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. INTRODUCTION

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.

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-

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

REFERENCES
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