In the Field

Knowledge Management Practices in Public Libraries

Knowledge Management in the Public Library

Knowledge management refers to how an organization, such as a public library, creates, stores, shares, and distributes knowledge (Velmurugan & Thavamani, 2014). It essentially involves giving the right people the right knowledge (including the right sources) at the right time (Velmurugan & Thavamani, 2014). The process of knowledge management encompasses knowledge creation, knowledge codification, and knowledge sharing. Drawing from my work experience at Markham Public Library, conversations with other library workers, and insights from relevant coursework in the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program at Western University, this reflection will explore how each of these practices are enacted in public libraries.

Knowledge Creation

According to Seng Chee Tan and Yuh Huann Tan (2014), knowledge creation is “how knowledge is created in organizations, through a dialectical process that involves individuals and the team and the cyclical transition between tacit and explicit knowledge” (p. 11). In a public library setting, knowledge may be created internally within the library or through partnerships with external organizations (Ajiferuke, 2018). For example, the Toronto Public Library (2020) partnered with Cisco Canada in 2014 to fulfill a need for technology that enabled the library to expand their online services;

Cisco Canada provides the Toronto Public Library with the technological ability to create live videos of lectures.

Additionally, libraries may acquire and incorporate new information into their knowledge bases by hiring employees who have specialized knowledge and skills. One example of this is employing social workers to assist vulnerable patrons who require more than just a place to read a book or browse the Internet. Such patrons might need help getting assistance with mental health and homelessness. Librarians, especially in public libraries, have had to address these concerns on their own, regardless of whether they were properly equipped to handle them or not (Hodgetts et al., 2008). The need for more specialized support for vulnerable patrons has been addressed at the Winnipeg Public Library, where there is a full-time social worker (CBC News, 2013). Recently, libraries such as the London Public Library have also started hiring library settlement workers to help newcomers to Canada find housing, learn to use computers, locate healthcare, enroll in English classes, find jobs, and more (London Public Library, 2020). Filling these new roles provides public libraries with additional knowledge.

Knowledge Codification

Knowledge codification is when tacit (personal) knowledge is converted to explicit knowledge and issued in a usable form. Public libraries codify knowledge through the creation and utilization of manuals, guides, procedures, and policies (Ajiferuke, 2018). For example, the Toronto Public Library (2020) makes its strategic plans accessible through its website.

Case-based reasoning is one method through which knowledge codification can occur (Williams & Willett, 2019). Libraries learn how to deal with certain issues by

examining the best practices and solutions employed in similar circumstances at other libraries. For example, when creating a new makerspace, librarians may examine how other libraries implemented successful makerspaces (Williams & Willett, 2019).

Libraries keep up to date by observing how other institutions operate in order to adopt successful practices at their own branch or library system (Williams & Willett, 2019).

Another example of knowledge codification in public libraries is the creation of procedural documents that are shared via employee intranets and shared drives. For instance, a Markham Public Library employee with whom I spoke described how he searched for and read an instructional document on how to use a 3D printer, which a coworker had uploaded to their shared drive (personal communication, February 4, 2018). It was because of this knowledge codification that he was then able to assist a patron with the 3D printer.

Onboarding documents prepared for new employees and instructional guidelines are also examples of how public libraries codify knowledge. When I started working at the Markham Public Library, I was given an onboarding package that contained information about my role and tasks to be completed. In this package there were instructions for how to set up email, voicemail, and other accounts. This codification of knowledge greatly assisted my learning so that I could be effective and better prepared in my role.

Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing occurs when knowledge—including skills, information, or expertise—is shared amongst people within or between organizations (Ajiferuke, 2018). Public libraries share knowledge by encouraging staff participation in educational

training programs. For instance, libraries may send staff to conferences so that they can acquire and share knowledge.

The Toronto Public Library, for example, paid for employees to attend the 2018 Ontario Library Association Super Conference. An employee with whom I spoke attended a session titled “Public Libraries Without Librarians: It’s Already Happening” and said he learned new skills that were applicable to his job (personal communication, February 4, 2018; Stevenson & Jones, 2018). According to this employee, the “session was really relevant, and it really emphasized community outreach and programming because it’s going to be AI [artificial intelligence] in the library” (personal communication, February 4, 2018). For this employee, attending this conference was an effective method for acquiring and sharing practical knowledge about AI and digital technology in libraries.

Staff from other public libraries across Ontario also attended the conference and shared information with their peers from both their libraries and other libraries. For instance, staff from the Hamilton Public Library presented a practical session entitled “Pop-up Library: A New Approach of Community Outreach,” in which they discussed how to employ pop-up libraries to gain new library members (Qin, Drennan-Scace, & Irving, 2018). They also shared how to create kits for a pop-up library. In addition, speakers from the Waterloo, Burlington, and Toronto public library systems shared their knowledge or best practices via workshops. Another way conference attendees exchanged knowledge was by participating in networking events such as the All Conference Welcome Party and the Public Library Awards Gala. This allowed

individuals to meet up and share knowledge on a one to one basis as well as in small groups.

In addition to external knowledge sharing venues, many libraries also facilitate internal opportunities. At the Markham Public Library, staff recently engaged in working team meetings to develop survey questions that would aid them when creating the library's new strategic plan for 2020. These questions will be distributed as a survey to be completed by branch staff. Another questionnaire has been developed for completion by the public. In the working team meetings, participants brought their own specific knowledge and shared it with the group. In particular, the group discussed which questions to pose and the best format for these questions.

Public libraries often provide internal workshops and webinars as professional development opportunities for staff. An example of this might be a librarian teaching another librarian or staff member how to use different technologies in their library makerspace, such as 3D printers (Williams & Willett, 2019). Many public libraries also encourage employees to share and acquire knowledge via participation in external webinars and other workshops offered by organizations affiliated with libraries.

Future Implications

There is always more that can be done to improve knowledge management within public libraries (Townley, 2001). Public libraries should continue to seek out new opportunities to develop collaborations with non-library organizations or experts from other fields. According to Townley (2001), it might be necessary for libraries to obtain training or external personnel to manage knowledge effectively. For instance, the current trend is for libraries to collaborate with external organizations in order to bring in

new programming to their libraries. The Markham Public Library partners with the city, educational institutions, not-for-profits, government-funded organizations, and the province to bring programs such as lectures, series, dances, and exhibits to the public. This is beneficial to patrons because it is free programming offered through the library. It is how the library facilitates knowledge sharing between other organizations and our patrons. Overall, public libraries are currently implementing some knowledge management practices and perhaps in the future more will be seen.

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