

[Sharing practices & actions for making best use of organizational knowledge in libraries](#)

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Beyond Knowledge Silos: Preserving and Sharing Institutional Knowledge in Academic Libraries

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Abstract:

Many academic environments tend to store information in “knowledge silos,” which are unproductive ways that compartmentalize knowledge and prohibit the sharing of ideas (Robson et al., 2003, p. 1). Preserving institutional knowledge is imperative for moving beyond these knowledge silos in order to effectively document the collective expertise and history of an organization. Institutional knowledge encompasses a vast array of areas ranging from tacit knowledge (i.e. expertise), implicit knowledge, explicit knowledge, to procedural knowledge (IFLA, KM Section, 2015). While the importance of retaining institutional knowledge has been recognized, best practices for preserving and sharing institutional knowledge in academic libraries warrant further investigation. In this paper, a number of promising strategies for engaging in knowledge-retention activities in academic libraries to help facilitate the preservation of institutional knowledge are addressed. First, the advantages and challenges associated with preserving and sharing institutional knowledge in academic libraries are discussed. Second, a number of concrete examples of initiatives undertaken at one large academic library system in an effort to retain and transfer institutional knowledge are shared. Third, a discussion of knowledge-retention efforts to help identify effective and promising strategies for academic libraries is proposed. Finally, the authors are uniquely situated within a University with an accredited School of Library and

Information Science (LIS). As such, innovative ideas for how Schools of LIS can cultivate a culture of information professionals prepared to lead and implement best practices for preserving institutional knowledge are also highlighted. By engaging in a discussion about promising practices for retaining institutional knowledge in academic libraries, this paper aims to serve as a platform to generate ideas and identify best practices that other information professionals may apply at their own institutions.

Keywords: Knowledge management, knowledge sharing, academic libraries, mentoring

Introduction

Knowledge has “always been embedded in the activities of organizations [and] this includes the knowledge generated within libraries” (Agarwal and Islam, 2015, p. 150). In an academic library setting, how new employees gather and access information relevant to their jobs is an important concern. At the same time, academic libraries are challenged with capturing the expertise of employees that are leaving the library due to staff turnover. Hence, important questions emerge around training new employees, capturing the knowledge of existing employees, and sharing this knowledge across many departments within academic libraries.

Institutional knowledge ranges from tacit knowledge (*i.e.* expertise), implicit knowledge, explicit knowledge, to procedural knowledge (IFLA, KM Section, 2015). This paper uses a knowledge management (KM) framework to examine how information and knowledge “grow, flow, and create value” throughout an organization (Agarwal and Islam, 2015, p. 151). In this paper, KM efforts in academic libraries related to the three following areas are of particular interest: 1) Retaining the knowledge of employees that are leaving academic libraries; 2) Sharing organizational information with new hires; and 3) Preserving knowledge perceived to be at risk of being lost in academic libraries.

Background

A number of advantages and challenges exist with regards to retaining and sharing knowledge within organizations. Advantages include the ability to train and transfer knowledge to new hires as well as capturing the expertise of current employees (Liebowitz, 2006). KM activities also contribute to organization’s overall effectiveness. KM helps to reduce the redundancy of information, improves communication across teams, and increases a sense of belonging and community among employees (Liebowitz, 2006).

Staff turnover is a major challenge to effectively capturing and sharing institutional knowledge. Staff turnover can be due to retirements or employees leaving the organization. In addition, Agarwal and Islam (2015) note that many academic libraries do not have planning or policies in place to help facilitate the sharing of knowledge. When current library practices do not encourage or support retaining and sharing knowledge, this limits the accessibility and usefulness of organizational knowledge (Agarwal and Islam, 2015).

Moreover, many academic environments tend to store information in “knowledge silos” (Robson *et al.*, 2003, p. 1). These “knowledge silos” are unproductive ways that compartmentalize knowledge and prohibit the sharing of ideas. Preserving institutional knowledge is imperative for moving beyond these knowledge silos in order to effectively document the collective expertise and history of an organization. Given this, more research is needed to understand existing library practices related to retaining and sharing knowledge.

Therefore, this paper has two main objectives:

1. To explore a number of concrete examples of initiatives undertaken at one large academic library system in an effort to retain and transfer institutional knowledge.
2. To identify promising knowledge-retention strategies for academic libraries.

To address these research questions, first a number of concrete examples of initiatives undertaken at one large academic library system in the United States in an effort to retain and transfer institutional knowledge are shared. Second, key findings from an internal survey of library staff about knowledge activities at one large library system will be discussed. Third, a discussion of promising knowledge-retention strategies for academic libraries is proposed. Finally, the authors are uniquely situated within a University with an accredited School of Library and Information Science (LIS). As such, the paper concludes with suggestions for how Schools of LIS may cultivate a culture of information professionals prepared to lead and implement best practices for preserving institutional knowledge.

Case Study: Knowledge Initiatives at One Library System

This paper uses a case study approach to explore knowledge activities at one large academic library system in the United States. This approach both allows the authors to assess *existing* knowledge retention efforts that are already in place and to also identify any *new* knowledge activities that are warranted. As an effort to analyze one academic library system more thoroughly, the results of internal survey of library staff about knowledge access and sharing are utilized to further identify any additional knowledge-related needs for the organization.

New Librarians Roundtable

As with other organizations, academic libraries often engage in the "onboarding" of new hires. One approach was the establishment of a New Librarians Roundtable (NLRT). The goals of NLRT are to provide a support network of librarians and introduce new hires to the evaluation process and unique features of the library system.

This program has existed in varying forms for over 30 years. The longevity and success of NLRT is due to continued assessment and evaluation of organizational needs. The program coordinators developed a schedule for a recent NLRT cohort that included the following topics:

- The importance of teams at the Library and in evaluation
- Information on key Library staff / librarians

- Policies and practices for the bargaining unit
- Evaluation factors / by laws
- Writing and presenting professionally
- Professional involvement: job related vs. professional development
- Employment Security Status & Promotion
- Annual review / professional record workshop

These topics are covered in a series of monthly meetings that also provide a safe setting for informal knowledge sharing.

Connected to NLRT and expanding the support network, a mentoring program exists for new librarians. NLRT cohort members are paired with librarians that have more experience in the organization. Mentors are able to provide new librarians with unstructured and informal history and knowledge that may be inappropriate for NLRT but relevant to their success.

NLRT typically includes a group project for each cohort that is developed throughout the year and is presented to the Library System at the conclusion of the program. The projects are valuable to the Library System and the cohort as they are designed to address current organizational needs and provide new librarians with an opportunity to present their work. NLRT, a major KM initiative in this Library System, is able to survive and remain relevant due to this tethering to organizational needs.

Videos (“Talks with Richard”)

One such project was to create videos about organizational “culture” from the librarian with most seniority. Culture defies traditional organizational documentation, such as organizational charts, policies, and contractual documents. To address this issue, this “storytelling” approach is directed at librarians new to the organization and covers broad topics such as collegiality, the professional record and annual review, the importance of job responsibilities, and what makes the organization a great place to work. The videos reside on the aforementioned LibGuide for New Academic Staff and were created as a one of the projects assigned to new librarians. The LibGuide for New Academic Staff is available online at: <http://guides.lib.wayne.edu/c.php?g=174856&p=1151910>.

GitHub for Managing Digital Infrastructure

In 2012, the Library system began utilizing GitHub, an online repository used to preserve, share, and collaboratively edit computer code. Though GitHub was primarily adopted to manage code, more recently the Library has actively used it as a way to manage knowledge around systems that underpin our library website and digital collections infrastructure.

Familiarity of software and related systems fades quickly, even to the original creator. As such, it is widely agreed that documenting software and systems is critical to the success of the overall platform. However, it is also broadly observed that documenting software is difficult and time consuming, and as a result, usually quite poor and incomplete (Brian, 2003).

It has been observed that software engineers who do document their code are engaging in sound Knowledge Management practices (Rus and Lindvall, 2002), and the Library wondered how it might lower the bar for documentation of systems in development. As the Library was already actively using GitHub for code collaboration and preservation, it was a convenient location and method for preserving knowledge around projects for future caretakers of those systems.

The key to leveraging GitHub for our own Knowledge Management was embedding information the Library wanted to preserve and make available to future system caretakers "near" parts of the code or projects where it would be useful. Most software languages allow for "comments" in the code that allow human-readable information to sit alongside machine-readable computer code, which provides a perfect medium documentation.

Software documentation is often tertiary to the code itself, and needs to be located and referenced when needed. This can be confusing and time consuming at best and prohibitive to documentation at worst. By using software comments as a medium for documentation, and the online platform of GitHub to search and access the code and documentation, the Library eliminated the need for much external documentation. This streamlined the documentation process immensely, and better situates the documentation with that it explains. Using GitHub has helped us capture information that would have formerly been lost to poor, incomplete, or non-existent documentation processes.

Moreover, because revision history is a core affordance of a GitHub workflow, GitHub also provides a wealth of context, history, and details about a project going back in time. These details provide insight into the project, such as whom to speak with regarding a certain functionality, or comments around why changes were made on a certain date, that all conspire to help management.

Introducing GitHub into the library's workflow -- by definition, a software that facilitates collaboration -- has allowed us to take on increasingly complex and long-term projects by streamlining our documentation process, with multiple persons involved at the process at any given time.

Survey: Knowledge Sharing in an Academic Library

To summarize the abovementioned activities, existing strategies to capture and share knowledge include: formal mentoring for new hires ("New Librarians Roundtable"), a recorded video storytelling approach for librarians new to the organization with advice from a senior librarian ("Talks with Richard"), and documentation to aid in the transfer of knowledge about managing digital collections and the library website for future library personnel. In addition, an online survey of academic library staff at a large urban University in the Midwest, United States, will be conducted in Summer 2016 to help elucidate both the views of and any additional needs around knowledge management issues in the organization. In particular, a major focus of the survey is on knowledge access and sharing. The survey questionnaire will consist of ten questions adapted from Agarwal and Islam (2015) and Liebowitz (2006). As seen in **Table 1**, the survey questions range from inquiring about how the knowledge of people leaving the library is

retained, how new employees are provided with organizational information, to what knowledge is perceived to be at most risk of being lost within the organization.

Table 1: Knowledge Sharing Survey Questions

1. To what extent does your library retain the knowledge of people who leave or resign from the library?
To a Great Extent
Somewhat
Very Little
Not at All
2. If applicable, describe at least one way that your library retains the knowledge of people who leave or resign from the library. (note: can leave blank/skip)
3. To what extent does your library provide organizational information to new employees?
To a Great Extent
Somewhat
Very Little
Not at All
4. If applicable, describe at least one way that your library provides organizational information to new employees.
5. Which resource do you most often turn to *first* when looking for information to perform your job?
6. What are the constraints you face in being able to share information or knowledge in your department?
7. What knowledge is at crucial risk of being lost in your department?
8. For what reasons is this information or knowledge at risk?
9. When you come across a news item, article, book, website, announcement, or some other information that may be useful to other library staff, what are you most likely to do?
10. What information or knowledge would help you do your job better? Please describe.

Key Findings from the Survey

The survey is scheduled to be conducted in June/July 2016. As noted, the survey questions explore KM efforts to retain the knowledge of departing employees, how the academic library is

introducing organizational information to new employees, and any knowledge that is viewed by library staff as crucial for being at risk. The survey questions will be pretested prior to disseminating the survey to help ensure clarity of the question wording. An invitation to voluntarily participate in the online survey will be sent to all library staff via a professional email discussion list hosted by the library system. The survey will remain open for a two-week period and one follow-up reminder will be sent to library staff to help increase the response rate.

Discussion

Key findings from the “Knowledge Sharing Survey” are forthcoming and will be presented at the IFLA Knowledge Management (KM) satellite conference in August 2016. It is anticipated that the survey data will be useful to help identify both current KM practices within the academic library as well as any additional KM needs. Any differences in the reported KM needs across library administrators, librarians, or staff will also be investigated. Further, this discussion will greatly help to increase awareness around the risk of knowledge being lost in academic libraries and possible actions to remedy this phenomena.

Future Research

Research that continues to examine how academic libraries are capturing and sharing knowledge within their organizations would be useful. In particular, strategies for successfully retaining knowledge that is perceived to be at risk by academic library staff would be helpful. Policy issues related to implementing and supporting KM activities would also greatly contribute to the discussion of KM efforts in academic libraries.

Conclusion

The aim of this presentation was to investigate the practices related to preserving and sharing institutional knowledge in one large academic library system. A number of KM efforts within the academic library were discussed along with practical advice that other libraries may be able to apply at their own institutions. In addition, the survey findings may offer new ideas for KM activities that other academic libraries may be able to replicate and test. Further, this discussion helps to build awareness around the risk of losing crucial knowledge and possible responses for preserving this knowledge in academic libraries. Finally, this discussion contributes to the existing literature about how Schools of LIS can also help to cultivate a culture of information professionals prepared to lead and implement best practices for preserving institutional knowledge.

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