

CHALLENGES OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The emergence of knowledge-based economy and society has necessitated the adoption of knowledge management systems in business sectors, higher education and libraries. Easy and free access to relevant information at the right time could empower the citizenry at all levels. This paper discusses the concept of Knowledge Management (KM) and the challenges of KM implementation in academic libraries in Nigeria. The challenges identified are related to human and organizational factors, problem of knowledge sharing, funds for acquisition of ICT facilities and services, emergence of Internet-based information providers, education and training in KM. Strategies for proper knowledge management in academic libraries are proposed.

Introduction

Knowledge Management is a new emerging field in Library and Information Science. Dimattia (1997) noted that since 1990s when the term appeared in information literature, its positive effects have been continually hyped in business sector, academia, library and information management and other aspects of human life. Knowledge Management plays significant roles in the creation of knowledge innovation systems of a country. However, owing to the diverse nature of knowledge and its management in a dynamically changing environment, it is often difficult to estimate the value of Knowledge Management.

Librarians as traditional custodians of information should be aware of the implication of the changes in knowledge society and develop technological and management skills that will enable them to make effective use of information to meet their organizational and changing needs.

The Concept of Knowledge Management:

The perceptions of Knowledge Management by librarians are varied. This sometimes leads to confusion and skepticism about the interpretation of KM. Literature review on KM (Ogundipe 2009) reveals that some librarians and information professionals see it as renaming of Information Management. Others

feel it is another management fad that is not even clearly understood by those who use it.

For a better understanding of the theoretical foundation of KM it is worthwhile to examine what constitutes knowledge because in the present knowledge society, attitudes have shifted from "knowledge is power" to "knowledge sharing is power". Ogundipe (2009) citing Bonn (1994) and Harris (1996) defined knowledge as a combination of information context and experience. He stated that knowledge is formulated in the minds of individual through experience and that knowledge is abstract but it can be transferred through shared experience tacitly or explicitly. A working and comprehensive definition of knowledge given by Davenport and Prusak (1998) is instructive. For them;

Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organizations, it often becomes embedded not in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices and norms. (Davenport & Prusak, 1998)

Nonaka and Konno (1998) identified two types of knowledge namely, explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is knowledge that is recorded in any format such as books, reports, technical papers, data bases, video, and sound recordings so that it can be shared and re-used by other people. By contrast, tacit knowledge cannot be shared or easily codified; it is deeply rooted in individual's expertise, personal beliefs, conceptual understandings, ideas and values. It is necessary to point out that tacit knowledge cannot be created or maintained without the existence of explicit knowledge.

What then is Knowledge Management? Ondari-Okemwa and Minish—Majanja citing Anantatmula (2005) define Knowledge Management "as the use of information technology and tools, business processes, best practices and culture to develop and share knowledge within an organization and connect those who do not Knowledge Management is distinct from Information Management in which librarians are trained and therefore familiar with. Information Management is system based with defined steps - acquisition, storage and access. KM is a more formal approach to managing information and knowledge which has long existed within an organization, for example with long serving staff.

The Role of Knowledge Management in Academic Libraries:

Knowledge Management is not just a fad but a fundamental tool for academic library effectiveness. Mohammed (2003), cited in Edem and Ani (2010 p.104) enumerated the role of KM in academic libraries as follows:

- Transformation of relationship between experts and amateurs, poor and rich, educated and uneducated, literate and illiterate, enlightened and ignorant, government and citizenry towards the advancement and progress of the nation, society and individuals.
- Encouraging information and knowledge sharing among the stakeholders to enhance their overall performance.
- Identification and analysis of the available Knowledge Assets (KA).
- Planning and controlling of all actions and activities to develop both the assets and processes for the advancement and fulfillment of organizational objectives and goals.
- Serving as a driving force for enhanced productivity, economic growth and performance.

From the above, one could conclude that KM systems primary roles are to facilitate easy access to international best practices and to ensure the availability of knowledge to those who need them.

Challenges of Knowledge Management:

While KM is a powerful tool for promoting innovation and re-engineering academic library services in Nigeria, its adoption poses new challenges.

The challenges relate to human and organizational factors, problems of knowledge sharing, funds for acquisition of ICT facilities and services, emergence of internet-based information providers, education and training in KM.

Human and Organization Factors:

The crucial role change involves understanding, capturing, structuring the tacit and explicit knowledge in a proper order and content. This call for special skills on the part of the librarian which include: knowledge in the field of computers, networking, content management and information analysis, Internet surfing techniques, digital sources. Websites and organization of data. Library and information skills and ability to exploit information are crucial to the success of KM in academic libraries. Information professionals and library managers especially those in traditional management roles should up- date themselves in KM.

Knowledge Sharing:

While a maxim in KM is that knowledge sharing is power, surprisingly majority of people would not want to share it with anybody. The fear of such people, Susaria, Liu and Whiston (2003) observed is that once their knowledge is shared, they might no longer be valued or deemed indispensable. This is a critical challenge because a large proportion of knowledge in an organization is tacit, that is deeply embedded within individual's experience, judgment and intuition.

Funds for Acquisition of ICT Facilities and Services:

Budget shortfall and more demand for academic library services in Nigeria are other major challenges. Students, lecturers and management of academic institutions in Nigeria have greater expectations of academic libraries due to the advancement of IT and the explosion of knowledge in the digital age.

On the other hand academic libraries in Nigeria get little funds from their parent institutions and the government for their activities. This has resulted in poor perception of library services. For instance, in most students' views, the importance of libraries is somewhat like "the eyes of the blind or the ears of the deaf" (Bridges, 2003). As a result academic departments or even faculties and students in some cases purchase their own computers/laptops to meet their academic and research needs.

Emergence of Internet-based information providers:

There is a great concern in the academic library world in recent times about the threat of marginalization by Internet-based information providers such as, cyber-cafes and business centers. In a study of KM implementation in academic libraries, Townley (2001) found that special libraries especially business and corporate libraries have taken the lead in the adoption of KM. This may be attributable to a global economy that emphasizes increase in productivity and operational efficiency so as to build an edge in the face of fierce competition with other rival competitors.

Education and Training in KM:

Transformation of information into knowledge requires a dynamic system of education and training. Knowledge Management has not been fully integrated in the curriculum of Library and Information Science schools in Nigeria. US schools are hard pressed to cope with the IT threat and poor infrastructure facilities. This largely includes inadequate faculty both in staff strength and also the expertise on modern information technology and Knowledge Management competences.

Way Forward:

The two major components of Knowledge Management - human factor and technology should be put in place for the successful implementation of KM in academic libraries in Nigeria. Proponents of KM in academic libraries, (Shanhong, 2000; Wen 2005; Edem, and Ani, 2010) advocate the following strategies. Use of specialized staff, use of ICT infrastructures to store and retrieve knowledge, setting up virtual libraries, digitization of library resources/services, training of library staff, adequate funding of academic libraries and effective supervision and control of library resources.

The proposed strategies are ideal. However, there is a need for raising awareness, commitment and involvement of key stakeholders on KM in academic libraries operations. Real change and progress in KM integration in academic libraries can only occur where there has been top level commitment. Experience reveals that parent institutions of academic libraries sometimes find it difficult to support new initiatives that are capital intensive. (Mutula, 2004; Wen, 2005). KM is a business strategy. Unlike the private and business sector academic libraries in Nigeria typically do not have enough financial resources. The "Codification or Personalization" strategy advocated by Ogundipe (2009) may be utilized. The codification strategy, according to Ogundipe, centers on computer systems; knowledge is documented, codified and stored in databases or knowledge base houses where it can be used easily by anyone in the organization. The personalization strategy centers on people with in-depth knowledge developed from experience and study. It is mainly shared person to person contact. With such, the computer is mainly supportive and a tool for knowledge transfer (Ogundipe, 2009).

Conclusion:

Since its inception in 1990, Knowledge Management has provided opportunities for librarians to make a difference in the digital age. Librarians are the most appropriate professionals to help information consumers find answers to the challenges of managing knowledge in a knowledge driven environment. It is important that our academic libraries should be provided with adequate funds to acquire ICT infrastructure. Similarly, librarians and other information professional should embrace KM and acquire more skills in computers, networking, content management and information analysis and Internet. This will help them harness tacit and explicit knowledge for social, economic and educational development in Nigeria

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