

# Knowledge Management for Libraries

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**K**nowledge management (KM) has been one of the biggest buzzwords in business over the past few years. Some KM programs have been incredibly successful, leading to the establishment of new positions and increased visibility within the company for its practitioners, while other programs have failed, leaving employees even more critical of the next big thing. The key to making KM work is not to manage knowledge per se, but rather to make knowledge more visible by using several tools and techniques, including mentoring, collaboration, communities of practice, network analysis, and many others. While most library managers may not be expected to craft a perfect KM program at their institutions, they can learn much by borrowing these tools and techniques that can make employees more effective and efficient.

There is nothing necessarily mysterious about KM tools and techniques. Although there is no simple definition, it is generally accepted that “a good definition of knowledge management incorporates both the capturing and storing of the knowledge perspective, together with the valuing of intellectual assets.”<sup>1</sup> Over the course of several decades, KM has developed into what it is today, though it has only been known as such since the 1980s. It has evolved due to input of diverse fields including “organizational science, cognitive science, linguistics, information technologies, information and library science, technical writing and journalism, anthropology and sociology, education and training, storytelling and communication studies, collaborative technologies, and groupware, as well as intranets, extranets, portals, and other web technologies.”<sup>2</sup> Since KM sits at the crossroads of all of these disciplines, it provides many familiar starting points for new practitioners.

Librarians as a group are well aware of the benefits of properly organized and codified information, as “the aim of codification is to put organizational knowledge into a form that makes it accessible to those who need it.”<sup>3</sup> In some cases, KM amounts to calling something librarians already do by another name. Many librarians have been drawn to the field by their innate desire to help others find wanted information, and they accomplish this feat by whatever means necessary. For example, librarians have collaborated by sharing catalog records through OCLC, books through interlibrary loan, and their services through digital reference. Even more importantly, librarians have demonstrated a unique willingness to share knowledge with others, as revealed by the sheer number of organizations devoted to librarianship and the close-knit networks of communication they engender. Professional organizations from the

local to national level collaboratively discuss and solve many of the common problems librarians face.

## KM Tools

Many organizations seek to implement a collaborative infrastructure by creating Communities of Practice (CoPs), which are “self-organized groups . . . generally initiated by employees who communicate with one another because they share common work practices, interests, or aims.”<sup>4</sup> CoPs include not only formal or professional groups, but any group that shares knowledge. They may be established units, or situational and short-lived. In fact, “communities of practice are everywhere,” because people generally want to share information and exchange ideas.<sup>5</sup>

Several roles within CoPs may be assumed by their members. Recognizing and utilizing these roles is a key to their success, so understanding the makeup of these communities is critically important. The role of the moderator, keeping the conversation focused and on target, is familiar to most librarians. Likewise, participants ask the questions and determine the substantive direction of information flow in the CoP. Within any community, there may be subject experts who have been trained in an area of expertise and who can provide specific guidance. This is not necessarily a formal role, though in every group, some people are more knowledgeable about a topic than others, so the person in this role may be different at each meeting. Finally, there are lurkers who do not actively contribute to the dialog in person or virtually, but do listen and learn, and contribute in other ways. These “knowledge seekers are looking for insights, judgments, and understanding” that can only be provided by others in their field.<sup>6</sup> Many groups are available to librarians to fill the role of CoPs within the library community. Managers can encourage librarians to participate in both internal library groups (task forces, committees, discussion groups) and external groups from broader communities. Whether these groups involve face-to-face meetings or electronic discussions, everyone benefits from the collective wisdom.

Mentoring is another people-centered KM technique. Many have an incorrect impression of the word “mentoring,” envisioning on one hand a lifelong commitment to an

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apprentice, or a rigidly hierarchical relationship. However, mentoring is for anyone who has something to teach or something to learn. One of the most interesting techniques is that of “peer mentoring,” which was developed by Steve Trautman at Microsoft. The idea behind this technique is that the knowledge of the mentor can be segmented so that information can be acquired in bundles so the apprentice will be able to assimilate better and faster, on a task-specific basis, thereby making a long-term commitment from either party less necessary. Focused knowledge transfer is intriguing because it can be used not only for orienting new hires, but also for transitioning work responsibilities among mid-career employees or making cross-training more efficient.

Trautman’s ideas are contained in *Teach What You Know*, his book for both mentors and apprentices.<sup>7</sup> It lays out different tools mentors can use to organize their thoughts and create a training plan, and also provides hints and strategies for apprentices on how best to draw the knowledge they need from their mentors.<sup>8</sup> This strategy puts the responsibility for the exchange in the hands of the apprentice, the one seeking the knowledge. From a KM perspective, knowledge-seekers will pursue the answers they need to do their job, and the role of the apprentice is seen as that of an active learner rather than a passive recipient of knowledge.

Web 2.0 provides some collaboration tools designed to improve knowledge exchange and productivity. KM practitioners use them to bring people together to share and develop ideas. Both mentoring and CoPs can benefit from these kinds of tools to stimulate interest and encourage collaboration. Blogs are one tool commonly used today in the library setting. There are several services where one can set up a blog for free or for a small fee, or specialized applications can be acquired for these purposes. The benefit is that the blog allows a person or a group to post information and receive feedback on those posts, with certain controls—for example, submissions can often be reviewed before posting and authorship can be restricted to one person or to a select group of people. For example, libraries can set up a blog restricted to library staff that replaces previous notebook or bulletin board systems for conveying information. The blog enables discussion, ensures that clarification and follow-up information is distributed uniformly, and allows for the archiving of older blog posts, keeping information retrievable. At the same time, libraries can also use a public-facing blog to communicate with their patrons and keep everyone involved and engaged in what is happening at the library, leading to greater support for the library in the future.<sup>9</sup>

Wikis can be used as another tool for interaction and collaboration. Perhaps the most common association with wikis is the Wikipedia online encyclopedia. It is a good model for open-source collaboration, but wikis can do much more. Wikis can store and edit documents that are used and updated often, such as policy and procedure

manuals. Because wikis make it easy for anyone to make changes and leave a record of the alterations, it is possible to revert back to an earlier version of a page if desired. Inside a business (or a library), wikis can be utilized as project-management tools, because they can be used as a workspace for asynchronous communication. Team members can post thoughts, ideas, and meeting notes; this saves the group time by not having to schedule meetings and also facilitates discussion of new ideas between meetings.

Once the wiki is in place it can be further developed as a tool of innovation for fostering creative input. An innovation tool is simply something that helps people be more creative. Wikis do so by allowing the free exchange of ideas, while providing the means to use “seeds,” the key to the process. Using seeds means that each person only contributes short phrases. To add an idea or comment, a person only needs to start the seed and let others build on the idea until it evolves into innovation.<sup>10</sup> In libraries, this could be used to develop new procedures for a department, plan children’s programs, or even generate ideas for a library renovation.

Tagging, a “grassroots classification system,” is another popular, user-centered subject tool.<sup>11</sup> It enables Web searchers to add tags that operate in the same way as subject headings. However, because these subject headings are completely user-generated, it becomes easier to create a tag, and the terminology can make better use of current jargon. The tradeoff can be concerns about the relevance or consistency of these tags. One of the benefits of tagging is that tags can be applied to anything—books, pictures, websites, even people. Tags can create a common area for sharing; for example, Connectbeam ([www.connectbeam.com](http://www.connectbeam.com)) is a tool that allows users to “bookmark intranet or Internet pages, websites, and documents as they work, grouping their bookmarks in ‘topics’ and applying keywords (‘tags’) that help them organize and identify information.”<sup>12</sup> This tool allows any group of people to pool their resources and share sources that they use to answer their own questions. It could be especially helpful when working with student populations that tend to choose the same research projects year after year. The librarians can find good websites once and then tag and save the information, so the next librarian asked that same question will have access to the shared work. Users can also tag themselves with terms that they would apply to themselves or their work, which serves as a type of expert locator system. In a large library this might include the subject specialist or selector in that subject area, the cataloger in that area, and others who considers themselves an expert in that subject matter. So, if a person searches for a topic, the results will include not only sites that have been tagged with the topic, but also people in the organization who have tagged themselves with it.

Clearly, the more that KM tools are used in an institution, the more complex the flow of information becomes. Network analysis is a technique that allows analysis into the relationships that exist within an organization and

makes the “invisible set of relationships in an organization visible.”<sup>13</sup> Organizations are more complex than their organizational charts imply. While there may be an assigned hierarchy, information rarely flows directly along those lines. A network analysis is the “mapping and measuring of relationships and flows between people, groups, organizations, computers, or other information/knowledge processing entities,” or who goes to whom for information needed to do a job.<sup>14</sup> This information helps create a picture of a group, or the entire organization, that shows all the linkages between people. This technique can reveal many things, including which of the peripheral people are not in the loop (who perhaps should be), which people need to be talking and are not, and which central people are handling the most information.<sup>15</sup> This information cannot only be used to craft a KM program towards the best fit for local needs but can also be used for succession planning, and demonstrates where there is a gap within or between groups, or where there will be a gap if a key employee leaves the library.

These KM tools and techniques are important, but it is equally important to remember that the most basic point about knowledge management is that organizational information is not about technology, but about people. A knowledge organization is one where connecting people and encouraging communication and collaboration are the most important things to do, because “knowledge assets increase with use: Ideas breed new ideas, and shared knowledge stays with the giver while it enriches the receiver.”<sup>16</sup> The knowledge needed for the future already exists in the collective wisdom of the organization, and tapping into that wisdom now will make sure that it does not get lost.

## References

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