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## Knowledge Management in Bangladeshi Libraries: A Long Way to Go

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### Abstract

*Describes that both knowledge and information have become essential ingredients to change our society for future vision and shows the different approaches of knowledge management activities. Mentions the modules and processes of knowledge management and also discusses the knowledge management techniques in libraries. Shows the present status of knowledge management activities in Bangladesh libraries.*

**Keywords :** Knowledge Management, Bangladesh

### **0. Introduction**

In the present age of information technology, both information and knowledge have become essential ingredients due to multidimensional use and application in the society. They have also been playing an important role to change and improve the current society for future vision. Organizing information for its gainful use in social development interventions against the environment of information explosion all over the world has become a highly contentious issue that poses a great challenge for today's librarians and information professionals. The developed countries of the world have already realized the importance of knowledge and information and accordingly collected and organized them properly. No doubt, knowledge and information cannot be well managed until some organizations or professionals take the clear responsibility of it. Of course, library professionals are the right persons to shoulder this responsibility as a whole.

In the current atmosphere of rapid change (whether political, economical, social or technological), information has become such a key asset that teachers, students, decision makers, top executives, development activists, people from every cross-sections of the society need to be informed (Mahapatra, 1999: 7). To meet this diversified need of information, the traditional role of the library is making way for information centre that is actively involved in providing all types of information that may be in actual or potential demand.

This paper is an attempt to illustrate the real picture of present information and knowledge management situation by the libraries and information centers of Bangladesh, an emerging concept of knowledge management, modules, processes and techniques of knowledge management, various findings and important directions for further development.

### **1. Knowledge Management : An Emerging Concept**

Knowledge Management is defined as the process of creation, capture, organizing, accessing and using knowledge to create customer's/user's value. It is also defined as the management of corporate knowledge that can improve a range of organizational performance characteristics by enabling an expertise to be more intelligent acting. Knowledge management is a revolutionary method by which, the detached knowledge available from diversified sources are captured, assimilated and converted in to a powerful competitive intelligence through various electronic devices such as CD-ROM, floppy, hard disks, software etc.(Bhunja, 2000: 59). In recent years, the term 'knowledge management' has gained worldwide prominence. For many in the academic world, and in the profession of librarianship, this is nothing new.

Librarians and information professionals consider knowledge management to be a function historically performed by librarians (Hawkins, 2000). However, in this age of digital information, the role and nature of knowledge management has diversified greatly. It has assumed new roles and responsibilities and over the years, has been accommodating many areas other than librarianship. Nowadays, it is increasingly considered to be a cross-disciplinary domain that draws ideas from a wide range of disciplines and technologies like cognitive science, library and information science, technical writing, decision support systems, computer supported collaborative work, etc.

Attempts have been made by different authors, specialists, organizations and groups to identify and define knowledge management in different ways. Gary A. LaBranche has defined it as “the process of transforming information and intellectual assets into enduring value. It connects people with the knowledge that they need to take action, when they need it. In the corporate sector, managing knowledge is considered key to achieving breakthrough for competitive advantages” (LaBranche, 2000). Skryme defines it as “the explicit and systematic management of vital knowledge and its associated process of creating, gathering, organizing, diffusion, use and exploitation. It requires turning personal knowledge into corporate knowledge that can be widely shared throughout an organization and appropriately applied” (Skryme, 1997).

While trying to define knowledge management Karl, E. Sveiby followed a different approach. He identified two tracks of activities on the subject and two different levels. (Sveiby, 2001). IT Track Knowledge Management – Management of Information. Researchers and practitioners in this field have their education in computer and/or information science. They are involved in construction of information management systems, artificial intelligence, groupware etc. To them Knowledge – Objects that can be identified and handled in information systems. People’s Track Knowledge Management – Management of People. Researchers and practitioners in this field have their education in philosophy, psychology, sociology or business/management. They are primarily involved in assessing, changing and improving individual skills and/or behavior. To them Knowledge – Processes, a complex set of dynamic skills, know-how etc., that is constantly changing. Level: Individual Perspective. The focus in research and practice is on the individual. Level: Organizational Perspective. The focus in research and practice is on the organization.

Summarizing the above definitions, it may be mentioned that, Knowledge Management is a complex process, which aims to enhance the use of organizational knowledge through sound practices of information management and organizational learning. In other words, knowledge management is an allocation of knowledge including information through the application of intranet to different annexes of an organization for effective role of the executives. If we are to gainfully use knowledge management for fulfilling our organizational objectives, we must have a clear understanding of the nature and scope of information flows inside and outside the organization.

## **2. Modules of Knowledge Management**

The radical changes during 1990’s with the rapid development of software technologies in the IT sector included text, image, audio, graphics, hypertext etc. which made an optimistic contribution to knowledge management. The Internet has been playing a dynamic role in activating the technology in building the true image of knowledge management in shape of electronic storage of information, retrieval, document delivery, accessing of information through various databases, transfer of file, transfer of information etc. The knowledge management system is primarily based on eight vital modules such as, (i) Information; (ii) Expertise; (iii) Collaboration; (iv) Team; (v) Learning; (vi) Intelligence; (vii) Knowledge transfer, and (viii) Knowledge Mapping (Balaje, 2000: 15). These are:

Information : the most important bezel acts as an instant access to update and customize information;  
Expertise : connects in real-time experts in an organization to members who desire assistance and even the implied knowledge can be made explicit;

Collaboration : plays an important role to facilitate online brain storming sessions and collects & preserves information;

Team : ensures efficient and systematic management among teams and shares skills;

Learning : abridges skill gap with the help of online sessions;

Intelligence : deals mainly with the explicit knowledge base;

Knowledge transfer in a structured electronic form : according to William Saffady pertains to (a) machine readable data files; (b) various online databases and CD-ROM information products; (c) computer storage devices in which information reside in shape of optical disk, juke boxes or magnetic tap autoloaders; and (d) computerized Networking Systems (Matson, 1997: 88); and

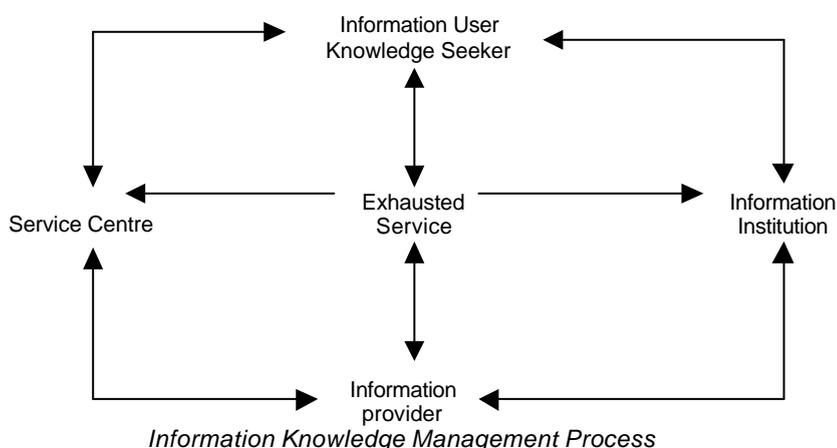
Knowledge mapping : identifies the body of knowledge within the organizations, which is primarily concerned with mute knowledge base and makes a repository of all skills and expertise in the organization.

### 3. Knowledge Management Process

Knowledge management is a process that helps to find, acquire, select, organize, retrieve, disseminate and transfer important information and expertise necessary for various activities such as decision-making, problem solving, planning, implementing etc. However these activities should be undertaken carefully so as right knowledge is captured & disseminated for the right users at the right time to take right decision at the right situation. Knowledge management consists of following steps (Kherde, 2004: 155):

- ✍ Create a new knowledge from all fields;
- ✍ Identify the individuals & capture the knowledge what they possess & convert it into explicit form;
- ✍ Organize the useful knowledge scientifically so that it can be easily retrieved; and
- ✍ Identify the ways by which the organized knowledge can be disseminated to the proper requests.

Knowledge management is one of the ways for the development of the nation as a whole. It is the responsibility of society to make itself aware of it. Society is made up of different organizations such as social, governmental, economical, educational, cultural, industrial, etc. All such organizations should perform the task of knowledge management and for creation of new knowledge the organization should identify the expertise working with that organization. To motivate this expertise, the activities such as seminars, workshops, symposiums, conferences etc. must be organized. On these platforms the individuals share their views, ideas and experiences. This sharing may also be useful for the better performance of their day-to-day working. From the platform of such intellectual activities, new implicit knowledge creates. The organization can convert the individual assets of knowledge is to be converted into the explicit one to transmit it to the knowledge seekers. Knowledge management process of an information institution is shown by the following model:



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Information or knowledge should be organized properly so that it can be transmitted whenever demands come from the requesters/knowledge seekers. Disseminator or information provider should be able to transmit this knowledge to the right request at the right time in the right way. So far, it is highly difficult task to perform if it is not organized properly or scientifically.

#### **4. Knowledge Management Techniques in Libraries**

It has already been observed that knowledge management is something that the library and information professionals claim to be practising for a long time. But for the last few decades, phenomenal advancements in the world of information communication technologies and both quantitative and qualitative changes in the information needs of individuals and corporate organizations have encouraged the library and information scientists to assume new roles and reshape their information activities. So, that the traditional roles of librarians and the term 'librarian' are at risk of losing weight and importance. That is why an increasing number of librarians all around the world are learning new techniques (especially ICT) to cope with the challenges of modern society and keep their jobs relevant and meaningful (Sherwell, 1997: 35-36). A recent Information Service Panel Survey conducted in the USA among special librarians shows that, the librarians think that within five years they will be assuming new roles which will be altogether different from their present role. More and more librarians think in the coming days they will be acting as 'Corporate Knowledge Managers' rather than 'librarians'. Besides, increased recognition of knowledge as a valuable strategic resource would heighten the importance of information professionals (Deieckmann, 1997: 19). As a result, the librarians will be responsible for amalgamating and coordinating all information activities, e.g. library database management, competitive intelligence, marketing research, internal knowledge sharing, etc. Being the knowledge manager, the librarian will have to create value to his/her organization by facilitating access to high quality information and by networking people and their ideas together using technological and technical infrastructure. This means that, in order to become knowledge managers, librarians will have to master new techniques and beneficially use them for excelling their performance and increasing the importance of their library to the information clients.

The key to knowledge management is capturing the knowledge of technique – how organizations get their work done and how various elements of information connect to this. Here, there are two different types of knowledge, e.g. explicit and tacit. Explicit knowledge is packaged, easily codified, transferable and communicable. Tacit knowledge is personal, context specific, difficult to formalize, and difficult to communicate and transfer (Hawkins, 2000). Attempts should be made by the library and information resource centre to try and capture both tacit and explicit knowledge and after structuring and modeling this knowledge in suitable forms, making these knowledge accessible to the users through a single access point so that a comprehensive information retrieval system can be put in place with the help of electronic search engines. To make this possible, the power of ICT must be properly utilized. The digital technology is at the heart of the emerging information and knowledge economy. It is frequently known as the most important means for making knowledge management effective and meaningful.

The success of the library knowledge base depends on two things: content and access (Broadbent, 1998). The library knowledge repository should be able to ensure that the answers to the users' queries are in the repository and at the same time it should be easy to find. If these two things can be ensured, the library knowledge management system will be able to function effectively. No doubt, knowledge management is not the exclusive domain of any particular group or profession. But if librarians and information specialists want to be key players in the emerging knowledge management phenomenon, they need to understand the multiple perspectives of the other professionals. Only then they can understand their own role in knowledge management intervention and will be able to get proper indication and insight as to what their future roles and responsibilities would be. Here it is important to understand that knowledge management is not only about managing or organizing books and journals, searching the Internet for clients or arranging for the circulation of materials, but each of these activities can in some

way be a part of knowledge management spectrum and process (Broadbent, 1998). That simply means that as knowledge workers librarians' responsibilities are multi-dimensional and demand a broader understanding of communicational, technological and other competence along with traditional library and informational skills and expertise.

While designing the knowledge management system in libraries, the following factors must be considered (USSLA, 1996):

- ✍ There should be enough content to make the knowledgebase useful. People use a knowledgebase because they hope to get what they are looking for in it.
- ✍ It should be ensured that the knowledgebase will grow in time. This also corresponds with one of the laws of library science: library is a growing organism.
- ✍ The knowledgebase must be easily and effectively accessible. For this, multiple tables of contents, hot links, and a good search engine must be in place.
- ✍ The users must be allowed to access and use the knowledgebase in their own suitable ways.
- ✍ While designing the knowledgebase, common, well-understood and mainstream tools and techniques should be used, which stand the best chance of being around for a long time.

## 5. Knowledge Management in Bangladeshi Libraries

Knowledge management has a number of obstructions in its way. Institutional, infrastructural, organizational and psychological obstructions are posing grave challenges to the successful implementation of knowledge management system in libraries. Most of the library users and patrons are still not well aware of the potential and far reaching impact of knowledge management and hence, are yet to contribute as much as they should for making this a meaningful venture. Nevertheless, efforts are underway in developed countries to strengthen knowledge management initiatives in libraries and give this venture a formal and more institutional shape.

But quite naturally, as a developing country Bangladesh is yet to fully comprehend the notion of knowledge management, let alone be benefited from such an endeavor. Bangladeshi libraries and information centres lack adequate manpower, infrastructure, information resources, financial support, patronization from government and non-government organizations and an educated user base who would play their due roles in making libraries a centre of knowledge management initiatives. Besides, information or knowledge are yet to be considered as key development resources or commodity in Bangladesh, people and the policy makers alike are not fully woken up to the fact that if utilized effectively, information also can act as a strong economic resources like natural gas or oil.

Library and information professionals of Bangladesh have still a long way to go to better manage their resources with the help of information communication technologies for maximizing the impact and effectiveness of their library resources. Meanwhile, the patterns are shifting rapidly in every aspect of their job. The new media – audio-visuals, television, microforms and computer base communication are in competition with book. Information is being generated faster than libraries are able to organize and store it. Commercial organizations and private companies are getting into the information business. Databases are replacing catalogs (Mahapatra, 1999: 07). All this presents a depressing scenario for the libraries and librarians of Bangladesh. Under the circumstances, if the library and information professionals are to keep themselves in the broad picture with their traditional importance and relevance, they must make their presence felt in every stratum of the society and to the forces that shape and reshape the process of social advancement. Knowledge management can also give the information professionals their expected control in this quest. It holds great potential for libraries of the country like Bangladesh because

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it can help library and information professionals in improving their status and turning them into a driving force of the new information age who must be taken into account for sustainable development of the society.

## **6. Directions**

Knowledge management holds great promise for the libraries of Bangladesh for the following reasons:

1. Against the backdrop of changing socio-economical scenario, information and knowledge are increasingly considered to be key economic resources. A rich knowledge repository in libraries in every part of the country can act as an invaluable tool for the businessman, researchers, government officials, NGO personnel and community people in general for their socio-economic interventions.
2. A scientific and systematic knowledge management infrastructure will help libraries to achieve a higher status and greater importance in the society. People will cease to think libraries as unimportant or insignificant. This will help libraries to be considered as an indispensable social institution.
3. It will help libraries in assuming diversified roles and responsibilities and would give the information professional a huge influence in discharging their duties. Supported by this new power, libraries would be able to act as a platform for newer interventions like distance learning, electronic commerce, etc.
4. This would bring qualitative and quantitative differences in the library and information services. It would improve reader service by streamlining response time and providing much more relevant information from a single point.
5. Knowledge management would restructure library operations and reduce costs by eliminating excess or unnecessary processes. It would improve the performance of the employees by recognizing the value of employees' knowledge and rewarding them for it.

But all these are not easy to achieve. Keeping in mind the depressing situation of the libraries in Bangladesh, their insufficient resources, weak ICT infrastructure of the country and above all people's unawareness of the importance of information, it will be a Herculean task to put a workable knowledge management system in place in Bangladeshi libraries. It would require heroic efforts from the library and information professionals, active patronization of the government, and spontaneous participation and involvement of library users and patrons in the knowledge management process to make this a worthwhile venture. Librarians and information professionals will also have to involve other professionals especially computer scientists and programmers in this interventions and make a combined and collective effort to design and implement a successful knowledgebase and knowledge management system.

## **7. Conclusion**

Knowledge management undoubtedly holds great potential not only for the libraries and information institutions, but also for the government agencies and corporate world. But to translate these possibilities into reality, the notion of knowledge management must be clearly understood and its real value should be evaluated. The value of knowledge management relates directly to the effectiveness with which the managed knowledge enables the members of the organization to deal with today's situations and effectively envision and create their future. This poses a considerable challenge to the persons who would design and implement knowledge management systems. The challenge is even greater for the library and information professionals of Bangladesh. The future of knowledge management practices in Bangladeshi libraries depends almost entirely on the kind of initiatives taken by Bangladeshi library professionals and their level of sincerity, skill and vigor.

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