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Knowledge Management Perceptions in Academic Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing interest taken in knowledge management (KM) by a wide range of practitioners as well as the library and information science (LIS) community, knowledge management is not systematically applied in libraries. Due to the complexity of knowledge, as well as the multifaceted nature of knowledge management, there is no consensus among LIS professionals regarding its relation to information management. In this context, the current study aims at exploring how library employees perceive knowledge management, as well as which KM tools and techniques are adopted by academic libraries. The results indicate that although practitioners are aware of knowledge management and appreciative of its benefits not only for library performance but also for LIS professionals' future career options, there is a lack of clarity on fundamental KM issues. Finally, academic libraries take steps towards capturing the knowledge of their users and internal explicit knowledge; however, social practices such as communities of practice, which facilitate tacit knowledge and expertise sharing, are not adopted.

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM) is a relatively new scientific field, formally established in the late 1980s (Dalkir, 2011). However, being a multidisciplinary field (Dalkir, 2011), KM lacks a universally acknowledged definition. This obscurity contributed to KM receiving substantial criticism, to the point to it being characterized as 'a management fad' (Wilson, 2002). In response to criticism, Ponzi and Koenig (2002) and Grant (2011), employing bibliometric and content analysis techniques, provided evidence that unlike other 'management fads', KM has survived. As Koenig (2005, p. 2) asserts, "knowledge management is here to stay".

In the library environment, it is widely acknowledged that the application of KM improves library operational effectiveness, such as improved access to information resources (Islam, Siddike, Nowrin, & Naznin, 2015), and facilitates services innovation (Islam, Agarwal, & Ikeda, 2015b) through the enhancement of internal and external knowledge sharing (Islam, Siddike, et al., 2015) and the creation of new knowledge (Wen, 2005). Although "knowledge management has much to offer to the management of libraries and advancement of the LIS professions" (Martin, Hazeri, & Sarrafzadeh, 2006, p. 24), the adoption of KM by library and information science (LIS) professionals is very slow (Roknuzzaman & Umamoto, 2009). The ambiguity of the terminology, on the one hand, and the disagreement among LIS professionals regarding its relation to information management (IM), on the

other, constitute significant barriers for their involvement in KM (Kebede, 2010; Roknuzzaman & Umamoto, 2009).

The controversy results from the complex nature of knowledge, which is often used interchangeably with information, wrongly assuming that it purely refers to explicit knowledge (Jashapara, 2005). Nonaka (1994, p. 15) explains that "information is a flow of messages, while knowledge is created and organized by the very flow of information, anchored on the commitment and beliefs of its holder. This understanding emphasizes an essential aspect of knowledge that relates to human action". He also stresses the importance of distinguishing between explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge – based on Polanyi's (1966) classification. Explicit knowledge refers to the knowledge "that is transmittable in formal and systematic language ... [and] is captured in records of the past, such as libraries, archives, and databases" (Nonaka, 1994, pp. 16–17), while tacit knowledge "has a personal quality, which makes it hard to formalize and communicate ... [and] is deeply rooted in action, commitment, and involvement in a specific context. In Polanyi's (1966) words, it 'indwells' in a comprehensive cognizance of the human mind and body" (Nonaka, 1994, p. 16).

In this context, the primary purpose of the study is to examine how Greek academic library employees perceive KM. That is, it attempts to explore if library practitioners are aware of the term 'knowledge management', how they perceive the KM concept and how they assess the potential implications, applications, benefits, and opportunities offered by KM to library operations. Furthermore, it aims at identifying the KM tools and techniques adopted by libraries. Consequently, the current research would not only allow us to understand how library practitioners perceive KM and which KM tools adopt, but most importantly, if they consciously and systematically practice KM initiatives.

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