

## Ethical Issues in Knowledge Management in Nigerian Academic Libraries

Dr Nene F. K. Obasi

[nenekaluobasi@gmail.com](mailto:nenekaluobasi@gmail.com)

and

Prof. Ahiaoma Ibegwam

[anibegwam@yahoo.com](mailto:anibegwam@yahoo.com)

Department of Library and Information Science

Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike,

P. M. B. 7267, Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria.

### Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to x-ray the ethical concerns in the knowledge management processes, with particular focus on academic libraries. The paper started by exploring the conceptual analysis of knowledge management which presents knowledge management as a discipline and as a model. Knowledge management is fast evolving as a model for increasing organizations' performance. The paper noted the ways that academic libraries as a learning organization stand to gain the competitive advantage which KM offers to them in their bid to provide value added service to their academic community of users. The paper equally examines the knowledge management processes of knowledge creation, capturing, and organization. Others are knowledge auditing, knowledge mapping and knowledge sharing. The authors therefore argued that knowledge management processes and gains have been established in literature, however some issues which are ethical in nature and which are common where there is more or less a formal structure, are yet to be given adequate attention in relation to research and practice. The paper thus discussed these ethical concerns under two broad themes namely; knowledge rights and cultural values conflicts. The paper concluded that the success of the processes involved in managing knowledge in organizations is not independent of the values of the members of that organization and therefore made recommendations to the effect that organization should rethink their traditions and focus on achieving knowledge management goals with recourse to the ethical considerations raised.*

**Keywords:** Knowledge management, Academic libraries, Ethical issues, organizations culture, Knowledge rights, Value conflicts

## Introduction

Today's organizations depend majorly on knowledge to succeed. The increasing dependence on knowledge has culminated in dubbing of the era as "Knowledge era". It supposes a culture in which information or knowledge has not only become a factor for productivity but a major determinant for success, for that matter. The knowledge that organization needs to succeed is embedded in humans- the individuals that work in the organizations. The knowledge or experiences of individual employees, if properly managed is capable of enhancing the actualization of organization goals. Fortunately, both organizations and staff members seem to be at par in respect of the realization and appreciation as well as acceptance of the value and potency of knowledge as a precursor of success. In this vein, scholars are in agreement that the prevailing knowledge culture has necessitated its effective management and resolution of any surrounding issues (Alegbeleye, 2010 as cited in Saffady, 1996; Igwe et al., 2015; Malhan & Rao, 2005).

Academic libraries particularly have this important role of providing support for the tripartite functions of higher institutions which are teaching, research and community services. They provide a platform through information services for the transmission and advancement of knowledge. To achieve this goal of knowledge conservation, academic libraries acquire information materials, organize them and disseminate them to their users. However a lot of phenomena have challenged this regular culture and tradition of academic libraries, making them to rethink their processes and practices; challenging them to go for models that will engender the provision of value-added services to their user community. The knowledge management model has offered a lot of leverages for organisations' optimum achievements.

One important issue that relates to knowledge management in organizations including academic libraries is the ethical dilemma surrounding the knowledge management processes. The term ethics is derived from a Greek word 'ethos' which can mean custom, habit, character or disposition. Ethics can also be viewed as the codes of conduct of an organization, institution or a profession. The power of ethics lies in the consensus factor that binds the people involved such that any violation based on the agreed principles of practice and operation attracts some punitive measures. Some other times or for some groups, ethics are far from being mandatory; rather voluntary (Land, et al. 2007). KM is geared towards collecting people's knowledge and sharing that knowledge to the group. For academic libraries, these practices of knowledge creation and sharing are directed

towards increasing the libraries' efficiency in carrying out their operations and services. However, knowledge management is full of ethical issues. Where knowledge management in academic libraries is concerned, KM requires access to the knowledge and experience of the employees both at the individual level and group level. This immediately raises privacy issues. For the academic library, the concern among others, is how KM would interact with employees' knowledge without undue or irrational influence on their rights. On one hand, KM supports libraries to develop useful service solutions. On the other hand, lack of sufficient management of this knowledge together with the attendant issues that naturally arise where human beings are involved in any system of administration, may limit the potency of knowledge management in advancing the objectives of the academic library. This paper seeks to improve ethical understanding of knowledge management in academic libraries for a better academic library and user management.

### **Knowledge Management Concept**

Knowledge management has evolved to become an interdisciplinary field. It cuts across many disciplines such as management, business, economics, computer technology and then librarianship. The multidisciplinary nature has engendered a growing and varying discussion on its concept, principles and applications (Koenig, 2018). Expectedly, a number of definitions have emerged. Uriarte (2008) defines knowledge management as the strategy and processes to enable the creation and flow of relevant knowledge throughout the business to create organizational, customer and consumer value. In their own definition, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) (2017) conceives knowledge management as identifying and mapping of intellectual assets within an organization, the creation of knowledge for competitive advantage, the conversion of vast amount of corporate data into accessible information and the distribution of best practices. A recent concept of the term is from Valamis (2022) who views Knowledge management as the deliberate process of defining, structuring, retaining and sharing of the knowledge and experiences of employees within an organization. From the definitions above, KM is more associated with business and economic constructions with the purpose of having an added advantage in a competitive business environment. However, definitions by Omin.sci (2021); Roknuzzaman and Umemoto (2008); and Uriarte (2008) conceptualized a multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary nature of KM. This feature has enabled KM to lend its processes and applications to many systems including the library system. Interestingly, these definitions have many common

features and thus KM can be summarized thus: as a practice, strategy, model, a field, and a process that harness the intellectual assets of an organization through creation, capturing and sharing knowledge to improve performance, boosting innovation and maintaining organizations' knowledge. Invariably, organizations' knowledge that is not effectively managed, may lead to knowledge untapped and rather trapped with outgone employees, thus stifling organizations' goal achievement.

Knowledge management deals with two forms of knowledge: tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is knowledge that is not codified. In other words it does not have a formal structure and it is not easily or overtly seen. Tacit knowledge has been described as one that resides in people's head (Koenig, 2018), or peoples mind (Nonanka & Takauchi as cited in Igbinovia & Ikenwe, 2017). Tacit knowledge is personal knowledge which develops through an extended period of time and experience garnered in the course of performing tasks. Tacit knowledge is difficult to identify unless when expressed; it is hard to encode thus more difficult to communicate than explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is a very essential type of knowledge in any organization including libraries because organizations can only achieve success to the extent that it recognizes and incorporate the expertise, experience and technical know-how of the people that have been in them over time. On the other hand, explicit knowledge is a codified knowledge. They are knowledge that are in material forms- book and electronic. They are formal, structured, sometimes published. Thus they are easier to capture, organize, access, reproduce and disseminate and even store. Explicit knowledge are located in memos, documents, reports, handbooks and databases. Both tacit and explicit knowledge consciously need to find entrance into organization management practices and culture.

The importance of knowledge management in organizations is enormous. Knowledge management is a veritable tool for gaining competitive advantage through the KM processes (Evans, 2017). KM is an asset for organization. As organizations capture and store the knowledge of their experts, their intangible asset increases, and decision making is enhanced with relevant knowledge. Organizations really need more of cultural change than any other type of changes to achieve success.

## **Knowledge Management in Academic Libraries**

All libraries as service institutions have a huge role to play in leveraging the value of KM for their operations and services to their users. Aguolu and Aguolu (2002) elaborated on the need for libraries in developing nations to keep pace with the changing values, when they asserted that mere availability of information materials in quantum was gradually phasing out as a yardstick for determining the standard of a library. The emphasis they said was on a motivated and dedicated staff; noting that staff willingness to contribute their maximum was a more viable factor for growth than the stereotyped standards of the industrialized countries which focus on the issue of professionalism and non-professionalism. Thus, very significant in the whole process of information management, is the human interface that interprets the resources and services to the users.

Expectedly, academic libraries in Nigeria have not been reserved and reticent in their response to innovations that have been happening around the globe. One of such areas they are exploring is the knowledge resource. This sounds like what librarians have known and have been doing except for the emphasis on knowledge rather than information. No wonder Alegbeleye (2010) referred to it as a 'new wine in an old bottle'. This may be correct to the extent that academic libraries consent to shift emphasis from 'collection' to 'connection'. The old emphasis where librarians' pride was their collection is the old wine and no longer holds sway, while the new bottle is the new focus on the human resource connection. Edem and Ani (2010) corroborated that human resource is the core of KM in libraries. There is new focus on knowledge asset which libraries need to manage well. The challenge is for them to apply more effective competencies to manage the knowledge of the libraries' personnel. This task of managing people's knowledge would be more complex and tasking than managing the libraries' collection (Singh, 2012). Further, integrating KM processes in LIS practice is another challenge (Roknuzzanan & Umemuto, 2008). The prevailing environment of competitiveness in information provision is one that needs a cutting edge factor for libraries and the expertise, experience, and knowledge of their librarians have become their greatest asset in the context of KM. Land et al. (2007) asserted that knowledge management provides libraries with a window of opportunity to leverage on the knowledge of their employees to provide value added services to their users..

## **Knowledge Management Processes**

There is an array of activities that are involved in the bid to manage the knowledge of any organization. From literature, the recurring processes can be summarized to be: knowledge creation, capturing, organizing, mapping, auditing and knowledge sharing.

**Knowledge Creation:** Knowledge creation is developing new ideas, skills and more effective and efficient ways of doing things in an organization. Knowledge can be generated through experience gotten when a team starts and finishes a project. This knowledge could be used in the future when similar tasks are to be performed. Through knowledge creation therefore, organizations promote learning and innovation. The hallmark of today's organizational success is the deployment of new ideas and skills generated in the course of organization activities to solving problems the organization may face in the present or future. So the secret lies in consciously observing opportunities for task or project performance where new knowledge could be sourced as well as capturing every bit of knowledge produced in the process. In academic libraries, knowledge-creating activities include the following: workshops, conferences, library automation projects, retrospective organization of materials, readers' services solution meetings, and reports. Nnadozie et al.(2015) as cited in Maponya, and Kim (2011) also suggested avenues for knowledge creation in academic libraries to include: findings of researches carried out by their staff, textbooks, exhibitions, understanding users' needs and requirements, staff discussion and meetings. Outsourcing of created knowledge is also an avenue to acquire relevant knowledge.

**Knowledge Capturing:** This is the process of collecting knowledge created from various sources for the purpose of deploying it for immediate or future needs. Knowledge capturing is important to forestall loss of knowledge normally witnessed through staff dismissal, retrenchment, retirement or death. KM forms the basis for the knowledge management activities of organizing, mapping and sharing. In identifying the factors that can support knowledge capturing, Igbinovia and Ikenwe (2018) opined that technology is one way while knowledge mapping is another method. They explained that while technology enhances the process, mapping is used to identify specific people and place of knowledge residence, using techniques which may include questionnaire, and interview.

**Knowledge Organization:** Organization as a knowledge management construct involves systematically arranging the scattered intellectual and experiential assets of an organization including that of academic libraries for easy location, understanding and access. Organization of information is majorly in the domain of librarians and they achieve this through abstracting, indexing, cataloguing and classification. This idea of organization is not different in the knowledge management platform. Admittedly, it could be difficult to achieve effective and efficient organization when it involves tacit knowledge because of its intangible and less structured nature. It is therefore imperative to design a knowledge map to ease the challenges of knowledge organization.

**Knowledge Mapping:** A knowledge map is a digital representation of an organization's knowledge. Since the nature of knowledge mapping is more of a computerized one, it offers the advantage of time saving and also promotes self-location of information reducing high reliance on supervisors and superiors (Kang et al., 2003 as cited in Nnadozie et al., 2015). Alegbeleye (2010) opined that a good knowledge map provides access to resources that would have been difficult or impossible to find. Elaborating further, the author stated that knowledge map helps to identify knowledge networks and communities of practice. The product of knowledge mapping is the development of a list of people, documents and databases, and instruction/advice on where /who to go when staff need knowledge. It also enhances the visibility of corporate intellectual assets to all members of the organization mostly using the instrumentality of intranet (Mutula & Mooko, 2008).

**Knowledge Audit:** Knowledge audit is synonymous with collection evaluation which is a core professional activity in library and information management (Nnadozie, 2015). Part of the reason for knowledge audit, is to determine collection size and scope. In a similar vein, knowledge auditing is also about knowing how well an organization's knowledge is being utilized in the organizations' activities and subsequently in achieving organizations' goals. Knowledge audit is diagnostic in nature and as such helps in identifying knowledge gaps (Hylton, 2003). Knowledge gaps are missing knowledge which are critical to an organization's growth. Knowledge audit thus would enable academic libraries to recognize barriers to knowledge flow within the library. It therefore behoves organizations to verify knowledge of their employees, no matter their position before such knowledge is made available or shared for the organization's use.



**Knowledge Sharing:** Knowledge sharing is a very important element in the knowledge management process. It has been so extensively discussed in literature under many nomenclature such as knowledge dissemination, knowledge distribution, knowledge transfer, and of knowledge sharing which is the most commonly used. Knowledge sharing is the process of making available to the members of the organization the knowledge asset from the organization. The whole essence of knowledge management is to share knowledge. If there is no knowledge to manage, then there is certainly none to share and vice versa. This idea of sharing underpins the importance of using organization's knowledge either to solve immediate need or storing it for future use. It also presupposes that knowledge for one person is knowledge for all persons as far as the organization's growth is concerned. Thus knowledge possessed by an individual employee transcends personal property; rather belonging to the organization also. This idea is averse to human nature when it comes to giving such that sharing knowledge would depend on individual characteristic or culture (Khalil & Marouf, 2021). This would create an ethical dilemma as we shall see in the later part of this discourse. It becomes imperative to create and maintain a culture that promotes knowledge sharing so as to forestall employees' hoarding of their knowledge for personal interest. Rechberg and Syed (2013) corroborated that sharing knowledge should be a regular feature to make it become part and parcel of the organization, like a culture.

### **Ethical Issues and knowledge Management in Academic Libraries**

In order to make success out of the KM processes, academic libraries would have to function in a context- a culture which reinforces effective implementation of the processes to achieve organization success. For instance, concentrating on the knowledge management processes and practices without recourse to a framework that can accelerate its success may lead to failure of the process or unsustainable success. This boils down to how libraries who are serious about KM manage their staff. In a work environment that is replete with issues of trust, transparency, motivation, and superiority, knowledge can be distorted, hoarded, withheld, exaggerated by both employee and employer intentionally and otherwise (Land et al ., 2007). In this instance, ethical consideration would prove to be a useful instrument which provides a framework; a level playing ground for knowledge management implementation in academic libraries.

The importance of ethics is to avoid or reduce conflicts and sustain a process. Some organizations including academic libraries are yet to come to terms with the fact that good employers are learning



employers- ones who behave as having responsibility for their employees as well. As revealed in literature, reliance on traditional organizational practices and hierarchies are capable of stifling the KM processes, thus the need for ethical considerations. For instance, Evans (2017) advocated for what she termed ‘virtue- based ethical theories, which focus on helping people develop good character that will aid fair decision making rather than reeling out rules for people to follow.

The main purpose of considering ethics in knowledge management in academic libraries is so that KM which is meant to facilitate the achievement of goals, will not rather inhibit it, considering that there are ways people’s knowledge may be handled that will stifle the whole gamut of the knowledge processes. Ethics will protect potential knowledge sharers, the knowledge managers and the organization as a whole. Ethical constructs include trust, fairness, equity, copyright, privacy, accountability, transparency, standards and resolution of conflicts. The relevance of ethics in KM in academic libraries cannot be overstressed, yet there is ‘little attention’ on the subject both in practice and theory (Land, et al 2007). Against the backdrop that Knowledge management processes- from knowledge creation to dissemination- should be based on ethical conducts (Evans, 2017), two broad issues that have been categorized under knowledge rights conflict and cultural values conflict are reviewed.

**Knowledge Rights Conflict:** The core of knowledge management is the human resource. Humans possess the knowledge which is to be used for the growth of the organization including libraries. Rechberg and Syed (2013) succinctly stated that the owner of the knowledge has the right to hoard or share the knowledge they have. On the contrary, Evans and McKinley (2011) asserted that withholding knowledge that will be beneficial to organization is unethical. Therefore the conflicts arising from determining the rights of the individual and that of the organization generates ethical dilemmas. The fact is that both organizations and individuals in them have rights. According to Evans and McKinley (2011), organizations such as the universities have the right under the intellectual property theory to manage their corporate knowledge as well as put up structures that will enhance KM processes. The authors argue that individuals under the personal privacy theory are likewise entitled to the protection of their personal knowledge and if there is need for them to share, it should be based on voluntarism not exploitation. Argandona as cited in Evans and McKinley (2011) asserted that knowledge belongs to individual but these people got this knowledge in their job. He also acknowledges the conflict in respecting the individual rights and

fairness, while maintaining loyalty to the organization. Argandona advocated the conversion of tacit knowledge to explicit one. This option still raises the intellectual property right issues because ownership is shifted from individual to collective and the knowledge worker may become less powerful and thus susceptible to downsizing.

In academic libraries, the scenario is not different. The libraries need the staff to share their knowledge to enable them manage the ever changing needs of their users. The staff on the other hand might be most unwilling because the sources through which they generate knowledge are directly or indirectly limited or closed. In Nigerian libraries for instance, paucity of funds is a popular excuse for low or no sponsorship of staff to conferences and workshops. Further, stringent measures are laid down for staff going for further studies. Besides, there is no reward or motivation for wanting to share knowledge gotten from these avenues. However, fairness is for the staff to appreciate the platforms provided for them by their organization to develop themselves. In this regard, fairness, equity, openness and trust are important constructs of ethical consideration in managing knowledge rights.

### **Cultural Values Conflicts**

Knowledge management is culture-sensitive. The organizations that appreciate and value the place of knowledge in achieving success are the ones that would manage knowledge well (Mullei & Nyaribo, 2020). The organization that shows a high sense of responsibility to their employees is a good knowledge manager. In organizations, cultural values reside both with the organization and with the individual workers. Conflicts arise when there is a sharp contrast in cultural values. Cultural value influences an organization in a very significant way.

Organizational culture is the way an organization generally does their things; their beliefs, values and norms which guide their behaviour. Personnel culture similarly is the way persons in the organization do their things as well. Culture is peculiar to the practitioner and it is what makes them to succeed or struggle to succeed or even easy to fail (Unegbu et al., 2015). Gupta et al. cited in Evans and McKinley (2011) agreed that organization's culture is critically important for enhancing sharing, learning and knowledge creation. An organization that emphasizes knowledge creation and sharing may have a workforce that has a different view especially if they are a new crop of employees. There are reasons why staff of organization may have a cultural orientation

that is averse to knowledge sharing. In an unhealthy competitive work environment, no matter the effort of the organization, employees will want to outdo one another and one way of doing that is withholding their experience and expertise. When knowledge becomes a subtle tool for power, a knowledge-withholding culture becomes more predominant than a sharing one (Martensson as cited in Evans & McKinley 2011), and this may hurt the survival of any organization.

Another source of cultural conflict is the one advanced by Evans and McKinley, which implies different cultures having different attitudes regarding an ethical issue. An example they used is where countries representing different cultural affiliations have differing ethical responses over an issue. In line with the objective of this paper, the authors are rather focusing at organizational culture of academic libraries. Libraries generally are service institutions. Academic libraries are unique in some ways. They are the only type of library whose staff enjoy academic status. Promotion and position would be greatly influenced by research output, professional and administrative competences. The system inadvertently encourages pursuit of knowledge and skills for personal interest. This influences their cultural value. This competitive nature of academic library staff can predispose them to having and displaying a low knowledge-sharing culture among them. Obviously, this scenario contradicts the expectation of library management which canvases for a collaboration culture for the purposes of collectively driving innovation in the library

In keeping with the changing trend also, academic libraries need to rethink their organizational structure. As Moran cited in Singh (2012) noted that team-based structure and participatory strategy are the hallmark of learning organizations. It is important for libraries to be open to the demands of new organizational culture- which is KM- in order to reap its full benefits. In the same vein, Evans and McKinley (2011) noted the significance of exemplary leadership culture in earning the trust and attraction of staff to make them collaborate and become willing always to share their knowledge. Library management are to be role models in words and behaviour; showing willingness to share knowledge with others in the library. Academic libraries need to recognize the importance of knowledge of their staff and go ahead to create an environment in which staff are willing to share their knowledge for their own benefit and the library's.

## Conclusion

Knowledge has been widely recognized as a critical factor for organizations' success including libraries. It gives organization the possibilities of innovation and competitive advantage. The processes undergone in managing knowledge when humans are involved are not independent of the values and rights of the individuals. Academic libraries are thus challenged to uphold a framework that will engender the smooth running of the processes. Ethical considerations provide a level-playing ground for all knowledge stakeholders. It reduces conflict of knowledge ownership, creates balance and checks organization and individuals' excesses. It is operated based on fairness, trust, accountability, compensation, motivation, loyalty, and organizational culture that is KM-oriented. Effective KM processes therefore require new management practices, cultural change and honest commitment of the knowledge managers.

It is therefore recommended that academic libraries should set aside formal structure- when the need arises- that places undue high premium on superiority, but should rather operate more under informal/semi structural arrangement where people with relevant experiences interact to bring innovative solutions to the myriad of problems confronting libraries of developing economies. Academic libraries should remove superiority complex as it concerns verifying the accuracy of staff knowledge. The overarching factor should rather be relevant knowledge irrespective of position or rank. The knowledge workers should be identified, motivated and allowed certain personal rights to remain exclusively their own such as patent rights. To reduce conflict of right to knowledge, academic libraries should embark on periodic conversion of tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge. Academic libraries should engage in building capacity in Information Communication Technology and in knowledge management programme for library development. The relevant information and communication technologies should be made functional and accessible for personnel use in sharing, communicating and preserving knowledge.

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