

Share and learn - a recipe for learning

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Abstract:

Libraries, just as any other public organization, face tumultuous times. For libraries it is not only the financial crisis which has led to budget cuts that creates uncertainty for libraries. At the same time libraries are re-thinking and re-assessing their position in the information society. Survival and success depend upon adaptability, innovation and flexibility. This, in turn necessitates continuous individual and organizational change.

Finnish LIS professionals are well educated and there is plenty of training available for them during their professional career. Finnish libraries have good potential for experimenting and developing new ideas. There are those who are innovative and spearheading, always trying new things. There are also those that are not so enthusiastic about learning new things. Sharing and peer-learning is needed. Recipe for learning is a simple-to-use and easy-to-adopt tool for this.

It is our intention that these recipes for learning promote sharing and peer-learning. Just as people like to swap food recipes, they could swap recipes for learning. Adopting a recipe someone has created will be made easy and it will be linked to other organizational processes.

Keywords: peer-learning, peer-support, knowledge-sharing, organizational learning

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper will provide an insight into a Finnish national development project, in which Helsinki City Library and Kouvola City Library together with The School of Information Sciences in the University of Tampere are developing methods to promote learning organizations. We focus on methods how to share one's skills, knowledge and know-how with peers and within organizations or even between organizations. This paper will bring out a case on sharing, which we call The recipe for sharing. It is currently being designed and implemented in the libraries of Helsinki and Kouvola.

The recipe for sharing is a simple method for sharing your skills, knowledge and knowhow with your colleagues. It includes step-by-step instructions on how to arrange a concert with local youngsters, for example. It can also be about a certain specific skillset that someone in the library has, which will be taught to others.

The focus of this paper is to introduce the recipe for sharing and discuss the experiences we have accumulated when piloting the concept in Helsinki and Kouvola City Libraries. This concept is being piloted in a ESF-funded (European Social Fund) project called "Osaavat verkostot". The English translation is "Skillful networks" or "Networks with talent".

In this project, we aim to share what is learned in Helsinki City Library and Kouvola City Library. In both libraries there have been many development projects throughout years and new service concepts have been developed. Two of these are Urban Office and Media Lounge.

Urban Office was developed within Helsinki City Library and it has become a part of its functions. One goal of our project is to start an urban office in Kouvola city library. In order to succeed in this, one must learn how it was done in Helsinki. The cumulated knowledge needs to be shared between the staff of Helsinki and Kouvola.

Media Lounge is based within Kouvola City Library. It is a place where the library organizes all kinds of events, such as concerts, game-nights and art exhibitions. Events are organized in co-operation with other organizations but also with local youth. Media Lounge has all the facilities and it is the youth who participate in the planning and organization of these events.

Both Urban Office and Media Lounge have generated special skills and knowledge among staff which is valuable. These skills and knowledge should be shared with other libraries in order for them to develop similar activities and services.

In other words, peer-learning, sharing, transfer of tacit knowledge and building communities of practice are core elements in our project. Individuals learn and through their learning process organizations learn. We are not saying that learning has not occurred before. What we are trying to do is to develop simple-to-use, easy-to-adopt tools for sharing and peer-learning. We also want to link this sharing to the organization's other processes and systems, HR for instance.

2 LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Before turning attention to the recipes we shall take a short look on themes which are linked to our topic. We are interested in how to share what is learned: skills, knowledge, tacit knowledge, lessons learned etc. It is not only the individuals who learn, but teams, communities and organizations as well. Indeed, we are talking about organizational learning.

Sharing in our thinking denotes peer-learning. It has become more and more vital in organizations that they foster peer-learning, especially in knowledge-intensive organizations. Peer-learning together with strong peer-support is an important element of learning organization. Sharing and peer-learning are

ways to build and foster communities of practice. To share is to learn, and to learn is to change – this goes for individual as well as for organizations.

2.1 Learning organization

The concept of the learning organization has been widely used since Peter Senge introduced it in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990). There are strong theoretical assertions that organizational learning is crucial for organizational survival and success (Dixon, 1992; Friedman, Lipschitz & Popper, 2005; Senge, 1990).

According to Peter Senge (1990, p.3) learning organizations are “organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together”. The basic rationale for such organizations is that in situations of rapid change only those that are flexible, adaptive and productive will excel. For this to happen, it is argued, organizations need to ‘discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at *all* levels’ (Senge, 1990, p.4).

Senge also talks about dimensions such as building shared vision and team that distinguishes learning from traditional organizations learning (Senge, 1990, p.69).

The concept of learning organization includes the notion that people must learn in order for the organization to learn. Skills, knowledge and know-how are created by individuals and those skills, knowledge and know-how are transferred or adopted by the organization over time. The link between individual learning and organizational learning is pivotal. How is this transfer or adoption made possible in libraries? Finnish LIS professionals are well educated and there is plenty of training available for them during their professional career. However, it is by no means self-evident that all this will lead into organizational learning.

2.2 Importance of sharing your knowledge

Titi Amayah describes in her study the determinant of knowledge sharing in public sector organizations (2013). According to Titi Amayah, knowledge sharing is increasingly viewed as critical to organizational effectiveness in the knowledge-based economy. Knowledge sharing among employees significantly impacts the performance of both public and private sector organizations. As a result, knowledge sharing has gained importance in organizations seeking to gain a competitive edge (Felin & Hesterly, 2007).

Knowledge sharing presents challenges for organizations. First, employees’ tacit knowledge, by its very nature, is difficult to transfer. Second, knowledge sharing is typically voluntary (Lin, Lee & Wang, 2009). Organizations can manage knowledge resources more effectively only if employees are willing to share their knowledge with colleagues.

Ardichvili (2008) identifies some determinants of knowledge sharing among employees in public sector organizations. Ardichvili (2008) suggested that motivational factors, enablers, and barriers influence knowledge sharing. Motivation is a necessary prerequisite for knowledge sharing (e.g., Ardichvili, 2008; Zboralski, Salomo & Gemuenden, 2006). Because knowledge resides within individuals, knowledge cannot be shared effectively if individuals are not motivated to share it. Therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of the factors that motivate knowledge sharing. Three categories of motivating factors have an impact on an individual’s willingness to share knowledge with other employees: personal benefits, community-related considerations, and normative considerations.

Besides the motivational factors, willingness to share knowledge can be further encouraged by enablers. Enablers of knowledge sharing include organizational culture, social capital, and trust. Once an individual is motivated to participate in knowledge sharing activities, enablers facilitate the actual provision of information.

Employees might also be faced with organizational barriers preventing the sharing of knowledge. Barriers that may prevent employees from sharing knowledge with colleagues include organizational climate and organizational structure. When barriers can be removed and knowledge sharing promoted, employees can more effectively disseminate and manage their knowledge. Effective transfer of training is an important part of the learning process in a learning organization. In our view, this transfer is done by sharing. However, organizations lack proper structures that promote sharing. Sharing adds up the amount of skills, knowledge and know-how in organizations. Without sharing or transfer of training, there is no learning organization. Sharing is also effective in making tacit knowledge tangible.

2.3 Communities of practice

In Titi Amayah's study, community related considerations were found to be the strongest predictor to knowledge sharing in public organizations (Titi Amayah, 2013). Therefore public sector managers will need to pay particular attention to programs and activities they can design to develop a sense of community among co-workers. Public sector organizations seeking to encourage or facilitate knowledge management among their employees could encourage the formation of communities of practice. Effective sharing, peer-learning and peer-support require communities of practice just as much as they require supportive organizational climate.

3 RECIPE AS A LEARNING TOOL

Libraries are no longer only places for the storage of books and other material or places for loan of them but also scenes of events and other activities. These days, public libraries are event producers which make them very well suited for other activities in public libraries. Libraries as places for events are also suitable for media educational events which have strengthened their role in media education field.

The LIS Professional in Finnish public libraries have good education but to produce events requires skills which a librarian usually needs to learn later during one's working life because most of the library events are carried out by the library personnel themselves. There are plenty of continuing training programs available for librarians. However, it is by no means self-evident that all this will lead into organizational learning. As a result, there are public libraries which have some librarians who have the key skills needed to organize events but also some libraries where events are not organized at all. Therefore, it is important to find methods to share skills and knowhow between library personnel and even between libraries.

Organizations lack proper methods to promote sharing. Our development project has focused on promoting sharing and learning from each other. The results of the development work in our project are two tools which are a) event recipe and b) peer support plan. The goal has been to develop tools which are easy and pleasant to use, not too time-consuming or too complicated.

The event recipes focus on sharing knowledge to organize different kinds of events in libraries for example video workshop for children aged 10-17 years old or a snow sculpture event for all citizens in Kouvola. Event recipes can be described as food recipes. Let's think that you have made a very good soup. You write a soup recipe which you share with your friends and they can now make the same soup with help of your recipe. The developed event recipe works in the same way it is a step-by-step instruction on how to organize an event. The purpose is that everyone who has organized some

kind of event will document the process on a recipe form. The structure of the documentation has been prepared in the project, to make the documentation process easy. When someone else sees the recipe he/she can organize same kind of an event by herself with help of the recipe.

Sometimes it can be difficult to make the good soup first time by yourself and it could be nice to have someone with you, someone who have made it earlier. So the second tool we developed is a peer support plan, a documented plan which clarifies the support process containing the objectives of the process, its schedule and phases. You might not need any peer support when you make fast food, but when you make gourmet food the peer support plan is certainly for good help.

Let's take an example: a librarian has organized a concert with local youngsters. After the event the librarian has documented the organization process in the event recipe. Another librarian wants to organize same event again when she/he sees the event recipe. But she/he is a bit uncertain of her/his own ability to arrange such an event so she/he asks the experienced librarian's support. They fill in the peer support plan form together and ask their superiors acceptance of the plan. The inexperienced librarian can now organize the concert with help of the event recipe and experienced colleague's support.

The first versions of both tools are complete now, including their visual appearance which has been designed by professionals. By now the project personnel have documented the first twenty event recipes. Now these recipes and the tools themselves will be tested in the two public libraries which are involved in the project. There will be arranged workshops in the end of May in the libraries, the participants of the workshops are library personnel, people who may be persons who document the event recipes themselves in the future. Based on the feedback from the workshop participants the tools will be adjusted if needed.

4 NEXT STEPS – MAINSTREAMING

The development project will end in the end of this year, before that the tools need to be accepted by the whole library management and personnel. So far they have been presented in a few management meetings in both libraries. Attitudes to the tools have been positive. As already has been shown, our project focuses on sharing skills and knowledge on organizing events but in some meetings the participants have even got ideas how to utilize the recipe tool in other skill sharing situations, too.

Our next steps in the project are to disseminate the use of the new developed tools. Our aim is to make them as everyday practice in the two libraries involved in the project. It is very important to get library management's support for the tools first so they will be presented in several management meetings in both libraries. In addition to this we need to make them well known among the whole library personnel, too. Therefore the piloting workshops will continue in the fall as well as informing about the tools in several staff meetings.

These recipes with the peer-support plan can be used in many different ways. We have started with the idea of an event recipe where the aim is to share lessons-learned in arranging an event in library. But they can be ideal for sharing other kind of skillsets, as well, for example e-skills. The demand for e-skills will continue to rise in a knowledge-based economy and society. E-skills are becoming an important entry ticket to the job market but also into better jobs. E-skills are needed for competitiveness, growth and employment in the 21st century. Orientation of new employees requires sharing and peer-learning. We hope to see our tools used in the orientation process, too. To succeed in this, it is important that managers and team-leaders will realize the potential these tools have.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Finnish LIS professionals are well educated and there is plenty of training available for them during their professional career. Also, competition for jobs is evident: there are a lot of applicants for open positions. To be competitive, one needs higher and broader basic education and the trend is rising. This, together with high quality of education in Finland, leads into well educated professionals entering libraries.

However, it is not self-evident that skills, knowledge and know-how are transferred or shared among peers. With our project we aim to create simple-to-use and easy-to-adopt tools which will help this sharing and transfer. We have adopted the idea of a recipe for our tools.

The event recipes focus on sharing knowledge to organize different kinds of events in libraries. It is a step-by-step instruction on how to organize an event. It can also be used to share tacit knowledge and various skills etc. What matters is that there are tools that are easy to use and there is a climate that supports the use of these tools.

Together with the recipes for learning we have created a plan for peer-support, which is a documented plan which clarifies the support process and the adoption of an event-recipe. With these tools we want to make peer-learning easier and bring transparency into the process. Sometimes it is good to make learning processes open and let everyone in the library see that they exist. This makes it more acceptable to see that someone is actually taking time to help someone else learn new things. In your own library, or even between branches or cities.

It is the goal of our joint development project to introduce peer-learning tools and processes that will lead into individual and organizational learning in libraries. As a result of this learning, libraries will develop their services and continue to be vital hubs in their communities.

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