

THE USE OF THE DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY LIBRARY'S INTRANET AS A KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT TOOL

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Abstract

Academic libraries have traditionally served as repositories of information and knowledge. That role has evolved in response to the technological revolution. Academic libraries like other organisations have recognised that knowledge has become an economic resource that has the potential to reposition an organisation with a competitive edge. In response, libraries are reinventing themselves by building on its knowledge capital. As a result, knowledge management is becoming a fast growing area of interest for academic libraries. This study investigated the use of the Durban University of Technology (DUT) Library's Intranet (SharePoint) as a knowledge management (KM) tool. It focused on its use amongst the DUT Library staff. The objectives of this study were to: establish what KM practices hold in academic libraries; establish if and how academic libraries employ the Intranet as a tool for KM; identify the characteristics of a KM tool; assess the DUT Library's Intranet (SharePoint) against the characteristics of a KM tool; ascertain the extent to which the DUT Library's Intranet (SharePoint) is being used for KM and develop an understanding of the factors that contribute or could contribute to the adoption of the DUT Library's Intranet (SharePoint) for KM. The target population for this study were the professional library staff. The study employed a qualitative approach in its research design. Data was collected from the staff by means of a self-administered questionnaire; a focus group interview with a sample of key informants and by consulting usage statistics of the SharePoint application. The study considered the capabilities of a typical knowledge management tool and compared these against that of SharePoint. The findings of the study revealed that most library staff were not aware of the capability of SharePoint while others felt that it was not a very user friendly application and preferred to use other mechanisms for knowledge management. The study further discovered other contributing factors to the poor adoption of SharePoint for KM. Based on these findings, the study recommends a more structured approach to knowledge management at the DUT Library and a more aggressive awareness and training programme on how SharePoint could be used as a knowledge management tool at the DUT Library.

Keywords: Knowledge Management; Intranet; SharePoint; Library.

1. Introduction and background to the study

In a knowledge society, knowledge plays a key role in ensuring development through harnessing the wealth of knowledge that is in existence and building new knowledge based on it. Knowledge management practices are essential in ensuring growth and sustainability of an organization. New learning and knowledge generation is therefore dependent on exposure to not only ones' own experience and knowledge but also to that of the collective (Jantz 2001). Perez (1999) suggests that there are various tools and technologies that can enable KM.

Libraries have to continuously reinvent itself in adapting to the changing environment by building on existing knowledge and innovating appropriately. As such, it needs to embrace ways of managing the knowledge base of the library. The DUT library is committed to ensuring that it positions itself to better manage its intellectual capital by keeping procedural manuals and establishing structures, like that of the Staff Training and Development Committee, that drive the continuous professional development agenda at the DUT Library. These interventions amongst others drive such processes that aim to foster knowledge sharing and learning.

The DUT library has witnessed over the recent past, an exodus of staff (DUT Library 2010; 2011; 2012a). The reasons for this range from an ageing workforce to better employment prospects elsewhere. This situation according to Townley (2001: 46) is not unique to the DUT Library. The result of which is that the library finds itself continuously training staff on areas of operations. Extensive resources are dedicated toward such efforts, as is evident in the library's skills and training budget.

There is a need for other avenues to be engaged in tapping into the Library's knowledge base and ensuring that the organisational knowledge assets are not lost. Hence this investigation as to whether the Library's Intranet could serve as a knowledge management tool, offers great value.

2. Scope of the study

The DUT library has recognised that it is losing its knowledge assets as an outcome of the high turnover of staff. As a means of capturing and sharing these organisational assets, the library has adopted a few knowledge management practices using both manual and online systems. This study will consider if the DUT Library's Intranet (SharePoint) could be used as a tool for knowledge management. It concentrates on its use as a means to capture, share and distribute knowledge amongst fellow staff members.

The DUT consist of six campuses, two of which are in the Midlands area (Pietermaritzburg) and in total comprises eighty-one permanently employed staff, ranging from support staff to paraprofessionals to professional staff. The study will cut across all sites but will be restricted to surveying staff in professional posts only. This is due to the specialised nature of these jobs and the knowledge required in the professional posts need to be better managed as it contributes to the organisation's competitive advantage.

3. Research method

This study involved assessing the degree of understanding of KM by DUT Library staff, establishing what KM practices held at the DUT Library and the extent to which the library's intranet (SharePoint) was being used for this purpose. To achieve this, three data collection methods were employed. The research strategy employed was a case study on DUT Library.

4. Research setting

The study was conducted at DUT Library, which is located in the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. The study population included thirty-three of the eighty-one permanently employed staff members at DUT Library. It was decided to limit the survey group to the thirty-three staff members who might be expected to have some experience of SharePoint due to the nature of the jobs.

All thirty-three were sent the questionnaire, whilst a sample of twelve was drawn from this group for the focus group interviews. The sampling method employed was purposive sampling, which relied upon selecting a few informants who were known to have more extensive experience of using SharePoint and might reasonably be expected to have formed opinions about the application.

5. Data collection

There were three data collection instruments used, the rationale being to establish patterns or correlations through the process of triangulation (Leedy & Ormrod 2013: 102). The data collection methods employed in this study were the online self-administered questionnaire, a focus group interview and the analysis of statistical usage data from the SharePoint administrative module.

6. Knowledge management

Yaacob, Jamaluddin and Jusoff (2010:15) posit that knowledge has become the driving force for competitiveness. Knowledge about services, processes, the clients and even the competition becomes a valuable contribution towards positioning the organisation competitively as well as in terms of improving its offerings to its clientele.

Rowley (2000: 325) contends that higher education institutions need to learn and adapt in an ever changing global information society and one of the ways is by being able to recognise the knowledge assets at their disposal, recognise the value of these assets and enable their use in a manner that benefits the institution. Yaying (2005: 36) summarises the case that knowledge management (KM) is concerned with the “harnessing and exploitation” of the intellectual capital that is prevalent within the organisation, with the ultimate aim of gaining a competitive advantage as well as to becoming more efficient and productive.

Intranet and KM: In enabling the sharing of knowledge, the provision of an appropriate tool is essential. Gupta (1997: 16) confirmed that intranets were changing the way an organisation created, processed, received and disseminated information. By virtue of this functionality, it supports various activities within the organisation that include document management, communication and collaboration (Fichter 1999: 107)

SharePoint as an intranet: errera (2008: 87-89) describes SharePoint as a platform for collaboration and communication that incorporates a suite of communication and collaboration tools, Web 2.0 technologies as well as other added features for online surveys, project management and even image libraries.

7. Findings

7.1 Understanding of knowledge management

Participants of the study demonstrated a good understanding of the concept of KM and the benefits that it held for the organisation. They understood KM to include the capturing, storing and sharing of organisational knowledge that would benefit the organization.

Respondents consider KM beneficial to the library in two broad areas, namely staff empowerment and development, and improvements to library services. Given the accessibility of this organisational knowledge and experience, it is felt that this may result in improved services and a reduction of job specific training

7.2 KM practices at DUT

In attempting to establish what KM practices were in place, it became evident that there was a mixture of both formal and informal practices. Further there were also respondents that admitted that there weren't any initiatives in their functional area or that they are unaware of any. This alludes to either some sections having adopted and practice KM more than others do or that it is a case of lack of awareness.

It emerged that there are efforts to capture knowledge from retiring staff which ranged from exit interviews, succession plans, coaching and mentoring initiatives as well as retirees documenting expertise.

Many respondents indicated that there were efforts in capturing knowledge as an on-going exercise that formed part of the normal job routine. Other initiatives noted included Communities of Practice, document repositories as well as job rotation. While a large contingent of respondents did indicate the use of the intranet portal as a tool that was used to access knowledge resources, e-mail emerged as the preferred option to share content and to engage in online conversation. Its preference related to its convenience, familiarity and ease of navigation.

7.3 Inhibiting factors to knowledge management practices

While none of the respondents considered knowledge management activities as a threat to their employment; organisational culture and the absence of a conducive environment surfaced as factors that contribute to the poor adoption of KM practices. Aspects that contribute to these factors included time constraints, workload, no acknowledgement for sharing, no reciprocal benefit and no clear direction. The assertions of Aswath & Gupta (2009:188) support these findings, which identify these very aspects as inhibitors to KM at the workplace

Bhusry, Ranjan and Nagar (2012: 65) confirm that many KM initiatives fail because there is no sharing culture present or that those involved do not understand or share the belief in the benefits of KM. KM needs to bring together people, processes and technologies (Bhusry, Ranjan & Nagar 2012: 65). People are an integral component of KM. The processes and technologies, whilst important, essentially aid the process but people are core.

7.4 SharePoint platform

Respondents felt that the SharePoint platform itself was a contributor to its poor usage and cited as that deterred its usage:

- Interface and navigation proved rather restrictive.
- Content management was cumbersome.
- Information organization and retrieval methods were not evident.
- Discussion feature was not user friendly.
- Integration with other application was lacking.

Whilst the literature, indicates that SharePoint is robust and has the functionality to operate as a knowledge management tool, it became evident that the implementation at the DUT Library did not harness its full potential.

8. Recommendations of the study

Based on the findings and conclusions, several recommendations can be made.

- There is a need for training on the use of SharePoint. Training would not only provide staff with the knowledge of what features and functionalities are available within the system but also how to use these features.
- Opportunities and time must be allowed for staff to either practice or participate in this environment. Driving visitor traffic to the site is only one part to 'converting' staff to adopt the tool. The site must offer a valuable experience.
- There is a need for better management and administration of the site. In keeping with the purpose of knowledge sharing, perhaps more staff could be empowered with skills and access to maintain aspects of the site. Relevant parties should investigate the extent and degree of customisation that is possible and then apply as is appropriate. The site may need a complete overhaul that addresses issues of navigation, content architecture and the user requirements.
- The library recognises that the SharePoint has potential, however further investigation is necessary to establish the extent to which SharePoint could be seamlessly integrated with other systems including the library system. In the case of DUT Library, the survey results suggest that the library needs first to establish its KM needs, then fully understand the capability of SharePoint before deciding whether SharePoint is an appropriate tool for KM.
- It is a recommendation of the researcher that a formal KM strategy be developed and that measures are put in place that demonstrates Library Management's commitment to the process by establishing practices that enable a sharing environment.

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