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Application of Knowledge Management in Academic Libraries: A SWOT Analysis

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Introduction.

In the last decade, academic libraries have generated increasing amounts of information concerning their operations. Yet, like other types of libraries, they rarely use this operational information to create and apply organizational knowledge. Instead, they give several excuses like saying they are so involved in providing services that there is no time to engage into new practices, nor time to explore this overabundance of information which could lead to increase in organizational effectiveness. In fact, most academic libraries do not consider organizational knowledge as a resource in its own right as they do to their staff, their collections, or other facilities. Academic librarians do not manage knowledge produced by their institutions as they manage other external resources because they have not structured their libraries to use organizational knowledge. They do not apply institutional knowledge to improve services related to scholarly information. For example, libraries and their websites all generate information and knowledge but very few librarians consciously use that knowledge to improve organizational efficiency nor do libraries lead their institutions in managing their knowledge. The evolving field of knowledge management offers academic libraries great opportunities to create knowledge to improve organizational efficiency and effectiveness for both themselves and their institutions. Some tasks carried out by academic librarians related to handling information as in indexing, codification, classification, database management, authority control and dissemination are all very relevant to the application of KM in academic libraries. However these tasks will require new and additional skills and competencies such as interpersonal and leadership, managerial, knowledge generation and sharing techniques for improved performance. As for challenges academic libraries face innumerable challenges in nurturing and managing knowledge. Managing tacit knowledge is a challenge, how to capture and use tacit knowledge internalized by individuals is a huge challenge for libraries (Bhatt, 2002). However, literature indicates that the most mentioned challenges to successful knowledge management application in academic libraries include: misunderstanding of the concept of KM, lack of knowledge sharing culture, reluctance of librarians to embrace change, lack of skilled and competent staff, lack of incentives for innovation and knowledge sharing, lack of commitment by management, lack of motivation for collaboration. (Maponya 2004; Al-Hawamdeh, 2005; Roknuzzana, Kanal & Umemoto 2009; Ugwu & Ezem 2010; Asogwa, B. E. (2012). These challenges are threats to the application of knowledge management in the library. This study therefore presents a SWOT analysis of the academic library as an option to better x-ray the library's operations in order engage and improve in KM activities and processes.

The Concept of Knowledge Management

Knowledge management is a concept that has emerged in the business community and has been discussed and written extensively over the past decade by various researchers and professionals (Allee 1997; Davenport et al 2000; McCreedy 1999; Bhatt 2002; Probst, Raub & Romhardt 2000; Skyrme 1997; Wiig 2000; López-Nicolás 2011). Knowledge is the important part of knowledge management. Therefore, to determine what knowledge management is, it is necessary first to examine the various concepts of knowledge by distinguishing between data, information and knowledge.

Several researchers have addressed the differences between data, information and knowledge (Allee 1997; Bellinger, Castro & Mills 1997; Barquin 2000; Beller 2001). According to Mustajarvi, Suurla and Markkula (2002, p.35), “data refers to codes, signs, signals and symbols that do not necessarily have any significance as such”. This means that data are raw facts that have no context or meaning of their own. What organizations do is to collect, summarize and analyze data to identify patterns and trends. Most of the data collected is associated with functional processes of the organization. On the other hand, information as a concept has different meanings, depending on the context in which it is used or discussed. Data becomes information when organized and patterned, grouped, and categorized thereby, increasing its depth of meaning to the receiver (Boone 2001, p.3). Information can be changed into knowledge through learning and adoption (Suurla, Markkula & Mustajarvi, 2002). It is evident from literature that knowledge is an intrinsically ambiguous term, therefore, a precise definition of it is difficult. This is because different disciplines use the term differently to denote different things. However, despite the difficulties in defining knowledge, it is generally agreed that, “knowledge is the expertise, experience and capability of staff, integrated with processes and corporate memory” (Abell & Oxbrow 2001, p.73). It is always bound to individuals and validated in the context of its application.

Organizations have been applying knowledge management and technology not only to survive but to gain strategic competitive advantage (Holsapple, Clyde, ed. (2013). As a result, Knowledge Management (KM) is being implemented and used across the globe, in the public and private sector as well as in higher education institutions including their libraries.

What then is knowledge management? Knowledge management could be defined as all the processes that create and share knowledge across an organization to optimize decision making

in the attainment of its goals and objectives. It is an emerging discipline developing the cracks and crannies of a vast arena of disciplines including library and information science. It involves capturing an organization's knowledge as well as its assets and then sharing that knowledge with the right people and at the appropriate time throughout the organization. Therefore, in the context of this study, knowledge management can be defined as the acquisition, analysis, usage, storage and application of knowledge in the library by librarians.

The management of information and knowledge has long been regarded as the reserved domain of libraries and librarians (Mohmood, 2003; Olembe 2012). Independently, academic librarians have developed and applied many knowledge management principles in the provision of academic library services. They have been practicing knowledge management knowingly or un-knowingly for several decades. Their traditional role has been to identify, collect, process, share information resources retrieve, utilize, connect users to information, and help them access their information needs. Reference, cataloging, and some other library services are designed to encourage the use of scholarly information thus increasing the amount of academic knowledge being used in higher education. Yet, as seen in literature, libraries are reticent to engage in the application of knowledge management, consequently very little is being done to use organizational information to create knowledge that can be used to improve the functionality of the library.

A study by Siddike & Munshi (2012), revealed that most librarians got to know about KM in literature and elsewhere, and they have not done any course relating to it, thus the concept is vague in their minds. This is perhaps another reason for variance in perception of KM by library and information professionals, and reason why they are reluctant to accept it as a new concept that could improve organizational performance (David and Naushed (2015).

The objective of this article is to urge academic librarians to transform the skills and competencies they have used for several decades in routine library services and operations to now manage knowledge. They should consciously embrace the strategy of finding and providing the right knowledge to the right users, in the right formats and at the expected time. In other words, time is running out for library and information professionals to change from information managers to content and knowledge managers. For a start to this journey, this study proposes an option, which is, to conduct a SWOT analysis of library processes. SWOT is the modern tool for analyzing the situation of the libraries within the context of knowledge management.

SWOT Analysis of the Position of Librarians in Knowledge Management Practices or Programs

There are various approaches used in the analysis of an organization's strategic position in terms of knowledge management. One of the strategies is conducting a SWOT analysis.

SWOT is an acronym 'S' stands for strengths, 'W' for weaknesses, 'O' for opportunities and 'T' for threats (<http://rapidbi.com/swotanalysis/>). SWOT analysis refers to the strategic utilization of tools in identifying internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats. The purpose of a SWOT analysis is to build on internal strengths so as to drastically reduce or completely eliminate weaknesses, as well as to optimize opportunities in order to minimize threats from external forces (Kirgin 2010). SWOT is a very useful tool for reviewing and understanding an organization's position prior to making decisions about future implementation of a new project (Madden, 2008). It was created in the 1960's by business experts Edmund P. Learned, C. Roland Christensen, Kenneth Andrews and William D. Book in the book titled: Business Policy, Text and Cases (R.D.Irwin, 1969).

A SWOT analysis of knowledge management in the context of librarianship presents the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats confronting libraries and information professionals in the development of user-centered dynamic knowledge based services. The SWOT analysis therefore, is a sustainable effort to enable librarians to have a holistic and clearer view of the full potentials, career expansion opportunities, deficiency, if any, as well as challenges militating against showcasing such potentials. Supporting this view, Kumar and Gupter (2012) have stressed that SWOT analysis allows strategies to be planned for successful utilization and exploitation of all the strengths and all the opportunities to overcome weaknesses and threats. It should be noted that the strengths and weaknesses exist in the internal environment of the library, while opportunities and threats exist in the external environment of the library.

The academic library can be perceived from both the external and internal environments. The external environment relates to the community of library's users, whereas internal environment relates to the staff, managerial structure, resources and library operations. A SWOT analysis, therefore, is an analysis of the library's position vis-a-vis its external and internal environments. It helps the library focus on improved library services and programs to identify the areas where the library is strong or weak, focus on where the opportunities are, and then overcome the threats/challenges. The SWOT analysis is the best practice to understand the current position of the library vis-a-vis knowledge management practices.

Wikipedia also presents SWOT analysis as a structured planning method used to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats involved in the library by identifying favorable and unfavorable internal and external factors that can be used to achieve the library's goals and objectives.

In the context of this study, SWOT is an activity predominantly involving library staff, library users and sometimes involving all the stakeholders. The analysis compares strengths and weaknesses by evaluating the internal environment alongside the opportunities and threats presented by the library's external environment.

The SWOT Analysis:

Internal Survey of Weaknesses and Strengths in the academic library:

An assessment of strengths and weaknesses can be facilitated through methods like surveys, questionnaires, observation, focus groups and interviews with students, library staff and other knowledgeable sources.

Strengths: Strengths refer to tasks and actions one can do well with talent, skills and knowledge which also include one's selling point. They are found in the internal environment of the library. Strengths refer to the resources or capability of the library to successfully achieve its goals and objectives. The strengths of the library should deal with threats in the external environment, so that the strengths can be maximized and the threats can be minimized. Therefore the most desirable situation of libraries is that in which the libraries can use their strengths to take advantage of opportunities. The libraries have to strive to overcome the weaknesses and making them strengths. They have to face threats to cope with them, so that they can focus on opportunities (Wehrich, H. K 1994).

The strengths of the library could be identified through its resources, finances, staff skills, competencies, infrastructure, relationship with hierarchy and overall capabilities of the entire workforce. Some examples of library strengths includes its hybrid and robust collection, electronic resources, qualified and competent library staff, presence of adequate state-of-the-art technologies and tools to drive KM processes, fluid communication, knowledge sharing culture, membership in a library consortium, cooperation ties with other university libraries and networking to share resources. Strengths should be maximized, for example successes to build on fruitful actions.

Weaknesses: Weaknesses refer to disabilities or shortcomings, faults and limitations of the library that prevent librarians or the library from achieving its set goals and objectives. They are weak factors which need to be addressed and improved. The weaknesses of a library

includes lack of qualified, competent and adequate personnel, lack of digital and electronic resources, lack of digital space, lack of communication with management, inadequate and obsolete technologies and infrastructure. Weaknesses should be minimized, corrected and or completely eliminated.

Opportunities: Opportunities and threats represent the external environmental forces in which the library operates. Opportunity is a favorable manifestation in the external environment that poses as an advantage for growth, expansion and recognition of the library. Opportunity is considered as a conducive or favorable situation in the library's external environment; those positive events which occur externally to academic libraries that might be pursued with new strategies. Opportunities should be considered as chances that should be exploited for the benefits of the library. An opportunity will allow the library to enhance or improve its performance. However, the library may not have control over opportunities sometimes. For example, technological developments, changes in the external environment and operational changes may be opportunities or threats. Unskilled personnel may face threats in technological developments, but training and peer assistance will be considered as opportunities to such staff). Opportunities for the library can be summarized to mean: giving formal training programs and demonstration on how to use selected library software to staff, open access movement, digitization of library collections, building and managing institutional repositories, availability of internet and effective usage by staff and students, library website, users' needs etc. With great opportunities, KM presents to academic libraries and information science professionals the possibility to expand their horizon, achieve great visibility and add value to library services and operations. Badghdadabad (2008) observed that inserting KM into library and information science curriculum is a response to the threats of professional irrelevance.

Threats: These are the external factors that tend to jeopardize the successes of library operations. They are the challenges found in the external environment of the library. Threats should be met if the library has to achieve its vision. They are the unfavorable conditions, barriers or constraints which may pose problems in the day-to-day operations of the library. Threats to academic libraries could be inadequate financial and electronic resources, high demand for changing needs of users, increase in cost of publications, information service providers, and access to information. For a successful application of KM in academic libraries, identified threats should be minimized.

Advantages of SWOT analysis

Conducting a SWOT analysis unveils several advantages to the academic library, its personnel and management. Some advantages include the following:

- Library management will be able to understand and determine present position of the library vis-à-vis knowledge management processes and practices.
- The gap between the existing library practices and the future of the library and the future of the library if knowledge management is implemented will be known.
- Opportunities will be an orientation and will facilitate library operations that are related to improve KM practices.
- Opportunities will suggest the right lane for libraries to follow towards achieving future expectations and library's goals.
- SWOT analysis would provide managers with responses for increased efficiency and effectiveness of existing library services.
- It is a way for library directors to understand the status of their libraries, and develop strategies to enable them find answers to respond to the incessant changing and increasing needs of library patrons.
- SWOT analysis will prepare the library to engage in better and successful KM practices.

Conclusion

The application of knowledge management in academic libraries will lead to an improved ability of the library to learn, identify and use knowledge processes and activities from both internal and external resources. A SWOT analysis is an excellent tool for exploring the possibilities of initiating new programs and knowledge management initiatives in academic libraries. A SWOT analysis looks at future possibilities for the library through a methodical approach of reflection into both positive and negative concerns. It will help library managers to quickly expand their vision. The strongest message from a SWOT analysis is that, whatever action is decided, final decision should contain the following elements: building on **Strengths**, minimizing **Weaknesses**, seizing **Opportunities**, and counteracting **Threats**. Conducting a SWOT analysis of library practices, services, resources, and procedures of academic libraries for the purpose of integrating knowledge management will lead to a generation of new and better quality services and improve performance.

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