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Problems and prospects of implementing knowledge management in university libraries: A case study of Banaras Hindu University Library System

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Abstract

This paper examines the characteristic elements of various organizational factors to identify whether a favorable climate for implementing and sustaining knowledge management existed in Banaras Hindu University Library System (BHULS). The findings of the study show that there are fairly favorable conditions for adopting knowledge management practices in BHULS. Staff in the library that participated in this study seems to be motivated and ready to grasp the challenges.

Introduction

Knowledge management has been defined in the literature as a process or practice of creating, acquiring, capturing, sharing and re-using organizational knowledge (know-how) to improve performance and achieve goals and objectives of an organization (White, 2004).
Like other business management trends, knowledge management is also a commercial concept, emerging first in the for-profit sector and then entering into the non-profit. Roknuzzaman et al. (2009) argue that a library itself is a knowledge-based organization where collection and maintenance of recorded knowledge by librarians is a practice as old as civilization itself. The basic goal of knowledge management within libraries is to leverage the available knowledge that may help librarians to carry out their tasks more efficiently and effectively (Shanhong, 2000). Knowledge management success in any organization is believed to be dependent upon various factors as they provide a context within which knowledge flows among individuals, whose actions in turn are influenced by their environment (Conley and Zheng, 2009). The existence of a favorable environment for communication, collaboration, knowledge sharing and transfer as well as easy identification of the organization’s knowledge assets is essential for the success of knowledge management. An appropriate organizational environment enables an organization to execute better, learn faster, and change more easily (Hariharan, 2005).

**Conceptual framework**

Organizational factors capture the general characteristics of the organization. Several factors are important for the successful implementation of a knowledge management, such as top management and leadership support, organizational culture, organizational structure, technology infrastructure, knowledge process, knowledge sharing and strategy (Choi, 2000; Gold et al., 2001). For this study, we selected five factors which are common in all the frameworks discussed in the literature. These are: (i) organizational culture (ii) organizational structure (iii) technology infrastructure (iv) knowledge sharing, and (v) knowledge process.
Objectives and Methods

In order to gain a better understanding of how some factors are critical for the successful application of knowledge management in university libraries, we chose BHULS with the aim to investigate whether a favorable climate existed for the effective knowledge management process by evaluating the librarians’ perception of:

- The organizational culture and values of the organization for creating willingness among staff to share knowledge and professional experience with their colleagues.
- The organizational structure that allows reward and incentives for encouraging employees to coordinate and share knowledge.
- The availability and use of technology to facilitate knowledge flow in the organization.
- The knowledge processes to capture, store, and transform knowledge.
- Knowledge sharing.

A questionnaire consisting of 15 open-ended and closed questions was designed in order to collect the required data for this study. 50 questionnaires were non-randomly distributed to the library staff of BHULS. Of the fifty respondents, four were deputy librarians, eight were assistant librarians, fourteen were professional assistants and twenty-four were semi-professional assistants. We approached each respondent personally and, therefore, we were able to get a 100% reply rate. Staff completing the questionnaire was aged between 25 and 54 years with the majority (80%) aged between 25 to 45 years old. Their length of service was between 2 years and 27 years with the majority (75%) having between 2 and 18 years of employment in libraries, 75% having a master degree in library and information science, 15% a bachelor degree in library and information science and 10% a doctoral degree in library and information science.

Findings

When respondents were asked about their organization’s willingness to accept change, the majority of participants (73%) responded positively, giving
examples of continuous improvement of library operations and services, development of information and human resources, and the fast adoption of new technologies. 27% gave answer in negation mentioning that lack of recognition and receptivity for change in their organization are serious obstacles to change. When asked about their work environment and what they think about it, 33% of the participants considered that it was one that encouraged the development of communities of practice and organizational learning, 21% mentioned collaboration, and 13% mentioned communication and 9% teamwork. With respect to the ways that staff performance was encouraged in their organization, the majority of the participants (57%) considered performance was insufficiently rewarded or not encouraged at all. However, 19% of the participants in this study indicated that this was by material reward, 14% by advancement in career, and 10% by just appreciation from senior fellows. Upon the question, whether their organization provided support for professional training courses or workshops, an overwhelming majority (69%) of respondents asserted that their organization encouraged them to participate in professional conferences, workshops and other related events; 17% responded that they participated in such events on their own initiative, and 21% said that their organization sends them to such activities. In addition, 31% noted that their organization initiated their own professional seminars, trainings or other events. These high percentages show that BHULS understands very well the importance of trained staff with up-to-date knowledge. Further, when they were asked to mention the areas where they would like to gain more knowledge in order to overcome future challenges, 21% mentioned knowledge of e-resources, 37% knowledge of library automation and digitization and 19% of metadata. To characterize the nature of the organizational structure of BHULS, respondents were asked to explain in few words the managerial style in their organization; 26% of the participants characterized it as being one that creates a stimulating climate. Phrases and words such as: open for change, dynamic, flexible, democratic, communicative, and competitive climate were used. On the contrary, 49% characterized their managerial style adversely, as being authoritative and used terms such as rigid, dictatorial, bureaucratic, disorganized, non communicative, non transparent, and reticent to change. 25% of the respondents replied to this important issue by choosing “not sure”. These varying perceptions show that no major change has taken place at the management level in BHULS. Regarding the employees’ perception of their library policy concerning the staff and the organizational development, 57% of the participants perceived the
priority of the library in terms of organizational development to be orientated
towards continuous professional development. However, 9% of respondents
remarked on the fact that hiring staff with higher education qualifications in
the LIS field constitutes one of the priorities for the institutions where they
work. Although technology is essential for the success of knowledge man-
agement, the literature also reveals that technology alone does not ensure a
successful knowledge management. BHULS is equipped with the latest tech-
nology to store and disseminate information resources to their users. The
library recently installed library software to integrate information and knowl-
edge of the resources and users of different sections. Expert and best practice
databases, portals and knowledge repositories have not yet been designed and
maintained by BHULS. However, most of the participants (79%) utilize
Internet and Web 2.0 tools to share knowledge for keeping themselves
abreast with the latest development in their field. Asked about their under-
standing of the importance of knowledge sharing, 63% of staff mentioned
that sharing of knowledge and experiences is important for the organizational
as well as personal development. When enquired about the staff’s willingness
to share knowledge, the majority of the staff (69%) again responded posi-
tively indicating their willingness to share knowledge and professional ex-
perience. In response to the question regarding the motivation of knowledge
sharing, the following reasons were mentioned by the respondents: profes-
sional cooperation (14%), increase of working efficiency (21%), loss of
knowledge when a member of staff leaves the organization (31%), exchange
of professional experience (25%). Among the respondents not willing to
share their knowledge a lack of rewards and incentives, fear of negative con-
sequences, and insecurity about the value of their knowledge were mentioned
as reasons. Asked about knowledge processes in their organization, the ma-
majority of respondents (65%) was found less sure about knowledge process
activities in the library. However, 10% of the respondents mentioned that the
structure of their library facilitates exchange or transfer of knowledge, 15%
mentioned that the knowledge required for their daily work is easily accessi-
bile in the library and 11% mentioned that they apply knowledge learned from
experiences. When respondents were asked to indicate the requirement of
knowledge in future to perform their work smoothly, 41% of the staff speci-
fied the requirement of IT skills, 11% specified their willingness to enhance
their knowledge level in routine work and processes assigned to them and
42% specified no requirement to enhance their level of knowledge as they are
equipped with the IT skills.
Conclusion

Given the critical role that organizational factors play in the success of knowledge management practices, the results of our research show that some of the elements of the organizational factors are existent and there are fairly favorable conditions for adopting knowledge management practices in BHULS. Staff in the library that participated in this study seems to be motivated and ready to grasp the challenges. A knowledge management program, once put in practice, can lead to the improvement of their performances and a secure position for the organization to survive in the highly competitive age. However, this research is limited to BHULS and the findings of this research cannot be used to generalize to other university libraries in India. Future research should encompass a larger sample and examine more concrete issues of organizational factors that are critical to knowledge management success in university libraries.

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