

Tacit Knowledge Sharing at the Information Desk

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Introduction

Knowledge is an organization's most valuable asset yet 80 – 90% of that knowledge walks out the door every evening.

Organizational knowledge is often characterized as either tacit or explicit. In this highly simplistic view, explicit refers to recorded knowledge that is easily stored and shared. Tacit represents the knowledge that lives in people's heads, or skill, or know-how. Tacit knowledge is difficult to verbalize but can be shared through social interaction in both formal and informal settings.

At the University Library's information desks, teams of two individuals (librarians, graduate assistants, and academic professionals) work collaboratively to provide information services both in-person and virtually via chat or email.

This pilot study seeks to capture the serendipitous exchange of tacit knowledge between colleagues at the information desk in order to assess the character and impact of tacit knowledge exchange in the mentor/mentee relationship.

Critical Incident Technique

Over a 4 week period participants self selected in response to a call for "incidents" where tacit knowledge was shared between colleagues at the information or VR desk.

Participants answered ten questions during resulting in- person, semi-structured interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis and text coding.

Eleven Incidents were reported

6 InfoDesk

2 Email

5 VR Desk

1 Email

General Impressions

6 incidents were reported by the individual asking for help from a colleague and 5 were reported by the colleague who shared their tacit knowledge.

Knowledge sharing incidents were characterized as personally meaningful in most cases, however the exchange of tacit knowledge did not significantly impact the relationship between the two colleagues.

Expert/novice roles fluctuated as a function of the context and content of the question, and did not correlate with mentor/mentee designations.

The READ scores for the reported incidents ranged from 3 to 5.

Themes

Type of knowledge required to respond to question

- Organizational Knowledge
- Research expertise/Specialization
- Resource expertise

Motivation to seek help with question

- Lack of prior knowledge/experience
- Lack of specialization
- Mentor/Mentee relationship

What contributed to the knowledge exchanged

- Experience - 6
- Specialization - 1
- Both - 3
- Don't know - 1

How was the exchange beneficial or meaningful personally?

- Increase in personal knowledge base
- Appreciation of the value of collaboration
- Insight into information seeking behavior and assessment

Patron impact

- Faster turnaround
- Better service
- More complete answer

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Indicators of tacit knowledge

- "just knew"
- "knew where to go"
- "knew whom to call"
- "fortunate that he/she was with me"



What's Next

With librarians retiring in record numbers, there is great risk of losing vast stores of experiential knowledge.

It is important for libraries to identify experts and expertise in order to maximize knowledge talent and to mitigate the impact of lost knowledge when key individuals leave.

These results will inform the next phase of this research which will explore tacit knowledge and knowledge sharing on a larger scale.

