



Why Special Libraries Are the Right Places to Host a Knowledge Management Center

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Introduction

First of all, allow me to thank the organizers of the IFLA Satellite Meeting on Knowledge Management and especially Mrs. Leda Bultrini, for her assistance and kind guidance for the preparation of this paper.

In February 2012 a Greek Sunday newspaper hosted an interview by Kevin Winkler, Deputy Director for Public Service at the New York Public Library. He concluded saying that we have to align our work with the people who use the Library. Times have changed and libraries which do not take energies to advance are going to die.

In the current economic downturn, for the sake of their survival libraries have to reconsider their roles and services, to adapt to and adopt new and emerging technologies. They should experiment with innovative ideas to provide services that empower patrons.

According to the “*2012 State of America’s Libraries*” a report by the American Library Association (ALA, 2012), libraries continue to transform the lives of their patrons and to see circulation rise “amid the shifting winds of an economic storm.” The budget-cutting threatens many libraries as regards collections and workforce. For example, the Library of Congress lost about 9% of its budget and 10% of its

workforce in 2011. But at the same time new library buildings are established (ALA, 2012a). Libraries continue their efforts to penetrate their communities.

Today libraries become the anchors for the economic, environmental and fair development. Special libraries though are considered as more vulnerable to closures than others. Their luck depends on the priorities set by the parent organization and its operational and budgetary plans. A way for special libraries to defeat shrinkages, elimination of workforce or closures is to grab any chances to stay relevant in the organization. Such a chance is the transformation to a Knowledge Management Center (KMC). Knowledge is the intellectual capital of the institution and its organization affects its advancement.

Special libraries vs. other types of libraries

In 1910, John C. Dana, the first President of the Special Libraries Association described the traditional library as it focuses its services to the reader of the polite literature while the special library is managed by experts on a topic to which the library is devoted (Dana, 1910). In its simplest definition special libraries are the ones which are not academic, nor public or school libraries (Semertzaki, 2011). They are also called research, corporate, company and recently, knowledge management centers.

Special libraries appeared more than two centuries ago in parallel with the evolution of business. They came out of the necessity that business, scientific, technical, legal and statistical information was requested to assist the growth of companies. As a result of the variation of business domains, each special library is unique and not identical with any other. An early example of a special library is the Library of

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Congress which was inaugurated in 1800 as the library that held material necessary to support the work of the US Congress. Likewise, in 1909 the Special Libraries Association (SLA) was established at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, during the ALA annual conference, aiming to the promotion of libraries engaged in the information services to business, industry and the government.

A key finding of the recent SLA Alignment Project (Special Libraries Association, 2012) is that “knowledge is the bridge between information and action ... Information professionals and librarians provide the context and depth that turns information into knowledge and results.” It is evident that there is a shift from information services to building the knowledge culture of the organization.

Characteristics and services

- Special libraries adhere to the mission and goals of the parent organization.
- They are subject-oriented, i.e. they cover from one to a few related topics.
- They provide specialized and tailor-made services to fulfill the needs of the institution’s personnel. They provide the right information to the right people at the right time when there is a demand for specialized information. They apply the “just-for-you” model instead of the “one-fits-all” model other types of libraries do.
- They act as mediators and bridges which connect people together and people with information and knowledge.
- They usually employ specialized personnel who hold a degree or demonstrate experience on the subject area of the organization besides their MLS degree.
- They are considered as small-to-medium size libraries concerning their collections.

- They are hybrid libraries because of the diversity of the material they hold: documents, patents, technical papers, internally produced documents, research papers and other corporate unpublished material which comprises the institutional repository.
- They add value to their organization while conducting research on behalf of their requestors saving them precious time as time is money.
- Consequently, the competencies of librarians become increasingly demanding. Mostly, they have to be aware of the tasks and activities of their organization.

Thinking out of the box: knowledge management as the opportunity to stay relevant

The definition of knowledge as published in the World Development Report 1998-1999 (World Bank, 1998-1999) is my favorite: “knowledge is like light: weightless and intangible, it can easily travel the world, enlightening the lives of people everywhere.” Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher, said “the only thing I know is that I know nothing.”

Professor Jim Matarazzo, expert in corporate libraries writes in the foreword of my book: “special libraries everywhere have been closed and/or reduced in greater numbers than before.” Special libraries have to react to survive and thrive. They have to think out of the box to be proactive and creative in order to overcome any difficulties caused in the current fluctuate times.

Here is the opportunity with knowledge management. Knowledge management refers to the procedures of creating, sharing, codifying, distributing, and learning, retrieving, using and reusing knowledge to create new knowledge in a continuous circle. It

discerns from information management which is defined as the organizational methodology which is concerned with the acquisition, retrieval and use of information to produce knowledge (St Clair, 2001). Simply, *knowledge* is *know-how* as compared to *information* which is *know-what* to do.

Knowledge management has four dimensions according to P. Lambe quoted in White (White, 2010). The author uses four Greek words to depict the values of knowledge management:

- *Logos* represents information management at the individual level (*logos* enables the logic)
- *Sophos* is the knowledgeable expert who represents the experience learned over time (*Sofia* is wisdom, the tacit knowledge hidden in the human mind)
- *Pathos* represents personal collaboration with others about a current situation and distribution of knowledge (*pathos* involves the emotional dimension)
- *Ethos* represents the culture, history and knowledge of the organization (*ethos* is the human behavior in the society as well as the oral and written culture of the individual and the society).

Competencies of special librarians

Special librarians have to obtain more capabilities to think out of the box. They have to extrovert, flexible and adjustable to changes. The key factor is collaboration. It is feasible to accomplish more together than individually. Collaboration enables people to reveal their talents and become more active in team working.

Peter Drucker, the father of modern management who also coined the phrase “knowledge worker” in the late 1950s, wrote that all organizations need the core

competence of innovation (Rosenstein, 2012). Knowledge management is innovation.

The SLA (SLA, 2003 rev. ed.) categorizes the competencies of special librarians in three sets:

- *Personal competencies* consist of attitudes, values, skills and ethics of the profession that enable special librarians to work effectively for the benefit of their organization, clients and profession.
- *Professional competences* are associated with the knowledge of information resources, access, technology and management and the ability to use this knowledge to provide the highest quality information services.
- Core competencies emphasize the value of developing and sharing knowledge through association networks and by conducting and disseminating research at conferences, in publications and collaborative arrangements.

Reasons for a special library to undertake the Knowledge Management Center (KMC)

A KMC is both a physical facility and a virtual place where the knowledge management system has been installed. It is the platform where internal knowledge is stored in a huge internal database fed by knowledge workers. The prevailing factor which distinguishes information from knowledge is *people*. I strongly believe that special libraries have all the potentials to be transformed to a KMC. There are many arguments to support it (Semertzaki, 2011).

- In 1916 the SLA adopted the value statement *putting knowledge to work*. It is the strongest argument to advocate the idea that the special library is the pertinent place to host a KMC. Then the statement became *putting our*

knowledge to work and these days it is *turning information to knowledge*.

- *The management of knowledge is the modern expression of what special libraries have been doing in the course of their history: they gather, organize and distribute information and knowledge created internally. Generally, they execute traditional tasks differently with a shift to less strict hierarchical structures. Indeed, the realm of special libraries comprises information and knowledge.*
- *The answer to the question why the library is the place to interact with authors and content providers is that “the library may be uniquely or strongly positioned to uphold principles of cost-effective or low-barrier access. Also, libraries bring other important characteristics associated with integrity, authenticity and trust” (Pradt Lougee, 2007). The same applies to special libraries. Information professionals are the best qualified employees to manage knowledge. They are conventionally responsible to deliver knowledge and information services to the parent organization.*
- *A core activity of special libraries is to add value to the parent organization by supporting the research conducted in it and by saving the valuable time for researchers, while assisting them with their research demands.*
- *It is imperative for special libraries to adhere to the mission of the parent organization. It is a business unit which supports activities, operations, research, products, clients and personnel of the organization using the library resources. In a competitive marketplace, companies strive to be innovative. Innovation and creativity are key factors for development. Knowledge management is an innovative project and special libraries endorse novel*

activities.

- The remark by Ulla de Stricker (Colvin, 2009) about the changing role of information professionals is very timely: “if we play our *knowledge management cards right*, there are very few areas in any organization in which we won’t have a significant contribution to make. Corporate portals, intranets, extranets, guardianship and mining of corporate memory, design and creation of new information flows, negotiation for content licenses” are some of the tasks that special librarians are capable to accomplish.
- Librarians are keen of technologies because *they use computer systems* to organize the content of their collections. The KM system is built on a capable computer system which makes knowledge accessible and retrieved, though simultaneously it facilitates knowledge sharing and exchange.
- *Organization of data and information* is traditionally the core activity of libraries. *Codification* is one of the main attributes of knowledge management. Special librarians organize and filter the plethora of information in order to present it to the requestor in an understandable manner. They have the expertise to store, maintain and make accessible the knowledge flow in the organization.
- Special librarians *combine internal knowledge with external resources* accessed at the library. The internally produced documents are kept at the library to create the knowledge repository of the organization’s intellectual capital. Internal knowledge feeds the KMC and create new knowledge. Therefore, special librarians are the knowledge workers for the internally generated knowledge.

- In their book, Davenport and Prusak (Davenport & Prusak, 1998) affirm that the *most intriguing new knowledge jobs* are knowledge integrators, librarians, synthesizers, reporters and editors. They also mention that knowledge administrators are responsible for capturing, storing and maintaining the knowledge that others produce. It is true that in the course of their work, special librarians behave as knowledge managers and serve as important hubs in internal communication products and tools such as the intranet.
- Information professionals provide *informal and formal training* to employees. They teach them how to use library resources and how to perform searches effectively. In the KMC informal training provides opportunities to retain organizational knowledge, especially the tacit one, which is more difficult to capture. It integrates the process of knowledge exchange and sharing. The knowledge workers require training to record their knowledge in the KM system. The training is a task that special librarians are pertinent to perform. It encourages the transformation of the library to a learning organization. The learning organization enforces corporate culture and managing people as assets.
- An essential task for information professionals is to share and diffuse information to the people needed. Knowledge sharing is one of the main elements in the knowledge management cycle. Hence, in addition to *sharing information*, special librarians are capable to *knowledge sharing*.
- Special librarians *bring people together* as they broadly know the activities of the organization's business units. They are the bridges, the mediators and connectors with peers. Likewise, people are the cornerstone of knowledge

management. Thus, special librarians know how to handle and connect people together. The library acts as a meeting point. Libraries resemble to the ancient Athenian Agora. It was an assembly and a meeting place for political and philosophical discussions, for exchanging ideas and for selling and buying goods. Special libraries contribute to the knowledge exchange besides the information exchange.

- As an innovative project, the KMC *changes the organizational structures*. Libraries are agents of change because they deal with changes particularly because of the rapid growth of technologies.
- *Libraries foster partnerships*. They cooperate with other business units within the organization. Moreover, they have a long tradition in networking, partnerships and cooperation with peer libraries. Similarly, the KMC underpins cooperation and networking enterprise-wide. The knowledge management team also consists of representatives from several business units. Special librarians can be the trusted partners to monitor the knowledge management hub with their experience in cooperative activities.

Consequently, special libraries have been involved in knowledge activities since their existence, but now they are mature enough to undertake all activities which utilize the knowledge in the organization. There is an overlap between librarianship and knowledge management. Knowledge-based activities are analogous to the traditional library activities.

Affects to the organization: changing the corporate culture

As it was abovementioned, the KMC breaks strict hierarchical structures in the organization. It involves several people from various business units both in the knowledge management team and as knowledge workers regardless of their position

in the hierarchy. As a change management project it affects the corporate culture. The contributors to the KMC have to change their attitude and adapt to the behavior of sharing and exchanging. They have to be convinced that their knowledge gains more value when they share it.

Benefits for the parent organization

The KMC as an innovative project deeply influences both the organization and the special library.

- It facilitates better decision making: the well and accurately informed decision maker takes as more correct decisions as possible.
- It exploits the existing resources and utilizes the existing computer systems.
- It encourages the free flow of ideas and knowledge which fosters insight.
- It improves customer service and satisfaction and boosts revenues but also enhances the value of existing products.
- It streamlines operations and reduces costs in human labor and hours by eliminating redundant processes. Consequently, it makes better use of employees' working time.
- It improves the collective-organization memory and knowledge sharing by recording the tacit knowledge of people who retire or quit.

Benefits for the special library

- The KMC promotes the profile, reputation, visibility and status of the library.
- It cultivates open and democratic exchange of ideas and makes the library the meeting point in the organization.
- It defeats the possible threat for the library to become marginalized and a candidate to close in austere economic conditions.

- It fosters a new type of library culture.
- The library becomes a trusted partner in the organization and demonstrates the value of its services. It is a value center and not a cost center.
- The library becomes the center of excellence that accrues knowledge and collective wisdom of the organization.
- It modernizes its structure and sets new priorities.
- It becomes the agent of change in the organization.

Conclusions

We have to remember that changes, crises and difficulties open up new opportunities. The wise librarians keep their eyes, ears and minds open to look and identify new opportunities.

Knowledge management is not a fad but a reality. Since the 1990s when the term was introduced, knowledge management is expanded in organizations. At the beginning, the conception of the idea to transform the library to a KMC seems intimidating and difficult to accomplish. It requires that a sustainable strategic plan will be implemented. Nobody declares that big projects do not entail high costs, risks and even failures.

The value of the newly established KMC gradually becomes apparent as the volume of the content introduced in the system is increasing. The phase of persuading people to become knowledge workers for the KMC is time consuming but extremely important. The KMC lives with the contributions of people who are the driving force of the center.

Furthermore, the success of the KM initiative predominantly depends on the support

by the upper management and it is based on the devotion and enthusiastic contribution of all staff, including the library personnel, within a supportive environment. The top management is the decision making agent who provides the financial resources and motivates the knowledge management team. It is fundamental to embrace the project. This hot issue needs more discussion.

New competencies of library staff are required to accomplish complex tasks. How ready are library personnel to change their attitudes and start learning novel things? The role of the knowledge manager entails increased responsibilities. The enthusiasm of the knowledge manager or the director of the library is crucial to convince the rest of the team. These are some hits to stimulate further discussion.

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