SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS: EFFECTIVE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT TOOLS IN AFRICAN MUSEUMS

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Knowledge management includes all the processes that are used in creating, disseminating and utilizing knowledge. Its main objective is the communication and sharing of enterprise knowledge between different people (Kavakali and Bakogianni,).

The objective of knowledge management systems is to support creation, transfer and application of knowledge in organizations (Alavi and Leidner, 2001).

The museums in Africa are custodians of different types of artefacts, most of which are the tangible cultural heritage of the indigenous community. These cultural pieces were collected by the museums in different ways: purchase, seizure or gift. The acquired objects were documented before they were put in the storage area. Documentation of the artefacts entails recording the object's details in books and on index cards. Once this is done, the objects remain there and are never made available for public viewing unless they are brought out for exhibition or loan. Sometimes, the exhibitions are not done frequently. This traditional approach to documentation of museum objects in African museums does not allow the museums to maximise their potentials in educating the public which is one of the key responsibilities of a museum. Museums need to be more and more conscious of their functions and purposes to the public, not only of their objects and how they are placed, but also in the presentations of these objects and the physical spaces in which they exist (Ignjatovic, 2004). An effective way of educating the public in museums is the use of knowledge management (KM) tools. According to International Council of Museums (ICOM), a museum is a non – profit making permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves and researches, communicates and exhibits for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment (ICOM, 2001). The definition implies that museums have to make the knowledge they have about the artefacts available to the public. The educative role of museum can be carried out by employing social networking tools in KM. KM practitioners use a wide range of IT tools to share, create, codify, and share knowledge. The trend in the development of Information Technology (IT) for organisations is toward more communication tools (Ghani, 2009). Although traditional method of documentation and storage of objects are in line with good museum practice, the public should not be denied complete access to these collections. This approach which is a common practice in African museums can be complimented with the use of social networking tools, a proactive approach to object documentation.

A network is "generally defined as a specific type of relation linking a defined set of persons, objects, or events" (Mitchell (1969) cited by Kristina Groth. There is also a concept called computer supported social networks, which only includes relationships supported through computer environments, e.g., chat, news, and e-mail (Wellman et al., 1996). Social networking tools (SNT) can be defined as tools which are used for online interaction. They are interactive medium used to communicate by a group with common interest. SNT tools include facebook, twitter, blogs, myspace, youtube, flickr, podcasts, e.t.c. SNT can be used as good KM tool to share information about these objects with anybody who is interested in the objects. An audience interacts, create and share knowledge using social networking tools (Falk, 2000). Use of internet is one of the ways that SNT can be used in museums (Leonhard). The museums form social communities when it signs up in any of these SNT websites. The information about these rich collections in African museums can be shared with the global public by posting them on the pages of these websites.

Presently, the documentation of objects in most African museums is done using the well - known traditional method of documenting. The acquisition of objets is followed by documentation. In this

approach, the name of the object, catalogue number, mode of acquisition, provenance and vendor's name are all recorded in index cards and documentation books. Traditional method has its limitations.

1. Access to information about the objects can only be made by referring to the index card or the documentation book.

2. Objects must be seen physically in order to know how it looks.

3. Knowledge about the objects are limited to the information on the index card.

The information about the objects is only in hard copy form and only accessible to museum staff. As a result of this, it cannot be accessed by more than one person at a time and it is not possible for people to access the objects from a distance.

In recent times, museums do not only serve the purpose of keeping objects for storage and exhibition, they have moved a step further to imbibe knowledge management concept. Museum learning theories are intertwined with the notion of 'community of practice' where the importance of learning is not only central to the individual but within a process of co-participation within a social context (Kelly et al., 2006). The usefulness of knowledge management as it concerns documentation is that the information about the objects in a museum is shared by all interested parties. This type of participatory communication encourages learning and helps museums to play their roles as educators. Most African museums are lacking in this aspect. The antidote to this lies in introducing digitization in documentation of objects and employing the use of social networking tools in KM.

The first step in the use of SNT is putting all the information about the object in an online database (digitization). Online digitization of these objects will make them easily accessible to the public. With this, SNT can be used to share information about the objects. This practice is good because it widens the horizon of each participant about the object. This information includes the name, provenance, dimension and picture of the object. Other information like catalogue number, mode of acquisition and vendor should not be included for security purpose. With the aid of SNT, comments can be made about the objects and information about the objects can also be shared because nobody can boast about a monopoly of knowledge of these objects. The beauty of SNT is that it is interactive. Although each African museum has information about the objects in their custody, it may not be complete. The use of SNT as an interactive medium aids in gathering new information about these objects. However, this approach to KM has the disadvantage of amassing a pool of information which may not be correct or true. African museums have the authority and responsibility to investigate all the information being fed into the websites about the artefacts so as to ensure that false information are not passed on to the public . In doing so, authenticity of information may be guaranteed. Apart from sharing knowledge about the African objects through contributions using facebook, tweeters or blogs, enquiries about them can be made using these SNT.

Some African museums are on facebook but they are not active. Museums remain slow to recognise their users as active cultural participants in many to many cultural exchanges (Russo et al., 2006). An interactive SNT must be active and not dormant. The museums themselves must be posting comments about the objects, events and activities of the museums in these SNT. Even though upcoming events and exhibitions do not fall into the class (group) of object documentation, these advertisements draw attention of the public to the museums. They are used to create awareness about these museums and to attract people to the museum. These events also help visitors and non – museum staff to develop interest in the objects in the museum, be eager to learn (know) more about the objects and visit the social networking sites of the museums.

There are other museological areas where documentation is paramount. A typical example is conservation. The practice in African museums is that prior to any interventive conservation work, photograph of the object is taken, the damage recorded and other information about the object are also documented. This information isl stored in a hard copy form. Some of the activities of the conservation department can also be made known online. SNT can also be used for this purpose and knowledge will be shared.

PROACTIVE STEPS TO ENCOURAGE AND IMPROVE ON THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS IN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

African museums should be encouraged to use SNT as a KM tool. The antiquities in these museums are masterpieces and very unique. They are seen and valued only by the people in the locality where they are kept, mostly museum staff and some visitors. The museum professionals in Africa should be enlightened on the importance of KM, the effectiveness of SNT in KM and the advantage of its use. This can be done through training, workshops and seminars. All these will not only help to showcase the objects in African museums and improve KM but will help them to be on the same platform with other museums in different parts of the world.

- African museums should be more responsive when using SNT. They should respond to comments and answers posted on their walls on facebook. The museums should also be encouraged to tweet and post comments on their blogsites.

- Apart from transmitting information about the objects on the SNT websites, African museums should advertise their exhibitions, conferences and seminars. Many of the African museums are object – based and the activities in these museums revolve around the objects. Putting up such adverts will not only make the public to know what is happening in the museum but will also attract their attention to the museum.

EXPECTED IMPACT OF APPLICATION OF SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS IN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT OF AFRICAN MUSEUMS

1. The museum professionals will also learn from their audience.

2. Awareness about the objects will be created resulting in renewed interest in the artefacts and the museums themselves.

3. Awakened global interest in the objects will lead to more research, exhibition, training and workshops as it concerns these objects.

4. There will be up-to-date information about these objects.

5. The rich cultural heritage of Africa will be made known to the general public.

6. Information about the objects in the African museums can easily be accessed.

SNT are good and effective KM tools in African museums. Their use in African museums will be of immense benefit to the museums: information will be shared, knowledge acquired and staff capacity greatly improved. Generally, the use of SNT in African museums will assist in improving the KM of these museums so that they will be valued and appreciated by all.

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