

LibraryCrunch

Bringing You A Library 2.0 Perspective, by Michael Casey

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Managing Our Expertise

Your desk librarian spends twenty minutes answering a question on voter turnout by demographic in your county.

The library's telephone help line steers a student to a unique online resource to help him answer a complicated homework assignment question that seems to come up every year.

Your IT department troubleshoots and solves a customer's emailed question regarding a problem they had accessing your catalog through the newest version of Firefox.

Three questions, three answers. The people who took the time to answer these questions were proud of their work, and rightfully so. They were faced with difficult or complicated queries and they invested the time and expertise to find the correct answers. As librarians we do this every day. We find answers or solve problems for our customers, and most of the time we do a very good job.

But then we fall down. We invest the time, which is really money, and then we don't bank the investment. The individual librarian with the explicit knowledge may remember the transaction and be able to use it in the future, they may even share it with a coworker or two, but ultimately the answer and the question that provoked it will be lost.

Librarians are, in general, not good at knowledge management. We fail to adequately capture the knowledge we create so that it can be used over and over again, either by librarians or library customers.

Take, for instance, the above example of the emailed question that the IT department fielded. IT personnel could have entered both the question and answer into a knowledge base that would then have been accessible to anyone having the same question. Likewise with so many of our desk, telephone, and IM questions – we excel at answering but fail at managing those questions.

Into this equation we need to add the internal knowledge that our library holds. You know the department head who's about to retire? How much tacit knowledge does she have that has not been harnessed, and how can we turn it into explicit (and captured) knowledge? Multiply this by every individual in your library and you'll quickly see that there is a huge amount of knowledge out there that can very easily be lost.

So what can we do? Perhaps the first thing we need to do is take a close look at how much money every question/answer transaction actually costs us. With this figure in hand we will comprehend the amount of money (and intellectual capital) lost with every transaction, and knowledge of this large amount may serve as incentive to change. Then we need to look at those veteran staff who harbor such a wealth of tacit knowledge and think about the loss we would suffer if they left without imparting their knowledge on others.

There are numerous technologies available to assist us in better managing our knowledge. Knowledge bases, document and email management, wikis, and blogs can all provide assistance. Another area to look to for guidance is the commercial help desk where corporations strive for maximum efficiency and effectiveness. As a service organization we have the luxury of being able to invest more time into providing better, higher quality answers than most commercial help desks, but this does not mean that we cannot learn from help desks and use the tools they use to better serve our customers.

By laying out clear goals we can better visualize where we want to go. A program aimed at managing the internal and external knowledge within our libraries could begin with these simple goals:

- Make available to our staff and customers the knowledge that we create every day during regular interactions.
- Reduce the number of repetitive interactions and allow customers to self-serve, even when it comes to reference questions, by providing a librarian-created and managed knowledge base.

- Harness the expertise of our many staff.
- Share expertise and know-how possessed by key veteran employees with new staff.
- Better manage innovation and facilitate quicker change within the organization.

One other goal for any library serious about managing knowledge is the creation of one centralized authority responsible for system-wide KM initiatives. This could be a new position (such as a Chief Knowledge Officer) or, more likely, a newly assigned responsibility within an existing department. The key, as with any new initiative, is to have one person (or team) that is responsible and accountable for that initiative. Spreading such a large goal out among many different departments or personnel is simply a recipe for failure.

Any serious knowledge management initiative will not be easy. Training staff to record their knowledge is difficult but not impossible. New technologies can facilitate this effort. Upfront costs may also seem high until you analyze the actual costs involved in not capturing this knowledge – and therefore repeating over and over again the same reference transactions, the same studies, and the same projects and investigations.

[library 2.0](#)

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