Knowledge Management For 21st Century Information Professionals

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ABSTRACT:

Due to rapidly changing information and communication technology (ICT), library science has been incessantly evolving. The internet has further transformed the information society into to a global society. The knowledge explosion and ICT tools have equipped information and library science with immediate access to practically limitless sources, plus quick storage, retrieval and sharing tools. In this knowledge economy age information professionals' roles have therefore changed profoundly at both library practitioner and library school educator levels. On the library side information professionals have evolved from traditional cataloguer and research and reference service providers to value added service providers, teacher librarians and, most recently, knowledge managers. On the library school educators' side, there is the constant challenge to review the curriculum, keep up to date and extend personal capacity according to the needs of the knowledge society. This paper looks particularly at the importance of knowledge management for 21st century information professionals; their evolving new roles, skills and challenges, and finally recommends what is important to have in place for information professionals to be part of this knowledge management economy.

Keywords: *Librarians, Library school educators, Information professionals, Knowledge management*

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, knowledge management has been a popular issue, relevant to and discussed amongst all disciplines at all levels, including the business, service, private and governmental sectors as well as libraries and information centres. Clearly much has already been written on the importance of knowledge management for libraries and information professionals (see for example: Chase, 1998; Broadbent, 1998; Balcombe, 1999; Schwarwalder, 1999; Rowley, 1999, Duffy, 2000; Shanhong, 2000; Milne, 2000; Townley, 2001; Koina, 2003; Al-Hawamedeh, 2002; Ajiferuke, 2003; Pantry & Griffiths, 2003; Whilte 2004, Watson, 2005, Jones, 2008). Earlier literature often questioned whether knowledge management was just another management fad or whether knowledge management represented librarianship in 'new clothes' (Broadbent, 1998; Wilson, 2002). However, Ponzi & Koenig (2002) established that knowledge management is at least living longer than typical fads and perhaps is in the process of establishing itself as a new aspect of management. It is

now apparent that multi-disciplinary knowledge management is one of the hottest topics of discussion today. "Every information manager needs to appreciate fully the scope and opportunity that knowledge management (KM) offers to the extended enterprise" (Duffy, 2000) because it can be used as a competitive tool.

Sarrafzadeh et al (2006) noted an increased awareness among library and information science (LIS) professionals of their potential contribution to knowledge management, with a high level of agreement on its positive implications for both individuals and the profession. Many library and information science schools now include courses on knowledge management. The University of Botswana for instance now offers, as of August 2008, "Knowledge Management for the Information Professional". Increasingly conference themes are set on knowledge management. In the African context recent examples are the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa Library & Information Associations (SCECSAL) 2004, the theme of which was 'Towards a Knowledge Society for African Development'; and SCECSAL 2006 'Libraries as a bridge to an information and knowledge society in eastern, central and southern Africa'. SCECSAL 2008's sub-theme was, 'Knowledge Management in the Context of the MDGs'. All of this reflects the growing recognition and awareness of knowledge management among information professionals, as well as the diversity of knowledge management. Progressively, it is being acknowledged that knowledge management is no more an optional extra or luxury for 21st century information professionals but a mandatory discipline if they want to survive or at the least remain effective, in the digital era. The underlying argument for knowledge management is that organizations benefit from identifying intellectual capital whether internal or external, necessitating capturing, organizing and sharing knowledge within the organization.

In spite of all this, there seems to be a gap in knowledge management literature: the absence of holistic consideration. Some authors focus on information professionals' new roles, some on skills, while others have looked at the challenges they face. Some focus on practicing librarians and others on library school educators. This paper is an attempt to discuss all these elements. So, the purpose of the paper is to describe the role of information professionals in knowledge management, their possible contribution, and skills and challenges unique to the 21st century that they face as they seek to sustain their critical positions and contribute to organizational performance. The paper will look at:

- ♦ the concept of knowledge management for information professionals;

- ♦ information professionals as they fit in knowledge management and their possible contribution to it and to their organisations;

- ♦ new roles of information professional;

- ♦ skills and challenges of and for information professionals;

- ♦ the future of information professionals;

Before proceeding into details, it would be appropriate to define two main terms used in the paper, namely 'information professional' and 'knowledge management for information professionals'.

Information Professionals

Initially, the term 'Information Professional (IP)' was coined by and for 'modern' librarians. But, as ICT took off, IP became a far more comprehensive terminology. According to Abels et al (2003), an IP refers to a person, who "strategically uses information in his/her job to advance the mission of the organization. The IP accomplishes this through the development, deployment, and management of information resources and services. The IP harnesses technology as a critical tool to accomplish goals. IPs include, but are not limited to librarians, knowledge managers, chief information officers, web developers, information brokers, and consultants". So, IP is wide-ranging. Anyone who deals in the provision of information at any stage, whether in terms of technology, education, systems or actual information services, can be called information professional.

In the context of this paper, 'information professional' refers particularly to "academic librarians and archivists, who are revamping to become knowledge managers; and library and information school educators, who seek to equip practicing and trainee librarians with all the necessary skills and competencies.

Concept Of Knowledge Management For Information Professionals

Many people can still become confused between the terms 'information' and 'knowledge'. The force behind the origin of knowledge management was the information explosion. Typically for example, every organisation generates large amounts of data and information. Without effective management it is difficult to identify and locate the information required in a specific situation. As the next step knowledge management came as a strategy to develop organisational knowledge and capacity to derive relevant knowledge from information. That is why knowledge is portrayed as the transformation of information: information is a building block of knowledge which is the refined, relevant and actionable output of information.

Knowledge management has several definitions. According to Taylor (1999:33), "knowledge management is a journey that moves an organization from a knowledge-chaotic environment – which is where many organizations are now – to a knowledge-centric enterprise that is supported by a comprehensive knowledge system". This definition emphasises the end-product of knowledge management. Taylor described the journey of knowledge management as a process of five stages: knowledge-chaotic, knowledge-aware, knowledge- enabled, knowledge-managed and knowledge-centric. According to Davenport et al. (1998; pp. 44), "Knowledge management is concerned with the exploitation and development of the knowledge assets of an organization with a view to furthering the organization's objectives. The knowledge to be managed includes both explicit, documented knowledge, and tacit, subjective knowledge. Management entails all of those processes associated with the identification, sharing

and creation of knowledge". This is an inclusive definition, which focuses on exploitation and development of knowledge to achieve organizational goals.

The author defines knowledge management as *a focused management process to capture, exploit, share and apply both implicit and explicit knowledge for the benefit of the employees, organisation and its customers.* Focus in the context of IPs at the library school educators side is on capturing, storing, exploiting, sharing and applying both implicit and explicit knowledge which can inform and assist them to review/ curriculum to fit to the market demand and deliver in most innovative ways. They need to focus managing customer & stakeholders knowledge, who come for learning or who are potential learners, organisational knowledge, subject knowledge, curriculum around the other universities to benchmark themselves, ICT/innovative knowledge how other educators are teaching innovatively using ICTs.

On the library practising side, librarians need to focus on their customers' knowledge and remain updated in their professional knowledge in order to provide value adding services to their customers, anywhere and anytime and in desired formats. They need to manage all types of organisational knowledge to maximise its utilisation and align it to the provision of information services.

The major characteristics of knowledge management are: a holistic approach, its action-oriented, ongoing process, ever-changing, people-oriented, emphases on organisation performance improvement, and value-adding and goal-oriented or visionary perspectives.

Position/Fit Of Information Professionals In Knowledge Management

Knowledge management has provided ample opportunities for information professionals. A decade ago, Milne (2000:140) had raised the question that "the opportunities are there, but are information professionals ready?" He further raised a concern, "do they recognise too, that their attitudes must be in tune with the needs of this new order if they are to become strategic partners in the knowledge processes within their own organizations?" and again "what are the messages for library schools as they prepare the information professionals of the future?" It is true that knowledge management is "a vehicle for enhancing the professional image and role of the information professional" (Southon and Todd, 2001). What is less clear is how eagerly and effectively information professionals have embraced this vehicle. We might ask ourselves, are we in fact changing our attitudes in keeping with the knowledge age; are we catalysing or pioneering change in our organisations? Or we are just enduring challenges before us because we are forced to survive? One critical development is that information professionals have begun to realise that they have a critical role to play in initiating knowledge management and its success in their parent organization.

Ferreira et al (2007) observed the close relationship between teaching schools and formation of information professional skills and stated that if 21st century skills were more commonly taught in library, archival, or information studies courses, this could help bridge the gap between the skills acquired in classrooms and those required by labour markets. This would help librarians, archivists, records managers and others like

them to maintain their significance in an ever-changing and knowledge-intensive world". Clearly this makes sense. But it brings into perspective the irony of library and information school (LIS) educators trying to teach 21st century skills which they have not in their turn had the chance to practice maturely in an organisational environment. This is an issue that requires consideration. Who is qualified to teach the new professional skills? The challenges facing LIS educators are articulated later in the paper.

Within the higher education environment there is often a close relationship between LIS practitioners and LIS educators; thus jointly they can add value to their parent organization in numerous ways and create a cycle of continuous professional development. Librarians and archivists add value by managing organisational knowledge in the most efficient and accessible manner and LIS educators by training future professionals in all the necessary skills and promoting importance of holistic knowledge management. Practicing librarians for example need to possess "an ability to offer the value-added service of analyzing and repackaging information to meet specific client needs (Milne, 2000:147), whilst LIS educators as innovators have the responsibility to provide a strong base to make their organisation innovative by undertaking a number of academic and research activities in an extremely complex information environment. To ensure their students' success educators must continuously evolve their teaching and learning pedagogy adopting quality assurance mechanisms and achieving standards of excellence in adopting best practices and creating competition in the global market (Rath, 2006).

Therefore information professionals can contribute to knowledge management in the following ways:

Empowering knowledge workers: Empowering knowledge workers by removing intermediary levels and facilitating direct access to knowledge anywhere and anytime through providing necessary tools, system and services.

Bridging the gap between the skills acquired and job market: Bridging the skills gap between classroom theory and professional practice, making their skills more marketable and reducing unemployment.

Leading in ethical and legal issues: Playing a leading role in devising and implementing standards for the ethical and appropriate use of information, thereby also engendering professional respect for unique skills possessed.

Leading in information management skills: Leading in imparting their information management skills organisational wide as well as externally, and 'putting them in the good books' of executive management.

Innovative teaching for greater collaboration and closer interaction: Providing web-based/online education opportunities using multi-media educational resources. Information professionals can thus make education more interactive and personalised. Collaborative effort is critical in order to prosper in today's information age because there is so much information and knowledge out there

and no one knows everything. The University of Botswana, for example, launched WebCT in 2000. More and more teaching staff are encouraged to look at teaching through WebCT, embracing e-learning facilities, or at least supporting conventional classroom teaching in this way. In an indication of the importance it is accorded, the use of WebCT has been linked with the university's performance management system. The potential is there to expand learning opportunities to non-university students and lifelong learners, with the quality of the content thus becoming paramount. Effective use of technologies to make learning more accessible does not make information content of the material any less crucial. All information professionals will appreciate this.

Creating knowledge management awareness: Often information professionals can be resistant to new ideas or initiatives and the knowledge management concept is still new for many. So by promoting and raising awareness of the benefits of knowledge management amongst the student community, teaching faculties and all the other stakeholders, in order to encourage them to buy in to it, information professionals (in this case particularly LIS educators) can have an immense impact on organisational performance and competitive power.

Recognition of and contribution to maximising the potential of organizational knowledge: This has been a serious issue in the library and information profession. Within higher education for example, when institutional management documents like Learning and Teaching Policy, Research and Development Policy, or University Research Strategy are referred to information professionals particularly in libraries for discussion and commentary, those staff members may fail to appreciate them or associate a direct relevance to the library. They seem to believe that such documents are more relevant to teaching staff. This attitude serves as a hindrance in the proper alignment between information services and achieving the parent organisation's goals. It is important for information professionals to look at all organizational documents, policies and procedures in order to customize their services accordingly. For instance, a Learning and Teaching Policy would have implementation implications for adequate library facilities and services.

Knowledge management is an approach based on the central role of knowledge in organisations, with the objective being to manage and support knowledge work and to maximise the added value of knowledge for the organisation (Tissen et al, 1998). This is one of the major characteristics of knowledge management. It presents a major shift in focus regarding the development and use of knowledge and information in increasing the effectiveness of any organisation. It is a great opportunity for information professionals to make themselves relevant to their parent organisations in a much more vital way than has generally been the case (Southon and Todd, 2001). According to Owen (1999), knowledge management is to add value for the organization at three distinct levels: Improvement of existing business processes and cost reduction; developing new products and services and improving organisational strategic position by developing unique knowledge, applying knowledge to innovative products and services, strengthening the competitive position, creating an attractive work environment etc. Balcombe (1999) inspires information professionals by saying,

"our mindset as information professionals is to share; to further the accessibility to and usage of knowledge. We can influence our organizations to see sharing as vital to every job". Information professionals play a unique role in gathering, organizing and coordinating access to the best available information sources for the organization as a whole. They are also leaders in devising and implementing standards for the ethical and appropriate use of information (Abels, et al, 2003). Knowledge management offers them a wonderful opportunity to get out of the box of the library or information centre and into the strategy areas of the organisation (Balcombe, 1999:91).

Thus, information professionals need to understand the role of knowledge in every area of the organisation. Understanding organisations is as useful to the information professional as understanding information and knowledge (Southon and Todd, 2001). It is "a major challenge to information professionals to engage with issues that have not generally been regarded as their task, either by themselves, or by those for whom they work. It is clear that the phenomenon implies a broader and more organisationally directed thinking on the part of information professionals if they are to engage successfully in this area" (Southon and Todd, 2001). Also, information professionals at library schools should bear this in mind when developing a knowledge management oriented curriculum. Then only would they be able to train and educate current and future practising information professionals to create knowledge links between organisational policies, resources, activities and outcomes and consequently contribute to and enhance organisational performance, image, visibility and competitive urge.

New Roles Of Information Professionals

The 21st century brings with it new roles and requirements for different competencies and skills for information professionals, beyond those traditionally practiced and understood, thus requiring increased intellectual flexibility. Information professionals now need to be equipped as, or capable of performing or adapting to, the following new roles:

- ♦ Technology experts both in using and training technology.

- ♦ Knowledge mappers/engineers: representing or mapping tacit and explicit knowledge to enable its classification, dissemination and identifying the gaps in the knowledge.

- ♦ Knowledge gatekeepers: acting as subject experts and familiar with evolving vocabulary (taxonomies, metadata, metatags and filtering etc.).

- ♦ Knowledge editors to repackage knowledge into the most accessible, appropriate formats.

- ♦ Networkers and Knowledge Brokers, with good networks of contacts within and outside the organisation.

- ♦ Web designers to display and share knowledge in eye-catching ways.

♦ Programmers to customise their instructions and services according to their customers' needs.

♦ Knowledge and information disseminators rather than custodians of information.

♦ Researchers both for personal and professional development and for providing up to date assistance to patrons.

♦ Knowledge consultants to provide expert advice beyond the usual operational zone.

♦ World knowledge content experts to keep updated with international news in their specialised areas

♦ Metadata specialists able to describe and dictate management and preservation strategies for digital information

♦ Knowledge Asset Managers to identify, evaluate advice upon and manage a portfolio of knowledge assets, such as patents, trademarks, copyrights, etc. (Chase, 1998).

New Competencies And Skills Of Information Professionals

Clearly, to take on these new roles effectively information professionals need to equip themselves with new skills and values.

Personal Competencies are a set of attitudes, skills and values that enable practitioners to work effectively and contribute positively to their organizations, clients and profession ranging from strong communication, to demonstrating the value-add of their contributions in the ever-changing environment. Specific jobs and markets might require certain sets of unique competencies at various skill levels (Abels, et al, 2003). Literature reveals the following skills vital for 21st century information professional:

♦ Good communication and interpersonal skills;

♦ Understanding flexible needs of customers and employers and developing creative solutions;

♦ Ability to market the concept of knowledge management and its benefits;

♦ Negotiation skills, for dealing with suppliers and licensers;

♦ Creativity and long term vision;

♦ General management skills: Information management, human resource management, project management, change management, strategic planning,

financial management, Liaison and negotiation skills (Halvegar & Tabuchi, n.d.).

♦   Analytical and lateral thinking ability;

♦   Cultural adaptability skills.

Challenges For Information Professionals

To summarise, library school educators, library and archive practitioners all information professionals are all confronted with several challenges. Educators for example must design courses to develop generic and specific skills in future librarians and prepare them for the real world of 21st century.

Some of the major challenges faced by information professionals would include:

♦   Content development in digital format: Information professionals must widen the scope of information management, identifying information sources and providing effective, relevant and accessible information services and capitalize on the library and information environment of the 21st century (Rath, 2006).

♦   Continuing Education & Training Programmes: developing professional skills through refresher courses, conferences, workshops, seminars etc.;

♦   Financial Support: developing appropriate infrastructure/resources;

♦   Intellectual capital management;

♦   Technological – trauma and infrastructure;

♦   Change management;

♦   Capturing of tacit knowledge;

♦   Introduction of multi-disciplinary growth of subjects;

♦   Need Based Curriculum: Education curriculum needs to be conceived in relation to market needs and employer perceptions about the competencies of professionals (Rehman, 2008).

♦   Balancing both tradition and technology while designing curricula;

♦   Ability to adopt a just-in-time rather than just in-case approach (Jones, 2008).

♦   Balancing both tradition and technology while designing curricula;

♦   Creating innovations in teaching, learning and research methods to improve the transfer of knowledge.

Future Of Information Professionals

The future of information professionals is full of opportunities as well as challenges. The new knowledge era has provided tremendous opportunities to shine and cement a special niche in the ever evolving information world. Information professionals need to carve out a place for themselves within the core business processes of organizations rather than being content to offer a traditional service from the sidelines (Milne, 2000:149). The challenge is to constantly keep abreast of the latest technology developments and subject knowledge. Due to information overload, information professionals are needed more than ever to quality filter and provide required information in an actionable or usable form (Abels, et al, 2003). Wilson (2002) also observed knowledge management as an opportunity for enhancing professional status and career prospects; the flipside being the potential risks of non-involvement. Envisioning the future of information professionals, Southon and Todd (2001) emphasised that "it will be a difficult but essential task for information professionals to contribute their skills and understanding of information and knowledge processes and roles to enable organisations to appreciate the role that technology is able to play. Information professionals will, however, require a strategic view of the organisation and the ability to work co-operatively with a range of other professionals with whom they are potentially in conflict". Information professionals are therefore in the forefront of the digital revolution; they should be leading the transformation into knowledge-based enterprises. It is now up to them how they make their future.

Conclusions

From the foregoing debate it is apparent how information professionals are challenged to move from librarianship to the cyberianship; from traditional classroom-based face to face teaching to online and e-learning. To keep the pace with the knowledge economy age and facilitate assisting the parent organization's competitive edge, it is important to appreciate and practice knowledge management. "Librarians and information professionals are in a position to transform themselves into value-adding knowledge professionals. However, this will require a radical change in how they view their roles and jobs within knowledge-based organizations. It will require them to visualize a world of rapid change, instantaneous communications, and the transformation of organizations from those based on identifiable boundaries to networks of business relationships" (Chase, 1998). The thrust of knowledge management in relation to information professionals is to enhance accessibility of information, to promote strong relationship with customers and relevant stakeholders by strengthening knowledge flow, offering value adding services and training cost and time-effectively, customized to organisational needs. Creativity and innovations in teaching, learning and research are essential in the transfer of knowledge. Since, there is a close relationship between teaching schools and practising information professionals, together they can contribute considerably to knowledge management. It is essential for 21st century information professionals to acquire the above discussed competencies and skills. This requires a total dedication to professional development, training and re-training, and changes of attitude to adapt and adjust.

Referring to 21st century skills, (Ferreira et al, 2007) stress, "if these were more commonly taught in library, archival, or information studies courses, could help bridge the gap between the skills acquired in classrooms and those required by labor markets. Although it is a major shift, it can make information professionals more relevant to their parent organisation. This paper concludes with Abell and Oxbrow's (2006:150) suggestion that, "the ability to work across organisational boundaries and the willingness to take opportunities to try different roles and ways of working are essential for information professionals in knowledge environments, but it requires an understanding of organisational dynamics and a particular mindset".

Recommendations

In order to contribute and catch-up with 21st century knowledge economy information professionals need to have in place the following:

- Balance education, research and practice

- Balance between people and technology

- Internationalisation of library and information school syllabus to fit in global market

- Constant learning for all information professionals whether LIS practitioners or educators

- Conducive working environment

- Appropriate infrastructure

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