Academic Libraries as Learning Organisations. A Romanian Perspective

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Abstract:

The learning organisation appears to be the ideal model to which all structures should turn nowadays especially in the context of the need to maximize their responsiveness to the complexity of the challenges and changes in the external environment and with many of them in the process of implementing the knowledge management function. Libraries in the western developed countries have moved faster in this direction and also innovated a lot during the past 20 years in terms of their internal practices and information services for users proving they have what it takes to be a learning organisation. But what is the situation of libraries in other countries? Within 2004 - 2009 we conducted a research on knowledge management in Romanian academic libraries which resulted in developing a strategic model for implementation of this process and also a framework for creating a culture of learning and knowledge sharing in these structures. In 2012 we resumed our research at the level of Romanian academic libraries this time focusing on their transformation into learning organisations and on their co-operation relationships. This paper will present the results of one of the studies in the current research which tried to determine if there is openness and interest in becoming learning organisations, if Romanian academic libraries display characteristics and practices which define a learning organisation, how learning is perceived at the level of these libraries' directors, how the issue of the continuous improvement is approached and what internal learning programs are in place. The study is based on the result of interviews with academic libraries' directors and library branch heads in Romania. The interviews were conducted through e-mail using a structured and open-ended questionnaire. Even if the results of our study do not represent the most vibrant example of libraries as learning organisations and are not related to the experience of libraries from western countries, we consider it as a relevant and edifying example of the current situation and of how things work at the level of academic libraries from a East European country in terms of learning and professional experience sharing.

Keywords: academic libraries, learning, learning organisations, knowledge sharing, Romania

1 INTRODUCTION

One critical element for the organisations' survival and success in the current changing environment is learning. The ability to adapt to changes and succeed in the globalized society

is highly dependent on the learning capacity of organisations. Learning can help organisations range ahead of the competition (Abell and Oxbrow, 2002).

Learning and the learning organisation have become hot topics in the management literature of the past 20 years especially in the context of the interest on knowledge management. The key role in both the implementation of knowledge management and in becoming a learning organisation is played by the organisational culture which should be oriented towards learning, knowledge sharing, collaboration, dialogue, team work, trust, creativity.

Learning can help organisations increase their capacity to respond to current challenges, and also to regenerate and develop their organisational knowledge. Characterized by Sydänmaanlakka (2002) as a complex creative process, learning is also described as "the natural connection between working and innovating" (Brown and Duguid, 2000). It can be considered as a process that never ends and nowadays it is an integral part of everybody's work (Gregory, 2000). Ali et al. go further and approach generative learning which increases the organisation's ability "to adjust to dynamic and unexpected situations and to react creatively to them" (Ali et al., 2006: 561).

2 THE LEARNING ORGANISATION

Many terms have been used to indicate the successful organisation of the future: competent organisation (Sanchez, 2001), intelligent organisation (Sydänmaanlakka, 2002), open organisation (Addleson, 2000), etc. and the main common element is the fact that it is based on learning and it has an organisational culture which supports the interaction among employees and knowledge sharing. The learning organisation is perceived as the ideal model to which all structures should turn, but, according to Senge, becoming a learning organisation requires a strategy for being able to anticipate, react and respond to changes (Senge, 1990). At the same time, according to Gregory (2000), building a learning organisation is a risky activity because it involves creating a new organisational culture.

But what is a learning organisation? One of the most quoted definition is that of Senge who considers learning organisations as "(…) organisations 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". (Senge, 1990: 3)

Specialists (Stacey, 2001; Sydänmaanlakka, 2002; Sanchez, 2001) have analyzed the different levels where learning can take place: individual, group/team and organisational, and models illustrating the interaction between these levels were designed.

Vat emphasizes in his definition precisely this aspect of the learning transfer from one level to the other and of the organisational renewal: "An organisation that helps transfer learning from individuals to a group, provide for organisational renewal, keep an open attitude to the outside world, and support a commitment to knowledge". (Vat, 2006: 537)

For Gregory the essence of a learning organisation is "adaptation to changing environments and circumstances" (Gregory, 2000: 161) and for this there are necessary actions at all levels. Koening and Srikantaiah consider that "The learning organisation is the belief that what ultimately creates and distinguishes a successful organisation is its success in creating and sharing information and knowledge. In short, it is success at learning." (Koening and Srikantaiah, 2000: 27)

However, for defining briefly the learning organisation we can refer to its five main activities identified by Garvin: "systematic problem solving, experimentation with new approaches, learning from past experiences, learning from the best practices of others, and transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organisation". (Garvin, 1993 as cited in Gregory, 2000: 162)

3 ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN AN AGE OF CHANGE

Like any other organisations in the contemporary society, libraries could benefit of many advantages as learning organisations, especially considering the changes in technologies, user practices and expectations, the increasing competition and the increase of digital resources.

Discussing the main characteristics of a learning organisation, Jain and Mutula (2008: 10) mention the free exchange of information, openness, learning from mistakes, employee empowerment, reward and recognition system, participatory management etc. among others and remark the similarities between a learning organisation and a knowledge intensive organisation. They consider that in order to become learning organisations, libraries "(…) should create the climate for change and innovation (…) and promote a culture of knowledge-sharing, collective learning and collaboration". (Jain and Mutula, 2008: 13)

During the past 20 years many libraries in the western developed countries implemented new managerial processes such as knowledge management, and started the process of transformation into learning organisations, innovating a lot in terms of their organisational practices and of their information services for users. In other countries like Romania the progress was slowed down in this direction for various reasons.

As part of the higher education system, academic libraries have experienced lately a period whose characteristics range between continuity and change. However, co-operation has proved to be one of the successful strategies of academic libraries which have re-thought their policies. The opportunities offered by the digital world have provided the necessary framework for academic libraries to establish various partnerships and collaborations.

Romanian academic libraries have changed a lot during the last two decades and they succeeded in overcoming the distance separating them from similar structures from abroad, but different reasons such as insufficient financial resources, the lack of a general vision and of modernization strategies in many of them have slowed down this process. The lack of communication and especially of co-operation have been often remarked (Stoica, 2005; Porumbeanu Madge, 2012a), but there was no significant progress. The key for solving many still critical aspects in the functioning of Romanian academic libraries is at the level of their organisational culture.

4 CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

We consider that developing organisational practices and a culture centred on learning and the ability to create and assimilate new knowledge and to share knowledge will help assist Romanian academic libraries to protect themselves when facing changes and redesigning their management systems. Starting from the transformation process both at the organisational and cultural level through which these libraries were going through we decided to conduct a research (which eventually lasted for five years) within these organisations in order to investigate the context for a possible implementation of the knowledge management process.

First, in 2004 we proposed to carry out a study on knowledge management in Romanian libraries and starting from the first results we focused on the elements of a model for implementing knowledge management in Romanian academic libraries, then on the organisational culture (Porumbeanu, 2010) and on the aspects that could lead to its transformation into one that encourages learning and knowledge sharing.

In 2006, we designed a strategic model for implementing knowledge management (Porumbeanu, 2006) and after that we also outlined courses of action to create a culture of learning and knowledge sharing within these organisations (Porumbeanu Madge, 2012b).

Despite the limited financial resources and a certain lagging behind similar libraries in the western world, Romanian academic libraries should focus now on building and developing a culture that fosters learning, creating and sharing knowledge. In order to share knowledge it is necessary to have within the libraries, open communication, interpersonal context, trust, transparency of decision making, appropriate rewards, teamwork, co-operation, etc. All these aspects enable, support and facilitate learning.

Orientation of organisational culture towards learning and knowledge sharing will help ensure success and long-term development in Romanian academic libraries. We believe that in order to create such a culture we consider that action must be taken in four major directions aimed at the communication process on the organisational level, the motivation and reward system for employees, the policy on training and continuing professional development of employees, and the system of the values promoted at the organisational level.

In 2012 we resumed our research at the level of Romanian academic libraries, this time focusing on their transformation into learning organisations and on their co-operation relationships. This study continues the research conducted within 2004 - 2009 and will be part of another extended research of these structures.

5 METHODS AND OBJECTIVES
The study is based on the results of interviewing eleven Library and Information Science (LIS) practitioners (academic library directors, heads of academic library branches) in Romania. The respondents were purposively selected from academic libraries in different cities of the country and different in terms of staff, users, collections, etc., for example from libraries with four employees to libraries with 267 employees, but they all demonstrated good results during the past years. The interviews were conducted through e-mail using a structured and open-ended questionnaire.

In January 2013 we invited fifteen LIS practitioners to participate in this study but only eleven responded positively and filled in the questionnaire by April 30th.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the current situation in these Romanian academic libraries regarding their transformation into learning organisations and their co-operation relationships. More specifically, the objectives of this study were:
- to determine if there is openness and interest in becoming learning organisations,
- to examine if these libraries display characteristics and practices which define a learning organisation,
- to investigate how learning is perceived at the level of these libraries' directors and library branches' heads,
- to explore how the issue of the continuous improvement is approached, and

- to investigate what internal learning programs are in place.

6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The filled in questionnaires were analyzed and hereinafter we are offering only a short presentation of the results, the complete results to be published soon.

The level of openness and interest in becoming learning organisations can be identified starting mainly from the way in which libraries respond and position themselves to change, how they support the learning process and knowledge sharing.

Most participants in this study (8) declared that in their libraries the dialogue, the collaboration, the learning process, knowledge and professional experience sharing, creativity are promoted and supported, other aspects such as employee empowerment or development of communities of practice being given less attention (only 4 respectively 3 positive answers). However, the most important aspect within the academic libraries represented in our study is the learning process (6 answers), followed by dialogue (4), knowledge and professional experience sharing (3), and collaboration (2), the examples offered by the respondents illustrating the way in which these aspects find their application in the organisational practice of these structures.

Although there were two negative answers, nine participants declared that change is encouraged in their libraries, in most cases mainly in connection with the implementation of new technologies and the necessary adaptation to them. Regarding the way in which change is perceived at the library and employees' level, the answers show that this is mainly seen as a necessity, but in a positive way (7 answers), nevertheless being seen reservedly as well (3 participants) or as "creating instability".

Asked if innovation is supported in their libraries and to give examples in this regard, most participants referred to innovations connected to implementation of new technologies such as RFID systems, creation of digital repositories, provision of information literacy tutorials.

Among the values promoted in the libraries represented in the study, the most often mentioned were correctness (5) and professionalism (4), followed by responsibility, co-operation, discipline, creativity and others.

All participants except for one declared that in their libraries there is openness to the employees' ideas, regardless if they are about rearranging the library spaces, improvement of services for users or a more efficient activity in the library.

Most participants (8) consider that their library can be characterized as being competitive, then flexible (7) and a learning organisation (7).

There is a strategy for improvement of performance in six of the libraries, among the most used methods being the participation in different training and specialization programmes, experience exchanges, but one of the respondent remarked the fact that performance is closely connected to the financial resources and Romanian academic libraries have been for many years "in a rather state of survival".

Regarding the policy of organisational development only two participants indicated the development and improvement of human resources, the others mentioning modernization of

the library, improvement of the service quality, implementation of new technologies, and diversification of information sources.

These results indicate that in the academic libraries represented in this study there is openness to new ideas, to the transformation and modernization of these organisations through the implementation of new technologies and even if there is not a precisely stated interest in becoming a learning organisation, there are certainly elements which can support strategies to move towards become a learning organisation.

However, changes at the level of the organisational culture are still necessary. Even if it seems that within the framework of organisational development policy the human resources do not benefit from special attention, depending on the available financial possibilities, it is critical that there is a focus on staff training and development.

Display of characteristics and practices which define a learning organisation
The learning organisation is presently seen as the ideal paradigm and among the key practices of such an organisation, specialists mention: "a strategic intent to learn new capabilities; a commitment to continuous experimentation; and the ability to learn from both past successes and failures". (Slocum et al., 1994 as cited in Gregory, 2000: 174)

We wanted to determine whether these characteristics were apparent in the academic libraries represented in this study, particularly in terms of the way in which the participants perceive their own organisation and the values they promote at the employees' level.

Ten participants declared that within their libraries, employees are encouraged to learn in different ways, they are designated time especially for this as part of their working day, they are invited to participate in different internal professional meetings, through experience exchanges, encouragement and financial support for participation in different scientific events and information visits in Romania and abroad.

Except for one, the participants declared that in their libraries, internal competition is encouraged, some of them mentioning that it helps improving the organisation performance. Respondents gave the same answer when asked about whether the employees are encouraged to experiment. All participants declared that mistakes are allowed in their libraries on condition that they can be corrected, they do not affect the general activity of the library, employees learn something from them, and they assume the risks and find appropriate solutions for solving the eventual problems.

Asked to indicate which of five situations (the characteristics of a learning organisation mentioned by Garvin) are met most frequently in their libraries, the participants chose systematic problem solving (7), learning from past experiences (6), and learning from the experience and best practices of others (5).

Seven participants considered that their library has changed the values it promotes at the employees' level in the direction of supporting innovation, dialogue and "getting outside the traditional sphere". Six of them considered that their library is an efficient organisation, five - a competitive organisation, and four participants believed that their organisation performed well.

Asked about the motivation and reward system in their libraries, most participants admitted that in the conditions of the current budgetary restrictions, of the legislation in effect and of the norms set by the university management there are not too many possibilities to motivate and reward the staff. However, when it is possible the rewards consist in bonuses, merit salary increase, promotion, financial support for participation in conferences, recognition certificates (Librarian of the year), etc. There was also a remark about the fact that the main criteria used for rewards were connected to discipline and less to work quality and efficiency. A participant noted that employees with initiatives and good results most often did not expect an immediate reward for their work and that in their case it was more about the desire to change something in their library.

Most participants (9) declare that lately new processes and practices have been implemented in their libraries, most of them being related to implementing and updating different library software, open source applications, modules for digital objects, and digital libraries etc. Five participants consider that their library renews itself and some (2) consider that it changes permanently and it anticipates changes (2).

The importance of the learning process is understood at the level of these libraries' directors, and is acknowledged in the ways in which the management supports the employees in the learning approach. In what concerns the motivation and reward system for employees the lack of funds and the current legislation do not offer too many possibilities to the library directors.

The internal competition with a view to increasing the performances, the employees' encouragement to experiment are among the aspects which can be found in the Romanian academic libraries investigated, libraries which according to their directors most often solve problems systematically, support the innovation process and the dialogue at the employees' level and can be characterized as efficient and competitive organisations. Most new practices and processes in these libraries are connected to the implementation of new technological applications.

How learning is perceived at the level of the academic library directors/heads
From the answers provided by the participants it was not found that the libraries represented in this study have a clear policy regarding the learning process but such a policy is supplied through actions such as self training, presentations, professional improvement courses, support for the employees to continue their studies in the field. Four participants answered that there is no such policy but one respondent acknowledged that for quality services it is necessary for staff to be trained permanently especially in order to be able to use the new working tools. Five participants declared however that in their libraries group/team learning is stimulated and rewarded. And for most participants the learning process means development (8) and performance (8) and also change (5).

At the level of their libraries, the participants perceive the learning process as being a permanent process, a dynamic process, a process continually adapted to changes and technological developments.

Among the factors which participants indicated as supporting the learning process in their libraries we mention employees' motivation, their availability, the openness to new and also creation of an appropriate and competitive environment.

The lack of financial resources was mentioned by participants as a major barrier to learning. Other barriers included the lack of time and the fact that the working day was already "too busy", the lack of appropriate courses which were offered at the right time and at the right price. Three participants declared they did not experience any barriers to learning.

Understood by most participants as development and performance, learning is stimulated in the academic libraries investigated, but the insufficient financial resources make more difficult to have a clear policy regarding the learning process in most of these libraries.

How the issue of the continuous improvement is approached
Most participants (9) declared that in their libraries employees' training and improvement is supported not just through counselling but also financially (support for paying the registration fee, transport and accommodation for different conferences or courses). A participant acknowledged, however, that this happens "to a lesser extent".

Eight participants consider that their library is an organisation where the employees have the possibility to develop continually and to obtain the results they want, one participant said "just in part" and another one gave a negative answer.

Asked about the library policy on human resources, the participants' opinions differ. Some insist on the support given to employees to participate to courses and scientific events and on the fact that during the past years their library focused on having staff with LIS education. However, most participants characterize this policy as showing a deficit, as being inefficient, and obsolete. Two participants answered this situation was in accordance with the university policy and remarked that many times it did not depend entirely on the library, but on the university or the Ministry of Education. One participant said that the library had a rigorous policy in this regard, but without offering other details.

Asked if there is a strategy in their libraries for the development of teams, two participants gave a positive answer, but the others admitted the fact that there is no such strategy, however, there are measures which have in view the development of teams and these are at the university level through the allocation of the necessary resources for improvement programmes and different workshops.

The policies regarding the human resources are essential in any approach of organisational learning (Pucik, 1996) and even if some participants consider that continuous improvement is supported in their libraries and the employees can develop and obtain the results they want, they acknowledge however that this policy is still showing a deficit and emphasize the fact that the organisation and the legislative regulations put the university in charge of this policy and not the library management. Although previously the participants declared that group/team learning is stimulated, there is no strategy for team development at the organisation level.

What internal learning programmes are in place
The existence of some internal learning programmes contributes substantially to promoting a shared vision at the library level, but in most of the academic libraries investigated such programmes have not been set up.

Four participants answered that there were no such programmes and the others referred especially to the training sessions offered to the staff on the updates of the software used by

the library or to the training sessions organised in connection with the different data bases provided by the library to users. A participant specified that working groups were recently established at the level of the library for the development of internal training programmes on different library topics such as statistics, performance indicators in libraries, Web 2.0 tools, risk management in libraries, document digitization and others.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The results of our study conducted among LIS practitioners in Romanian academic libraries indicate that even if their transformation into learning organisations is not precisely envisaged and consequently there is no strategy in this direction, the libraries represented in this study present a series of elements which characterize the learning organisations and there are practices which can favour the development of a climate for change and innovation.

The understanding of the importance of the learning process and of the actions aimed at supporting the employees to participate in specialization and improvement courses prove that even if they do not have significant financial resources which could allow them to establish internal learning programmes and to motivate and reward the employees more consistently and even if they can not decide in most situations about the human resource policy, the management in Romanian academic libraries is profoundly aware of the need for continuing improvement. Although many approaches are not at the conscious level in the direction of transformation of libraries into learning organisations, they demonstrate that at the library directors' level it has been understood that this is the direction to follow by libraries in the globalized digital world.

Nevertheless it is necessary that clear policies are drawn up in this regard. They could map out the steps Romanian academic libraries should take in the following years. The development of strategies which should correspond to the specific situations at the level of every library could support learning, knowledge sharing, improvement of performance, the transformation into learning organisations and in fact the survival and success of these structures in the current changing and highly technological environment.

Learning can help organisations become more efficient, competent and competitive, generate new knowledge, innovate, achieve results and success in the current environment. Romanian academic libraries should support at the organisational level, training and improvement of the employees' skills and knowledge and development of teams that collaborate and learn together. A learning and knowledge sharing culture could support Romanian academic libraries in the future in order to become learning organisations and to adapt to the globalized environment by reinventing themselves constantly. This could help them respond creatively to change and maintain an important position on the market of information transfer. A learning and knowledge sharing strategy can contribute to the development and transformation of Romanian academic libraries into learning and also long-term successful organisations.

IT consultant and former deputy director of the Central University Library "Eugen Todoran" Timişoara; Mrs. Ioana Popescu, head of the Faculty of Letters Library from the University of Bucharest; Mrs. Viorica Scutariu, director of the Central Library of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Gr. T. Popa" of Iaşi; Dr. Silvia-Adriana Tomescu, librarian at the Faculty of Political Sciences Library from the University of Bucharest; Mrs. Lenuţa Ursachi, librarian at the Reference and Bibliographical Research Service of the Library of the "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galaţi; Dr. Rodica Volovici, director of the Library of the "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu.

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