deep into the organizational fiber and gene. And all these through general awareness and participation” (51).

Aspects of organizational culture, organizational learning and knowledge sharing should be considered when approaching implementation of knowledge management in the infodocumentary structures. However, research has focused so far on the importance of culture and less on creating a framework for building such a culture.

This study highlights the directions on which library managers should concentrate when they operate changes at the organizational culture level. Future research on organizational culture in libraries and information services and on the learning and knowledge sharing processes can help deepen this area and provide a stronger basis to be useful in the infodocumentary structures.

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