

PROMOTING AND DEVELOPING KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITIES IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge is a critical resource for competing in today's economy. Today's organizations must find ways to turn the knowledge of their employees into a competitive advantage in order to survive and succeed. It is very critical that the relevant people are well-equipped with the necessary knowledge and knowhow in order to cope effectively and efficiently particularly when making decisions that affect their lives as well as the lives of others. Thus, continuous enhancement to their knowledge, skills and abilities is a must. However, companies are in danger of losing critical organizational knowledge when workers retire or resign. This paper is focused on promoting and developing knowledge communities or communities of practice in the workplace. The benefits of establishing communities go far beyond retention of knowledge. It is a way of describing how people in organizations can teach and learn from each other. By facilitating the development of communities of practice in the workplace, organizations can help ensure that their human resource is fully and effectively utilized.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is a critical resource for organizations to successfully compete in today's economy. Organizations must find ways to turn the knowledge of their employees into a competitive advantage in order to survive and succeed in this knowledge era. There are various situations, however, whereby companies are in danger of losing critical organizational knowledge. For instance, when workers retire or resign, they will take away with them everything they know. Thus, organizations must find a way to manage their knowledge bank effectively and efficiently. An organization's knowledge bank is fundamentally based on informal on-the-job experiences and knowledge. For instance, most employees learn more when they interact with each other at the workplace because much of the knowledge are stored in the brains of the workers.

KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Librarians organize, filter, disseminate, share and use data, information and knowledge daily. They need relevant data, information and knowledge to be able to carry out their tasks effectively and efficiently. They need data, information and knowledge to assist them in making quality decisions and solving problems. De Long and Fahey (2000) described data as "raw facts or observations", information as patterns that individuals made up from the data obtained and knowledge as the product or result of human reflection and experience which increased the capacity of individuals in decision making and action to achieve some purpose. They looked at knowledge from two perspectives:-

- Explicit knowledge, which can be easily explained and shared as they are normally recorded or documented such as in formal rules, tools, and processes; and
- Tacit knowledge, which is what we personally know but difficult to share or explain it to others e.g. acquired skills and know-how.

Those forms of knowledge can be found in any organization including the libraries. Thus, libraries must find ways to successfully combine tacit and explicit knowledge at all levels of

the organization by encouraging the learning of tacit knowledge to increase the skill and creativity of its employees and enhances explicit knowledge to maximize efficiency.

Knowledge is different from information as knowledge is seen as an asset only when it is used or applied. Librarians and users only sieve and select the data which they feel are relevant to them. These data will be converted into some patterns of understanding or information. If the information proved to be useful and applicable to them, it has become knowledge. In other words, it is the way the information is manipulated and used that turns it into knowledge.

De long and Fahey (2000) divided knowledge into three distinct types:

- (i) Human knowledge which included everything that one knows and knows how to apply their acquired skills or expertise to go about doing things. It is within the person, a combination of both tacit as well as explicit knowledge.
- (ii) Social knowledge or collective knowledge is tacit in nature and develops only when group members collaborate and work together effectively and successfully.
- (iii) Structured knowledge on the other hand is explicit in nature and develops based on rules, procedures, processes and regulations.

So, what is knowledge management? According to Friedman (2000) knowledge management refers to the ability of an organization to produce positive impacts through the creation and dissemination of as much of the right knowledge as possible to as many people at the right time. The purpose of knowledge management is to enhance organizational performance through the application of tools, processes, systems, structures, and cultures to improve the creation, sharing, and use of all three types of knowledge that are critical for decision making.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT PROCESS

When employees resign, they will take with them everything that they know. New employees come in, and the organizations will have to train them from zero until they have acquired the

necessary knowledge and skills to perform their jobs. This process costs the organizations time, money, and customers. An effective knowledge management (KM) program will be able to help these organizations cut some costs. But, what do we need to put together a successful KM program? Saunders (2000) did a survey among companies that have made great progress in implementing KM programs. Among the factors that contributed towards the success were identified as follows:

1. A well-defined program – specify what we want to achieve from the KM program, i.e. what are the objectives?
2. Choose a process – Saunders (2000) categorized the KM efforts into three:
 - Self-directed, whereby employees will use the database technology provided by the organizations to find the information they need.
 - Knowledge networks, whereby the employees will use the networks available to find the information they require.
 - Facilitated transfer, whereby a specific employee or unit will be assigned to integrate or encourage knowledge transfer throughout the organization, and to train other employees on how to participate in knowledge sharing and transfer within the organization.
3. Find and enlist the right people – identify the right people, either internally or externally, from every discipline, to be involved in the process.
4. Make sure the technology supports your data – choose appropriate software programs to facilitate the IT part of the knowledge management process.
5. Invest in training knowledge workers – we need an effective system to manage the flow of information. Those involved in facilitating the knowledge transfer process must be well trained and equipped with the necessary skills to capture and disseminate knowledge to everyone in the organization.
6. Focus on strategy –find the most effective ways to connect employees to one another so that it will be a lot easier for those who have problems to locate the experts in that area, to share what they know, to learn from each other, and to develop new knowledge.

7. Get senior management's continuous support –get the support and commitment from the senior management, as they have the resources, the people, or the tools to get the job done and to get people to share their knowledge.
8. Teach employees to share their knowledge – this is one of the hardest part of the process, because people will try to keep some of what they know to themselves. Why is that so? Individuals want job security, but if everyone else knows what you know, you can be replaced at any point in time. Thus, organizations must find ways to get employees to willingly and openly share their knowledge and know-how.

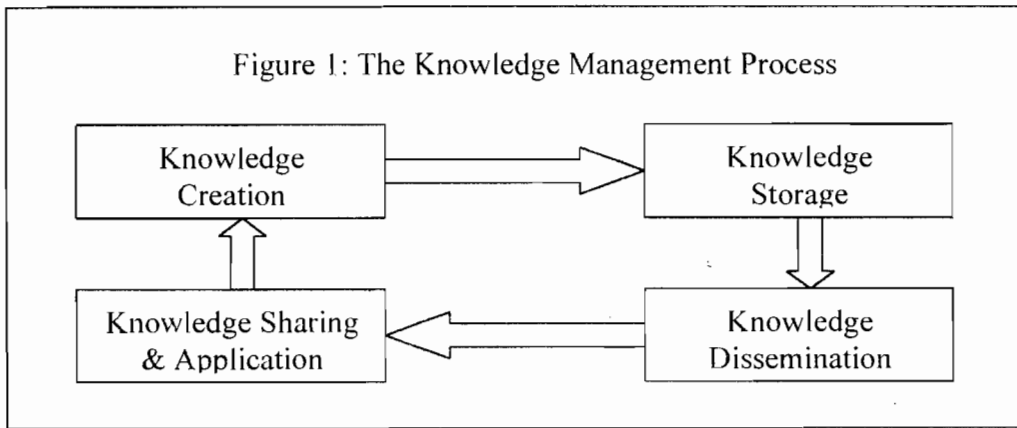


Figure 1 exhibits the knowledge management process. By integrating the tacit and explicit knowledge as well as the three types of knowledge within an organization, it will be able to create and develop useful and meaningful ideas and knowledge which can be applied when solving problems and making decisions. Changes may lead to knowledge and skills obsolescence. Thus, continuous learning and training will be necessary to keep up with the latest knowledge and skills in various disciplines in order to adapt to the new competitive realities. The organization must figure out how to best organize and present important data, information and knowledge so that it will be easy for employees to locate and retrieve what they want. Besides that, the organization must also find the most suitable method(s) and channel(s) to distribute, transfer and share knowledge throughout the organization. Finally, the organization must ensure that the employees apply and use relevant knowledge in the workplace.

KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITIES

In this era of technology, users expect fast responses to their questions. By identifying and creating communities within an organization, libraries can help its users much faster as there are more experts to attend to users' needs and demands. Furthermore, these communities can help reduce the time and expense of training and updating employees. It is more cost efficient and less time consuming to leverage the internal knowledge available from communities of experienced employees. The challenge is for all organizations trying to prosper in the information age to take full advantage of its most valuable resource, that is the knowledge that its people possess. The benefits of establishing communities go far beyond retention of knowledge.

The term "communities of practice" or knowledge communities is one of the approaches which is quite common within the knowledge management phenomenon. What are communities of practice? They are informal groups of people who get together regularly to share knowledge and solve each other's problems. One distinct characteristic is that they're self-selected. Communities of practice develop naturally as people with common interests get together to share their knowledge, ideas and experiences, and collaborate in free-flowing and creative ways that foster new approaches to problem solving and decision making. Most people, in fact, belong to a number of communities, be they work-related or not. Some, for instance, belong to common lunch groups at work and also to the neighbourhood councils in the community they live in. These communities are highly effective ways for people to continuously learn and acquire knowledge.

People may form communities for several reasons. Some communities are formed in response to changes within the organization, such as new company strategies, changes in policies and procedures or reengineering. Other communities may be formed in response to changes originating outside the organization, such as the rise of e-commerce, changes in the government policies, advanced technology, the economic situation.

Communities of practice are a crucial aspect of knowledge management. Innovative business organizations are formalizing these communities to create new mechanisms for creating, capturing, and sharing the knowledge that is critical to their success. They can be defined as networks that identify issues, share approaches, and make the results available to others. They are highly effective ways for organizations to continuously learn. Communities of practice can help their members share with each other the know-how and experience they've gained throughout their careers. Through this sharing, members of communities of practice raise each other's competencies. In fact, these communities work best when addressing pressing needs, such as difficult customer challenges or streamlining regulatory processes.

Creating an informal learning organization in a formal way can be done. Most learning in an organization doesn't necessarily have to take place in formal training programs. This was the conclusion of a 1996 Bureau of Labor Statistics Report, which indicated that people learn an astonishing 70% of what they know about their jobs informally, through processes not structured or sponsored by the company. Studies on workplace learning conducted by the Education Development Center (EDC) in Newton, Massachusetts, USA, at seven manufacturing companies found that informal learning takes place informally, spontaneously and continuously, in the course of everyday activities and routine procedures (_____, 2000). One of the tools or methods that we can apply to inculcate the culture of continuous learning in an organization is through a community of practice. Communities of practice are great for sharing tacit knowledge, because tacit knowledge resides in relationships. To be effective, communities need to address these challenges and create enough human connection to build real relationships.

Organizations are continuously striving to gain and maintain their competitive advantage in the industry they are in. One of the factors that will help contribute towards this goal is the level of intellectual capacity which an organization possesses. Hence, we need to seriously look at the issue of how to go about building and encouraging a K-workforce at our workplace. There will be no simple solution because in a diverse and changing environment, the nature of knowledge management is likely to be ever-changing and may serve different

purposes for different organizations. For instance, some organizations may focus on knowledge of customers, others may be concerned with the building of knowledge capital, or with providing enhanced access to knowledge. We have to be clear that knowledge is not necessarily synonymous with information. What counts is how we manipulate and master information. If we wish to transform it into something usable we must focus on people, not data, and ensure that qualities like independence, innovations and creativity are encouraged in the workplace.

CHALLENGES AND ISSUES IN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Organizations are encouraged to put up an initiative by fostering communities of practice in the workplace. The challenge is for all organizations trying to prosper in the information age to take full advantage of its most valuable resource, that is the knowledge that its people possess. By facilitating the development of communities of practice in the workplace, organizations can help ensure that this resource is fully and effectively utilized.

According to McDermott (2000a), there are four main challenges in developing knowledge communities: the management challenge, the community challenge, the technical challenge and the personal challenge.

- The management challenge

Communities are held together by people who care about the community, who have a heartfelt interest in the topic. Community co-ordinators exist to connect the people. Thus, they need to have technical knowledge and social skills to perform their jobs well. their main task is to communicate to the people the values of sharing knowledge among one another.

- The community challenge

Leaders in the communities must be actively involved in developing knowledge communities. They must have the skills to involve the people in the community in knowledge management programs. They must be able to create real value for community members in order to get their involvement.

- The technical challenge

The real challenge is to design the social side of collaborative technology to make it easy to connect and contribute to the community, to design human and IT systems that make information available and help community members think together.

- The personal challenge

The most valuable community events focus on thinking together to solve problems. But discussing problems, sharing half-baked ideas, or thinking aloud may not come naturally. Developing this is a personal challenge for most community members.

Most writers tend to link knowledge management with advanced information and communication technologies to support the collection and exchange of information among the people. Application of technologies in communicating messages to the public has a lot of advantages. The public gets to know or learns about relevant information more quickly through the application of advanced technologies. Technology, such as the internet, is a communication means that is widely used today as it generates and disseminates a lot of information to the users. However, one has to be aware that not all of these information are accurate and true. Librarians and users need to know and understand how to gather and sieve only the relevant information for their use. Hence, we need to seriously look at the issue of how to go about creating, organizing, storing, disseminating, transferring, sharing and applying knowledge at the workplace.

Ezra Ondari-Okemwa (2000) stated that librarians and libraries are basically communicators of information and public university libraries in particular represent a major storehouse of human knowledge. However, if they are to be of any value, they must be able to disseminate this knowledge in large quantities to their users. Users come to the libraries for some reasons and they may require assistance from the librarians to look for data and information. Librarians should not take it for granted that all users know how and where to look for required data and information and who to ask for assistance.

CONCLUSION

The main challenge in the 21st century is not where to acquire knowledge but how to manage knowledge assets. Employee and organizational development is necessary to capture and disseminate knowledge. Communities of practice or knowledge communities is a way of describing how people in organizations can teach and learn from each other. It's only through the acquisition of knowledge by individuals and their willingness to use that knowledge for the benefit of the organization that competitive advantage can be attained. Thus, library personnels must be more creative and innovative. They must acquire the skills of disseminating, using and managing information and knowledge effectively. They must apply various methods to generate new ideas and new ways of doing things.

Today's organizations must find ways to turn the knowledge of their employees into a competitive advantage in order to survive and succeed. However, companies are in danger of losing critical organizational knowledge when workers retire or resign. The benefits of establishing communities include assisting users much faster, reducing the time and expense of training and updating employees and fully and effectively utilizing the library's human resources.

Changes that have been and will be occurring are forcing the libraries and librarians to review their roles in managing knowledge continuously. Libraries and librarians need to understand the changing expectations of everyone involved, how to respond to these new expectations, how the library's mission and strategies are being affected by these changes, and what they should do to fulfill their new roles.

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