



OPEN ACCESS

Review

Knowledge management and knowledge sharing for strategic library planning. Value of knowledge sharing for expatriate library professionals

S.C. Kumaresan

ABSTRACT

This article examines the importance of knowledge management in libraries and the need for motivating and creating a 'knowledge sharing culture' within the library. This article also brings out an empirical account of the difficulties library and information science professionals face when they take positions overseas, particularly in a culturally, politically and religiously conservative society and country. Moving to another country means reinventing the wheel once again in a new environment; and if it is to a non-English speaking country it could be a challenging task. One could be in for a 'culture shock'. In hindsight, it becomes all the more important to know and understand the intricacies of working in such an environment, to build our networks, hone our technical skills and the value of 'knowledge sharing'. Knowledge management can be very useful in bridging this gap and putting us at ease and get ready for the job. The knowledge management system involves identification of knowledge, capturing, sorting, storing and sharing of pertinent information within the library or various libraries in case of multiple campuses. This article focuses on the issues in knowledge management and the value of knowledge sharing in libraries and tries to advocate the use of knowledge management tools for successful sharing and transfer of knowledge.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Knowledge sharing, Knowledge transfer, Strategic library planning, Expatriate library professional, Culture

DOI: 10.5339/pil.2010.4

Published: 28 March 2010
© 2010 Kumaresan; licensee
Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation
Journals. This is an open access
article distributed under the terms
of the Creative Commons
Attribution License
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>) which permits
unrestricted use, distribution and
reproduction in any medium,
provided the original work is
properly cited.

BACKGROUND

Every year thousands of library professionals migrate to different parts of the world to take positions they always dreamt of, and Middle Eastern countries are prime examples of such migration. Expatriate library professionals are employed in most of the organizations or institutions in these countries. They are most sought after because of the fact that there are few accredited educational programs in Library and Information Science at the graduate level offered in any of the universities in this region and hence there is a dearth of qualified and experienced manpower. Senior library professionals are most sought after for the expertise in their field and experience in strategic library planning and managing libraries successfully for a long time. In most cases, these library professionals are recruited from overseas to establish a library, initiate and instill a system by which the patrons are well served, train the local population in various aspects of library management and hand over the charges. This transition would take place over a period of time depending on the nature of the organization and the availability of a suitable national candidate to take over the reins. However, when an expatriate library professional leaves an organization, he/she takes away the vital knowledge of the systems and procedures they helped establish and also core technical knowledge to train and groom young professionals of that country. It is for this very reason that the tacit knowledge of individuals and other organizational knowledge have to be captured, stored and made available whenever necessary.

Organizations and universities acknowledge “transferring knowledge across global boundaries has become an important competitive advantage for success in the global economy of the 21st century” (Fink and Holden, 2005). While professional challenges are the same or very similar, the legislative and regulatory frameworks are different depending on the country where one goes (McKnight, 2007). The working environment and the laws are different in different countries, besides the cultural, linguistic, religious and political differences. We are into what is called the “culture shock” that would take substantial time for us to get out of and learn to work in that country. It is also important to study the policies of the organization, systems, and procedures and understand the local laws, customs, traditions, stereotypes and behaviours of the people we work and deal with. A review of the literature reveals the application of knowledge management in libraries on various aspects of the library, however there is little or no evidence of any literature available to suggest that research has been done to apply knowledge management tools to overcome expatriate library professionals’ difficulties, and aid in strategic library planning.

EXPATRIATE ISSUES

Expatriate library professionals face professional and personal challenges both requiring the same care. Personal problems could vary between individuals viz. finding a job for the spouse or partner, managing financial affairs such as tax payment, leaving behind dependents, freedom to express oneself, building social networks and the list goes on. A smooth relocation and integration into the mainstream from one country to another is a recipe in itself for success and could yield considerable rewards on a personal and professional level. Senior library managers involved in strategic planning need considerable support in terms of sharing vital knowledge from the organization and colleagues to understand the complexities of working in a country.

Professional difficulties not only include those relating to the laws, policies and procedures of the country but also challenges faced due to “knowledge drain” when employees leave organizations. When expatriate library professionals leave an organization and go back to their country or in search of greener pastures, he or she not only takes away vital experience but also critical tacit knowledge, needed for successful strategic planning. Hence, it is vital to find ways to identify critical knowledge among library professionals, capture them, store them and make it available whenever necessary.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Knowledge management is a concept that has emerged explosively in the business community over the last few years (T.Kanti, 2000). Although there are many definitions available for knowledge management, the one given by the Gartner Group as quoted by T. Kanti Srikantiah in his book *Knowledge Management for Information Professionals* is more appropriate to this article reflecting the essence of it.

“Knowledge Management is a discipline that promotes an integrated approach to identifying, capturing, evaluating, retrieving, and sharing all of an enterprise’s information assets. These assets may include databases, documents, policies, procedures, and previously un-captured expertise and experience in individual workers”.

Knowledge management is not confined to corporate or business domain but it is a phenomenon of utility and applicability in information intensive organization of all types (T.Kanti, 2000).

To understand knowledge management it is important to understand what knowledge is, According to [Machlup \(1980\)](#) there are five categories of knowledge:

- i Practical knowledge—used in individual's work, decisions and actions.
- ii Intellectual knowledge—used to fulfill intellectual interests.
- iii Small talk and pastime knowledge—satisfies non-intellectual interests and entertainment.
- iv Spiritual knowledge—relates to religion, and mystical experiences.
- v Unwanted knowledge—outside one's interests, usually acquired accidentally.

However [Smith \(2000\)](#) suggested a different perspective of knowledge, which includes:

- i Public knowledge—otherwise called 'explicit knowledge', known, taught and shared regularly.
- ii Shared knowledge—knowledge shared by knowledge workers in their work.
- iii Personal knowledge—otherwise called 'tacit knowledge', which exists in individuals' minds.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING IN LIBRARIES

The most important aspect of knowledge management is not managing the knowledge *per se*, but rather in making the knowledge more accessible and visible using different tools and creating a culture of knowledge sharing within and between libraries. The perfect ingredient for knowledge management in libraries comes from the communities of practice and collaboration with other libraries. The transformation from librarian to knowledge manager is clearly underway, however to adjust to these more far-reaching changes, information professionals must search beyond current bounds and think in terms of benefits to their organizations. There is considerable opportunity for librarians to use their traditional skills to assume a new function of managing knowledge within the library, which would complement the traditional library service function (Ron, 2001).

Knowledge management within libraries involves organizing and providing access to intangible resources that help librarians and administrators carry out their tasks more effectively and efficiently ([Malhotra, 2000](#)). Strategic planning in libraries involves all aspects of library administrative decisions involving policies, procedures, systems, services and human resources. Expatriate library professionals have to take into account the shared knowledge and expertise with regards to all aspects of diversity in the new environment before making decisions. Based on this emphasis on the role of knowledge management in libraries, it can be understood that knowledge management can play a vital role in strategic library planning and be a critical tool, especially for the expatriate library professionals. Application of knowledge management could eliminate the vacuum created due to 'knowledge drain' in libraries when employees leave the organization.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN LIBRARIES

Sharing pertinent knowledge is a key and vital part of the knowledge management system and process. Sharing of knowledge may be sharing of 'explicit knowledge'—that which is written down or encoded in some fashion vs. sharing of 'tacit knowledge'—that which exists in the minds of individuals. With the help of information technology sharing of knowledge has been made possible at different levels and locations. Knowledge sharing is very important for library managers in strategic planning and this attitude has to be nurtured within and between libraries.

There are individual and cultural differences that drive the knowledge sharing behaviours of employees, especially in the expatriate environment. Library professionals should be more sensitive toward the difference in culture, language and the beliefs of the people of those countries where they work, especially in the Middle East. Simple things like greeting a person of opposite sex, religion, politics, etiquette, especially during the holy month of Ramadan, and dressing in public are some of the many issues that need extra care and awareness. It is also important that one should take extra care on the choice of words used while speaking and writing, since the majority of the nationals in these countries do not speak English. While these are issues on personal front, there are issues that expatriate library professionals need to be aware of on the professional front viz. selection of resources, both print and electronic should be appropriate to the region, any material with explicit contents of religion, sex or politics could be deemed inappropriate. Difficulties in finding publishers

and publications of materials, copyright and intellectual property acts etc., are some of the other issues expatriate library professionals need to be aware of. Successful experiences of other expatriate professionals in dealing with patrons such as answering their research queries, using a particular resource or website for providing reference service or a particular method of information literacy training, are worth capturing and sharing with others. Hence, it becomes all the more important to share vital information and knowledge for the expatriate professional to have a smooth transition.

However, a 'knowledge sharing culture' has to be created by either motivating the employees by providing organizational support such as intrinsic rewards for sharing vital tacit knowledge or by providing supervisory control—which in a way is formal and has specific guidelines for appropriate sharing behaviour and monitoring of the knowledge. [Goodman and Darr \(1999\)](#) identified that a sharing culture is necessary prior to implementation of any knowledge management system. They also found that the important element in producing a sharing culture is shared rewards. However, in addition to emphasizing the importance of knowledge sharing it is also important to emphasize the understanding of cultural differences, beliefs, political and religious differences between individual employees.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING CULTURE IN EDUCATION CITY-QATAR

Part of the reason for emphasizing the importance of creating a knowledge sharing culture has to do with the fruitful experience at Qatar Foundation's Education City in Qatar. Like other Middle Eastern countries, Qatar too has a very large expatriate population working in different sectors, including the universities and other educational institutions within the Education City. The Education City Library Directors' Council (ECLDC) is a success story, in terms of creating a sharing culture that is worth emulating elsewhere within or outside the region. ECLDC was created for the very purpose of cooperation and sharing among libraries within Education City. The council meets regularly and shares knowledge and experiences in terms of library policies and procedures and the issues in day to day activities of the libraries. Besides sharing, the ECLDC also has different active SIGs (Special Interest Groups) that involve library professionals from all over Qatar, including both expatriates and nationals. One of the main activities of these SIGs is to share and train library professionals in a particular aspect of the library. The success of this sharing and training is visible from the fact that a large number of national and expatriate library professionals attend the meetings.

Knowledge sharing is done in different ways at Education City; a digital repository has been created on the Texas A&M University at Qatar website, which is remotely accessible by anyone, where the minutes of the meetings of all the ECLDC meetings are uploaded alongside information with regards to the activities and issues. Intranet e-mail is another major knowledge management tool used for storing and sharing vital tacit and organizational knowledge. Although sharing of knowledge is informal, it has been very effective and successful in terms of benefits that library managers have gained. This has inspired me to find a formal, structured way of knowledge capturing and sharing and has thus become the topic for my doctoral research.

IDENTIFYING KNOWLEDGE SHARING REQUIREMENTS IN LIBRARIES

Libraries, like enterprises, can benefit a lot from knowledge management activities such as knowledge sharing, capturing and retrieving whenever necessary, however it is very important to identify the knowledge sharing requirements within and between libraries for effective and critical decision making. Library managers should work closely with all other department staff at various levels to try and identify valuable tacit knowledge in individuals and take all steps to capture, store and sort them in order and should also try all possible measure to retain such staff. It is also important to work closely with library managers of other libraries to try and identify tacit knowledge hidden in individuals and capture them so that their services or expertise could be utilized whenever necessary.

IMPLEMENTING KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN LIBRARIES

Implementing knowledge management in libraries involves meticulous planning and considerable organizational support. Library managers at all levels should be involved in the planning and implementation process and all the library employees should be part of these processes. [Wen \(2005\)](#) identifies two important factors—the 'human factor' and the 'technology factor' in implementing knowledge management. The human factor involves all the employees of the library and their active participation in the process. Managers of different departments within the library have to be

in-charge of implementing knowledge management in their respective units and responsible for managing knowledge (both explicit and tacit) pertaining to their department. They would audit the currently available knowledge in the system for its value and importance and decide on its availability in the knowledge management system.

The technology factor involves the format of the knowledge management system and the technology of retrieving knowledge. It is very important to consider such factors as, whether or not a library should go for advanced software that would involve considerable investment or simply use the existing technology to implement the knowledge management system. Honestly, the answer would lie somewhere in between these two. The decision varies between libraries; however, the need and scope of managing knowledge in a library would determine what kind of technology should be used for implementing a knowledge management system. Libraries that are already cash starved would find it difficult to acquire advanced software to implement knowledge management. Nevertheless, a careful study of the existing technology within the libraries would reveal that simple and existing technologies viz. Microsoft Excel, Access, Office suite or for that matter even intranet e-mail–Microsoft Outlook or freely available open source systems can be used as a knowledge management tool to store and retrieve pertinent knowledge.

LIMITATIONS OF IMPLEMENTING KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Motivating staff to contribute to the knowledge pool is vital in the successful implementation of a knowledge management system in any library. While organizational knowledge or the explicit knowledge can easily be brought into the system, the real challenge lies in convincing and motivating employees to share their 'tacit knowledge'. Tacit knowledge is like a trade secret for any employee, a very vital piece of knowledge or expertise that determines their success in an organization. It's a trump card for employees involved in critical decision making or problem solving, that they would like to hold close to their hearts and play only at a critical time. This particular knowledge is what makes an employee 'expert' in his/her field and to ask them to share such knowledge is equivalent to asking the magician for his wand and render them value less.

Wen (2005) states that knowledge sharing should be taken into account in the staff job profile, annual performance review and promotions. Although the best way of motivating employees to share their most valuable knowledge is not fully known, it is quite evident that motivation and organizational support seems to be the only way to encourage and convince employees to contribute to the knowledge pool than any kind of supervisory control. It is important for library managers to create a culture of sharing among and within libraries for determining the success of the knowledge management system.

CONCLUSION

If libraries use and share knowledge it will improve the services rendered in a library (Jantz, 2001). Expatriate library professionals very much depend on this quality in their new environment to carry forward their day-to-day activities both on the official and personal front. Hence, it is important for them to lead by example and start sharing their own knowledge and motivate colleagues to reciprocate and thereby create value in the knowledge network. If knowledge management is implemented in libraries, personal knowledge may be turned into organizational knowledge that can be widely shared throughout the library and applied appropriately for strategic planning (Mphidi, 2004). Transfer of knowledge from one cultural base to another is seldom straightforward and takes time, persistence and patience; and is largely dependent on the value system, attitudes and competences of the people of that country. Although these issues seem insurmountable, they are similar in many ways to starting any new senior position. A little research on the background of the new country, culture and the belief systems compounded with a personal attitude of openness and willingness to learn will assist expatriate library professionals in integrating successfully and thrive in the new environment.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

S.C. Kumaresan is the Head Librarian at Academic Bridge Program, Qatar Foundation, Doha, Qatar since August 2008. He received a M.Phil degree in Library and Information Science in 2005 from Alagappa University and MLIS in 1994 from Bharathidasan University, India. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D., as a part-time research scholar, on the applications of knowledge management in libraries

at the Bharathidasan University, India. He has held various positions over the last 15 years, including teaching assignment for the MLIS students. He has published a book and many research articles in various journals. He has served on the editorial board of some of the National conferences in India and is also a member of the editorial board of the *SALIS e-Journal*, published by the Society for the Advancement of Library Science, a registered professional association in India. He is a member of many international professional associations including ALA, ASIS&T and SLA. His research interests include knowledge management and organizational growth, knowledge sharing and ICT in libraries.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has declared there no conflicts of interest.

References

- Fink G and Holden N, (2005). The global transfer of management knowledge. *Academy of Management Executive*. 19, (2), 5–8. Special issue
- Goodman P and Darr E, (1999). Computer-aided systems and communities: Mechanisms for organizational learning in distributed environments. *MIS Quarterly*. 22, (4), 417–440.
- Jantz R, (2001). Knowledge management in academic libraries: special tools and processes to support information professionals. *Reference Service Review*. 29, (1), 33–39.
- Machlup F, (1980). *Knowledge: Its creation, distribution and economic significance*. Princeton University press, Princeton.
- Malhotra Y. (Ed.), (2000). *Becoming knowledge powered: planning the transformation*. An interview with Dave Pollard, Chief Knowledge Officer at Ernst and Young Canada. *Information Resources Management Journal*. 54–63.
- McKnight S, (2007). The expatriate library director. *Library Management*. 28, (4/5), 231–241.
- Mphidi H, (2004). The utilization of an intranet as a knowledge management tool in academic libraries. *The Electronic Library*. 22, (5), 393–400.
- Smith L, (2000). Knowledge discovery, capture and creation. *Bulletin of American Society for Information Science*. 6, (2), 11–12.
- Srikantiah KT, Koenig MED. (Eds), (2000). *Knowledge management for Information professionals*. New Jersey, ASIS.
- Wen, S, 2005. *Implementing Knowledge Management in Academic Libraries: A pragmatic approach*. Retrieved from <http://www.white-clouds.com/iclc/cliej/cl19wen.htm>.