1-2023

Overcoming Barriers to Documenting Institutional Knowledge

Cynthia Bassett

Lauren Seney

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO DOCUMENTING INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE
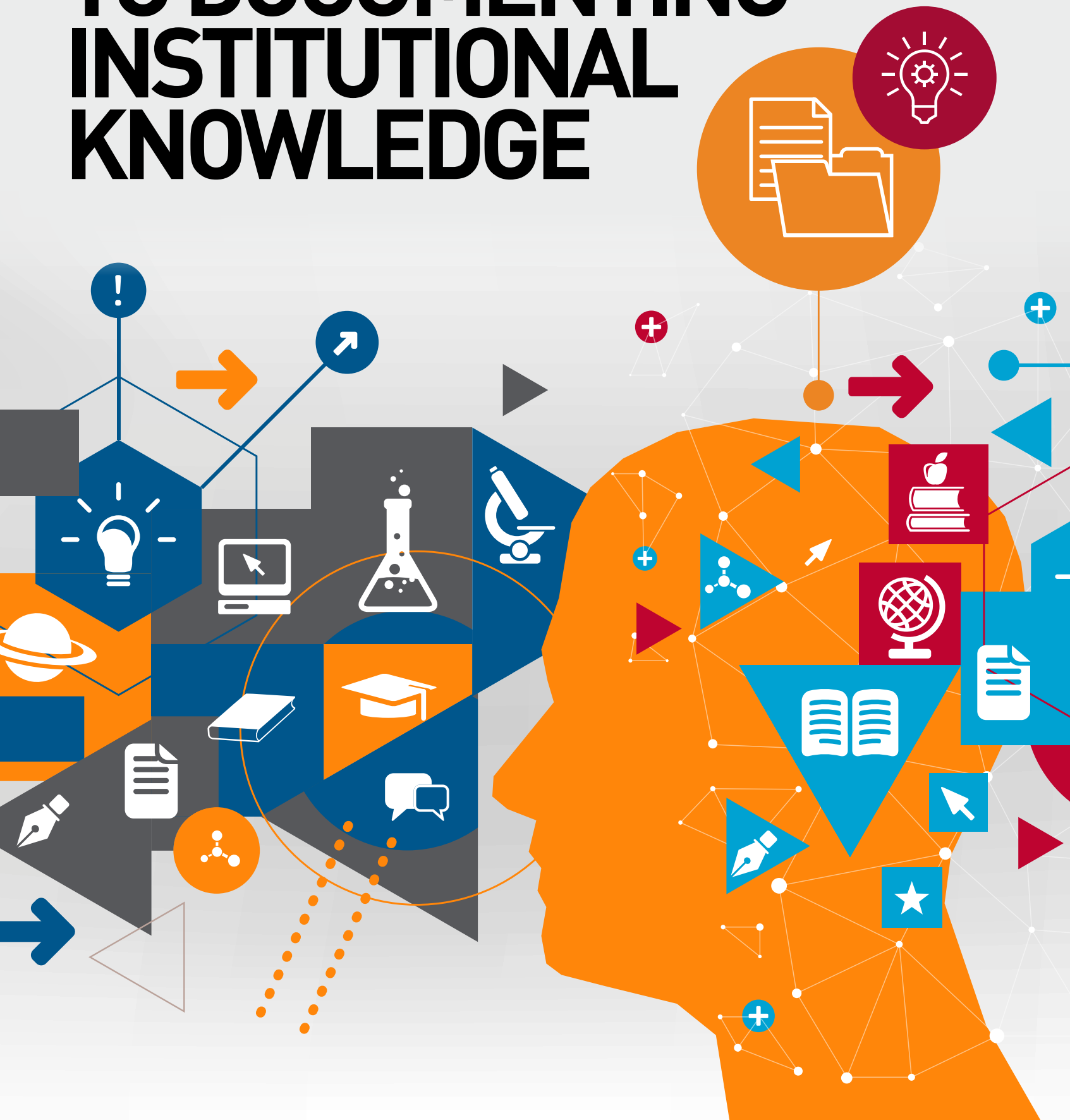
Tips and best practices for creating effective documentation practices.

BY CYNTHIA BASSETT & LAUREN SENEY

It is inevitable—employees come and go in libraries. When they leave, they take their institutional knowledge out the door with them unless it is captured before they go. Documenting institutional knowledge is crucial for continuity of service.

Anyone who has ever inherited a department or started at a new library with highly refined and involved procedures knows that learning how and why processes are managed can be overwhelming. If there is no documentation to explain things, library staff can be stymied for months as they get up to speed, severely impacting productivity and morale.

Knowing all of this, many libraries still struggle to record procedures. There are many reasons for this struggle, some of which involve individual employees and some of which are systemic. Addressing these barriers is foundational in every institution to ensure a stable library infrastructure.

Identifying the Barriers

The barriers to documentation can be overwhelming, especially because several may hit close to home. While it may not be possible to overcome all the barriers quickly, by simply acknowledging that they exist, librarians can start on the right track toward making positive changes at their institutions by making documentation part of transition planning.

Understand Library Culture: Communication Is Key

Many of the barriers encountered when it comes to developing documentation are a result of the existing library culture. Whether employees are new to an institution or are long-term personnel, it is essential to step back and consider your workplace culture. To do this, start communicating with everyone in the institution. Have conversations in groups and with individuals about your workplace culture to understand the entire scope of perspectives. This lays the foundation for making changes in the culture and ultimately promoting one that supports consistent documentation practices.

Talking once is not enough: make sure to maintain ongoing conversations with colleagues. Continuing to openly communicate will ensure everyone is engaged in improving the institutional culture because employees will feel heard, valued, and supported.

Audit Existing Documentation

Chances are high that each library has some documentation already in place. A good starting point is to audit the documentation on hand and the method used to capture it. To see what is missing, librarians might start by reading job descriptions and mapping the procedures needed to do all major tasks in those

positions. Many organizations have *too much* documentation, as their processes have been updated over the years leading to multiple files in many locations. If possible, identify the most recent set of documents. There is no need to delete old files at this moment. Instead, create an Archive folder to place old files. If needed, files will still be accessible, and as they are updated, employees can then decide to keep or delete the archive.

As this audit is taking place, note the file formats used and where documentation is stored. A wide variety of formats and locations can make maintaining processes over time difficult; however, forcing employees to change to an unfamiliar system can also lead to staff resistance in maintaining documentation. It's important to understand these dynamics within an institution and to work toward a common end goal. Different employees may need different levels of support as the library transitions to common file formats and storage locations.

An excellent time to consider the Yirka Question is after completing an audit. Ask yourself: "What can library employees stop doing in order to focus on higher priority projects?" Ceased processes will no longer need documentation.

Once these conversations have taken place and an audit has been done, addressing challenges should become easier, though the steps taken will likely differ depending on whether the challenge is a barrier involving an individual employee or one that is a systemic issue of broader workplace culture or circumstances.

Overcoming Individual Barriers

"I DON'T HAVE TIME!"

The biggest elephant in any library is the lack of time needed to create effective documentation. We get it. Everyone is in a time of transition and feels overextended. Documenting processes is important, but it is generally not urgent until it is very urgent due to the unexpected loss of a staff member. Life can change on a dime.

Consider the following ideas for creating documentation even when there is not much time:

- *Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.* Can an employee only grab screenshots? Great. Have them printed out on paper. Can they do a screen recording where they narrate a process? Awesome. Record it.

- *Ask employees to set aside short amounts of dedicated time to document.* A lot can get done with short bursts of work. This request signals the institution's support for documentation and lets employees know that everyone is in it together.

- *Include the writing of procedures in annual goal setting.* Stressing this within the annual review will help to elevate its importance, even for those who don't enjoy the process, and again signals that employees will be supported with time and assistance as they develop and update written procedures. It also signifies the importance of creating manuals within the organization to ensure that processes will be maintained over time.

"CREATING DOCUMENTATION IS THE WORST!"

Documenting processes is no one's idea of a good time. How can we make it a more palatable experience?

- *Host a "docuparty" once a month!* Provide snacks to celebrate the good work being done.

While it may not be possible to overcome all the barriers quickly, by simply acknowledging that they exist, librarians can start on the right track toward making positive changes at their institutions by making documentation part of transition planning.

- *Set aside remote work time for documentation.* Documentation may not seem so onerous if we can do it while wearing our pajamas.

- *Work together.* Sometimes working with a buddy makes a process that is not super fun more enjoyable.

"WHAT DO I DOCUMENT?"

Employees may struggle to know where to begin, and staring at a blank screen can lead to frustration. Providing some direction can help employees get started.

- *Create a template for documentation that is simple and easily populated by busy employees.* This may ease the difficulty of confronting a blank page and have the added bonus of keeping documentation consistent.

- *Tie documentation to the major areas of an employee's job.* Decide together what areas need documentation and what areas do not so that an employee is not left wondering what to write down. Together, pose the question: "If you won the lottery tomorrow, what parts of your job would I have to do?" Document anything that would require cross-training.

Overcoming Systemic Barriers

Systemic barriers are ones that affect the library as an entire ecosystem and are closely tied to the structure and culture of the library as a whole. These barriers will generally be more challenging to overcome than individual barriers because they will affect more employees.

EVOLVING TECHNOLOGY

Documentation can be recorded in a variety of ways, so an audit may reveal existing procedures held in a variety of file formats. Additionally, some information that needs to be transferred, such as passwords for institutional accounts, may need to be recorded and stored more securely (e.g., in a password-management program) than in a simple paper document or digital file. Some employees may struggle to document if they are asked to use technology that is far out of their comfort zone.

To manage this barrier, be thoughtful about the file formats used for documentation. If at all possible, keep it simple and well within the reach of employees' skill sets. The procedures outlined above should help with this. If use of a technology that falls outside the norm is necessary, such as a password manager, provide careful training and institutional support for new users.

It is important to set up a structure for how documentation will be created and where it will be stored. Given that there may be several different formats of recorded information—from written procedures to video or audio recordings of processes—the storage solution needs to be one that can accommodate the full spectrum of content.

LACK OF TRUST

An employee may fear they will lose their job if they create documentation that is sufficient enough for the library to outsource their position or hire someone who will work at a cheaper rate. Overcoming a lack of trust takes time in any relationship. One solution to this issue may be to invest in developing the relationship between an individual employee and their supervisor. Conversations will be the basis for overcoming this barrier. If improving the relationship is not enough to relieve the employee's lack of trust, library administration could consider offering employees a for-cause time-limited employment contract to indicate an institutional dedication to keep valuable employees on staff. Deep-seated trust issues may need more work.

Looking Ahead

Every institution is unique, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing the barriers to creating documentation. Change takes time, and little changes made now will pay big dividends in improved workplace culture, employee morale, and stronger infrastructure down the road. ◼

(M·B) Management + Business Acumen

(T·T) Teaching + Training

CYNTHIA BASSETT
COLLECTION MANAGEMENT & ELECTRONIC SERVICES LIBRARIAN
University of Missouri School of Law Library
Columbia, MO
bassettcw@missouri.edu

LAUREN SENEY
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR AND HEAD OF RESOURCE ACCESS & DISCOVERY
University of Colorado Law School Library
Boulder, CO
lauren.seney@colorado.edu