

Special Libraries as Knowledge Management Centers

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Abstract: *Nowadays, special libraries have the potential to meet the challenges to transform into knowledge management centers in their parent organizations. The required steps to implement the project and its components are illustrated. Both the parent institution and the special library benefit from the KMC.*

Keywords: *Special libraries, Knowledge management, Knowledge management center.*

I. INTRODUCTION²

In the current economic climate special libraries are vulnerable to face the consequences of their company's economic constraints. They are candidates to close in cases of downsizing, reduction and budget cuts and staff movement.

However, in this ever-changing environment new opportunities, such as knowledge management, emerge. Special libraries are given the chance to reconsider their status as information centers and pursue the new role of the knowledge management center in the organization.

II. SPECIAL LIBRARIES

A. Meaning

Special library is the one which is not public, nor academic or school library. It emphasizes on a specific or on a bundle of relevant topics and reports to its parent institution: business, industry, government, private companies, not-for-profit organizations and associations.

The Special Libraries Association (SLA) defines *special librarians* as 'information resource experts, who collect, analyze, evaluate, package and disseminate information to facilitate accurate decision-making in corporate, academic and government setting'.

The SLA was founded in 1909 at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire under the mission to promote libraries engaged in the information services to business, industry and the government, through learning, advocacy and networking initiatives. The recent declaration of the SLA Alignment Project is 'Advancing Knowledge: our members are knowledge leaders who actively contribute to and drive the success of their organizations'. It is evident that the emphasis shifts from information services to building the knowledge culture of the organization.

² This paper is based on the author's book: *Special Libraries as Knowledge Management Centres*, Chandos Publishing, Witney, Oxford (2011).

B. Characteristics and Services

The special library is 'managed by experts ... on a topic to which the library is devoted,' in contrast to the traditional library which is 'for the reader of the polite literature' (Dana, 1910). The nature of collections, services, clientele and subject coverage distinguish special libraries from others.

They are user-centric institutions and their main feature is the personalized quality services to expert patrons: they provide the right information to the right people at the right time to take the correct decisions ('just-for-you' model). The focus is 'just-on-time' and not 'just-in-case' information.

Special libraries adhere to the mission and goals of their parent organizations. Their collections comprise various formats of materials, print and the 'grey literature', namely, the unpublished corporate material (technical and research papers and reports, patents and internally produced documents). They add value to their institutions by saving time to the researchers and by providing the right information, and knowledge to satisfy information needs.

Special librarians cannot do what they want to do or what they do well, but they must do what the clients want and play different roles for different customers (Hawkins, 2011).

III. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

A. Knowledge vs. Information and Data

Sharing knowledge is power. *Knowledge* is the organization's biggest intellectual asset. It is a complicated, intellectual activity, produced in human minds. It is based on the individual's experiences, education, cultural and socio-economical background. On the contrary, *data* is a sum of raw, unrelated, scattered, unprocessed issues, facts, events, symbols and numbers which is meaningless per se. Data is the basis for the creation of information. *Information* is analyzed, organized and codified data that are processed to create new knowledge.

Hence, knowledge derives from information, as information stems from data, but we obtain knowledge from individuals.

These days, the basic economic resource of the society is knowledge and not capital and the society is oriented to the knowledge economy.

Knowledge is divided into:

- *Tacit*: hidden in human brains, difficult to articulate, uncodified, unstructured, personalized and shared through person-to-

person communication, depending on the owner's willingness to express and share it

- *Explicit*: codified, stored, explained, documented, communicated, transmitted, disseminated through IT and recorded for retention for future generations.

B. Knowledge Management: Definition

Knowledge management (KM) is the sum of learning processes which are associated with the exploitation and sharing of existing human knowledge, using the technologies and the corporate culture to enhance the organization's intellectual capital (Jashapara, 2005).

KM, as an interdisciplinary model, is tackled from an information systems perspective, a human resources or a strategic management perspective. It mainly pertains to enterprises because it deals with all aspects of knowledge and chiefly involves the people of the organization. In the organizational setting, KM refers to practices of generating, capturing, collecting, disseminating and reusing knowledge internally created.

KM discerns from information management which is the methodology concerned with the acquisition, retrieval and use of information to produce knowledge.

C. Characteristics of Knowledge Management

The core features of knowledge management are:

- *People*: the protagonists, the driving force and the core element of KM. KM lives on the involvement of people as creators, transmitters, users and re-users of knowledge who shape human networks and generate new knowledge.
- *Knowledge transfer and sharing*: tacit and explicit knowledge become useful through *dialogue*, as the pedagogical 'Socratic' method, where the master who teaches his students pulls the answer to a query out of the student's mind. Similarly, the success of a KM initiative depends on knowledge sharing during the creation of the common knowledge-base in the organization.
- *Codification*: the organizational knowledge is codified to become accessible and recordable for re-use.
- *Mutual trust and confidence*: they are fundamental factors for the expression of knowledge. The knowledge holder must feel secure and confident to articulate tacit knowledge.
- *Technology*: it is a tool for the creation of knowledge. KM system heavily relies on technological tools and infrastructure.

IV. SPECIAL LIBRARIES AS KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT CENTERS

A. Reasons

Special libraries are entitled to transform to *knowledge management centers (KMC)*, *knowledge resource centers* or *centers for business knowledge* for many reasons:

- The principle that special libraries gather the knowledge created in the organization is not new. In 1910 G. Marion, librarian at the Arthur D. Little, Inc., described the work of his library as a central point that connects departments with their staff and collects, distributes and monitors the *knowledge flow* in the company.
- An advocate to this end is the SLA's value *Putting Our Knowledge to Work* which relates the work of the special librarian to knowledge management processes.
- *Organization of information* (classifying, codifying and making information accessible and reusable) has always been the province of librarians. These attributes are perfectly accomplished by special librarians. They are pertinent professionals to organize and filter the plethora of information which exists in the organization and presents it in an understandable and exploitable manner. Consequently, special librarians can organize the content of the knowledge management center.
- Companies usually chase *innovative activities* to compete in the market. From their mission, special libraries are concerned about aligning with the company's objectives and from their nature, they embrace innovations. Thus, they are competent enough to host the KMC.
- Special libraries act as *learning organizations* and provide *informal training* to employees by instructing them on the use of library resources. Informal training provides opportunities to retain organizational knowledge, especially with the employee turnover. In parallel, KM is a sum of effective learning processes that are exploited to create new knowledge.
- The fundamental principle of the library profession is to promote the *sharing and dissemination of information*. Knowledge sharing and transfer are characteristics of KM. Special librarians have acquired the expertise to identify internal deposits of information, to retrieve information and to share it with their community to fulfill the demands for specialized information.
- The KMC is a *change management project* which operates beyond traditional organizational structures and changes the corporate culture. Special libraries are used to adopt changes while embracing technological advancements. It is an opportunity for them to get involved in a change management project.
- Special librarians are well-positioned to provide *cost-effective* and *low-barrier access* to information and knowledge under the values of integrity, authenticity and trust. The KMC is

an example to provide low-barrier access to internal knowledge.

- Special librarians *bring people together* as they broadly know the work of the business units. They become the intermediaries, mediators and bridges to connect people with similar professional interests. They recognize the importance of people as a key source of information. In parallel, people are the dynamic ingredient of KM.
- Special libraries are the *democratic meeting point* as the Ancient Athenian Agora, to exchange and amalgamate ideas. The KMC is the community hub of the parent organization that collects the corporate wisdom.
- During their routine work, special libraries contact other *business units* in the organization to collect and disseminate information. Additionally, they have a long tradition in *networking* and *cooperating* with peer libraries. Similarly, the KMC involves several business units: the HR, research, IT, training, and finance. Hence, special libraries are experienced enough in partnerships to administer the KMC.
- Special libraries combine internal knowledge with external information from their resources. The internally produced documents may be kept in the library to create *knowledge repositories* which are among the components of the KMC.

In conclusion, there is a great overlap between special librarianship and knowledge management. Knowledge management-based activities are analogous to special libraries' activities.

B. Competencies Required

The role of information specialists evolves to take ownership of institutional knowledge and to give access to information, knowledge and strategic learning captured across the organization. Information professionals have to think as innovators, knowers and entrepreneurs who add value to their companies. Special librarians manage to:

- Organize, categorize, catalog, classify, identify, select and evaluate information sources
- Disseminate the organized content
- Adjust library services in accordance with the developments of the company
- Operate as aggregators of internally produced knowledge
- Combine the traditional library skills and apply them in a different content environment.

Moreover, special librarians require particular capabilities for the KMC. They should:

- Extend their roles to become knowledge workers and execute all relevant activities: KM developers, KM integrators, KM educators, KM researchers, but also pathfinders for

instructing users and facilitators to information resources

- Acquire specialized skills: ability to transfer knowledge to work, benchmarking and assessment of software and databases
- Perform as knowledge brokers: connect people and persuade them to share their knowledge
- Be the facilitators of change and have eagerness to adopt changes
- Have skills on communication, business culture and interpersonal proficiencies, capabilities to persuade and influence, and understanding the environment of the parent institution, confidence, credibility, devotion and enthusiasm.

V. STEPS TO ESTABLISH A KMC AND ITS COMPONENTS

A. Steps to Follow

A prerequisite is to gain the support by the parent organization. The KMC entails steps of project management:

- Carry out a *KM audit* to understand the current situation and identify knowledge needs in the organization
- Produce a *needs assessment report* with recommendations, after analyzing, synthesizing and interpreting the knowledge needs
- Present the report to the *executives* to ensure their *approval* and support
- Build the multidisciplinary *KM core group* and make *alliances* in the organization staff
- Start planning and prepare a *KM strategy* to identify where you are and where you want to go. It includes a *project plan* with the w-questions (what, who, when, where, how) and an *action plan* (financing, workflows, milestones, expected outputs, evaluation)
- Select *pilot projects* to test techniques, procedures and methods
- Guide *the implementation phase* and ensure that people are well-informed and trained
- Apply the experience from the pilot project to *modify the KM strategy*
- Anticipate issues of *security, maintenance, user education and training, and marketing.*

B. Components of the KMC

The challenge for special librarians is to integrate all structured and unstructured knowledge emanated from various sources, under one platform and to make it reusable in the *center for business knowledge*. Among its components are included:

- *Knowledge repository*: unpublished corporate material, informal documents, internal memos and the published wisdom of employees in external resources

- *The intranet*: the information tool of the organization including activities and policies
- The library's *OPAC*
- The *Ask a Librarian* and *FAQs* services: databases where the recorded knowledge of the reference desk is accumulated. They are valuable resources to retrieve information
- *Records management*: records are documents of current value, including correspondence, reports, inventories and other sources of organizational memory
- *Selective Dissemination of Information*: dissemination of custom-made information
- *Electronic journals* under prescribed restrictions of use
- Powerful *search engine* to harvest, search and retrieve the content of the KM system
- *Communities of Practice*: groups of people who share a concern, common interest and complementary knowledge on a topic and deepen their knowledge by interaction on a voluntary basis. The *virtual Communities of Practice* are shaped by geographically dispersed groups. *Knowledge cafés*, as a progressive development, are tools to articulate tacit knowledge within groups
- *Taxonomy*: the architecture of the information and management of the content in the KM system in a way to become retrievable
- *Technology*: it is the layer to store information and knowledge. The rule of 33 ⅓ should apply: 'if more than ⅓ of the total time and money resources of a project is spent on technological aspects, the project results in an IT project and not a knowledge project' (Davenport and Prusak, 1998).
- *Web 2.0 technologies* depending on the organization's policy.

VI. BENEFITS FROM INTRODUCING A KMC

A. For the Parent Organization

The knowledge management center is advantageous for the parent organization, because:

- it facilitates better decision making: the well-informed decision maker takes as more correct decisions as possible
- It exploits the existing knowledge and resources
- It increases opportunities for innovation and encourages the free flow of ideas
- It improves customer service, boosts revenues and enhances the current value of existing products
- It streamlines operations and reduces costs in human hours
- It improves and records the collective-organization memory

B. For the Special Library

The special library accumulates many advantages from the transformation into a KMC:

- Its profile, reputation, visibility and status are augmented
- It becomes a strategic and trusted partner of the company and demonstrates the value of library services
- It cultivates open exchange of ideas
- It accrues the knowledge and collective wisdom of the organization
- It defeats the possible threat to become marginalized and to conquer closures during economic constraints
- It becomes the agent of change by introducing an innovative project.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The knowledge management center is an expensive and difficult project to accomplish. In this paper we approached it from the aspect of its content and the requirements to establish it. However, the KMC encompasses people and technology as a multidisciplinary project.

If special libraries play their KM cards correctly, they will become a vital asset to the parent organization. In this context, effective use of knowledge helps the company achieve organizational survival and transformation.

Furthermore, the KMC cannot succeed without the support of the top management. It is an innovative project and when it is fully operational, it demonstrates the value added to the company.

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