

3.NLB – Network of Specialists

Knowledge Sharing Platform for Practicing Librarians: A Case Study of the National Library of Singapore (NLS)

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The Background and Purpose of the KM Effort in the Case

The National Library Board's L2010 strategy aims to expand the learning capacity and build knowledge capabilities of the nation, in part by developing and promoting knowledge communities. As part of the Collaborative Reference Network Service programme (CRNS), an L2010 initiative, a cross divisional team was formed for the Network of Specialists (NOS) project.

One of the core functions of the NLS is the provision of reference and advisory service. Librarians used to work alone on the reference enquiries, as it is often difficult and time consuming to find the right subject experts to help. There are no effective and efficient means for fellow librarians to help and collaborate with each other. The extensive knowledge residing with the subject-expert librarians is also not effectively shared or re-used.

NLS' solution is to leverage on technological innovations to develop a collaborative platform called the Network of Specialists (NOS) for librarians and subject experts (to collaborate in real time, discuss and simultaneously work on one enquiry).

What NLB Did

NOS comprises various subject and special interest online communities such as the Arts Subject Community, Business Subject Community and the Singapore/SEA Subject Community. A librarian receiving a difficult enquiry can send an email to the relevant subject community/communities to seek assistance and it will be broadcasted to all the community members simultaneously. Members of the community can review and add to the contributions in a common e-space that is web-based. This means that anyone in the community who has an Internet enabled device can access the collaborative platform any time anywhere.

Through this sharing process, learning takes place as the initiating librarian continues to take ownership of the reply to the enquiry whilst getting inputs contributed by others in the community. This improves the staff's capability in handling the more challenging reference enquiries.

The interactions between staff and subject experts are also captured and archived to form part of the library's knowledge management data.

Planning, Communication and Rollout Process

1. Staff's inputs were sought at the conceptualizing stage, as the intention was to involve them right from the beginning to ensure a greater sense of ownership.
2. Management support has played a very important role in encouraging usage. Apart from communicating with staff, they also participate in the NOS platform actively by contributing inputs whenever possible.
3. The progress of the project is tracked at the weekly project team meeting. The meetings discuss system enhancements as well as review usage statistics and staff's feedback.

Lessons Learned

1. Changing conservative mindsets: Although generally the librarians are open to sharing and not afraid to ask for contributions/assistance via the collaborative platform, there are some who are not accustomed to sharing on an open discussion platform. These librarians are usually those who are not in the habit of blogging or participating in online

forums, Yahoo/Google groups or wikipedia. We noticed that such behaviour is brought to the collaborative platform. In order to help librarians change their mindset and the working behavior that they have been accustomed to, the project team conducted regular communication sessions and involved most of them in the project planning stage. This is to make them feel that they are part of the initiative and hence developed a certain degree of responsibility to make it work.

2. Impact of strong management support: Management support has been instrumental to the success of the project.
3. Gathering useful feedback: Two separate surveys and focus group discussions were conducted with participants of the system to ascertain their satisfaction and reception rate for the product as well as address staff concerns. Measures were implemented promptly to address concerns raised during these sessions.
4. Adopt a personalised approach: Project team members also made an effort to talk to staff individually. Project team members approached every staff whenever opportunities arise and through informal chats, are able to glean plenty of hidden thoughts about the system that were not raised in official meetings.
5. Improving user acceptability: Due to the relative complexity of the system, staff feedback that they could not remember how to use certain functions. The project team took the initiative to send weekly tips of key functions in the system to staff via email. The logic behind this exercise was to breakdown the tools into digestible portions so staff would not find it so overwhelming when they were taught how to use the system.

Impact and Benefits

1. Efficiency improvement: Staff no longer need to spend hours relentlessly searching for answers to challenging enquiries as the NOS system efficiently allows staff to tap on each other and external experts' expertise and capabilities. This increases staff's productivity and saves valuable staff time.
2. Quality and service improvement: The NOS system facilitates the depth and breadth of knowledge sharing and improves the quality of answers to library customers.
3. Customer satisfaction: The numerous compliments from library customers are strong evidence of their satisfaction with the substantial list of recommended resources sent to them.
4. Employee satisfaction and improved learning curves for new employees: Staff are happy as they enjoy the benefits of sharing and collaborating and they are able to bring about a better level of service for customers. New staff or staff who are not knowledgeable in the subject areas can also learn and enhance their reference capability by viewing the discussion threads and contributions made in the subject communities. All these have led to an exponential growth in knowledge within the division.
5. Creation of a knowledge repository: Since the launch of the NOS system in May 2007, an estimated 1211 discussion threads have been created and this knowledge repository is expanding daily.
6. Greater innovation capacity: The NOS collaborative platform has led the project team to further innovate in the areas of knowledge management. A new project looks into the packaging of the reference enquiries and answers into a self-service enquiry database for librarians and library customers to access and re-use.

Insights and lessons learned from case study discussions

1. Collective knowledge is always greater than the sum of individual wisdom.
2. Everyone is a specialist in his/her own right and thus anyone can 'qualify' as a community member in NOS.
3. Contrary to the common belief that people are unwilling to share knowledge given the busy lifestyle that they have, many are actually eager to share on their topics of interest as well as subject areas which they are familiar with.
4. The use of NOS collaborative platform has saved valuable time for both library staff and users.
5. Important to seek staff inputs at the project conceptualising stage, get them involved from the beginning to ensure buy-in and a greater sense of ownership from them.
6. I liked the colored pamphlet that was used to announce about the 'network of specialists' initiative. It is convincing and new!

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