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The role and importance of the Intellectual capital of the academic library – Gdańsk Tech Library Circulation Services case study

(Rola kapitału intelektualnego biblioteki akademickiej na przykładzie doświadczeń Sekcji Obsługi Czytelnika Biblioteki Politechniki Gdańskiej)

Słowa kluczowe: kapitał intelektualny, zasoby kapitału intelektualnego, zasoby niematerialne instytucji, biblioteka akademicka, sekcja obsługi czytelnika, kształcenie kadr, szkolenie użytkowników biblioteki, Biblioteka Politechniki Gdańskiej

Abstrakt: Skuteczne zarządzanie zasobami kapitału intelektualnego danej sekcji biblioteki akademickiej może być jednym z czynników wpływających na wysokie oceny usług bibliotecznych jej użytkowników. Może ono wpływać na wzrost kapitału intelektualnego biblioteki akademickiej, w strukturach której się znajduje. W sposób pośredni może oddziaływać również na poziom kapitału intelektualnego uczelni. Głównym celem autorek było przedstawienie rzeczywistej wartości i jakości usług Sekcji Obsługi Czytelnika Biblioteki Politechniki Gdańskiej poprzez ukazanie jej kapitału intelektualnego. Artykuł koncentruje się na opisie doświadczeń Sekcji Obsługi Czytelnika Biblioteki Politechniki Gdańskiej.

Keywords: intellectual capital, intellectual capital resources, intangibles, academic library, library circulation services, staff education, library user training, Gdańsk University of Technology Library

Abstract: Effective management of intellectual capital resources of an academic library department may be one of the factors which can increase the quality of the library services delivered to its stakeholders. It may increase the intellectual capital of the academic library in terms of the structure in which it functions. It may also indirectly affect the level of intellectual capital of the university. The authors' main goal was to show the real value and quality of an academic library's circulation services through highlighting the existence and importance of their intellectual capital. The article focuses on describing the Gdańsk Tech Library Circulation Services case.

Introduction

Libraries have always responded to social and cultural changes and adapted to the changing needs of their stakeholders to remain relevant. To keep up with the transformations, academic libraries and their sections (services, departments, units), including circulation services, need to change themselves on a constant basis. Today the role of librarians should be to formulate a new definition of a library which would correspond to both the new trends and technologies shaping the contemporary book and information market and the changing needs of the potential library users [25]. A university library is both a knowledge and learning non-profit organization [15]. A knowledge organization is an organization in which people use systems and processes to generate, transform, manage, use, and transfer knowledge-based products and services (e.g. books, journals, electronic portals, videos etc., and provision of technical advice [18]) to achieve organizational goals [9]. These goals in the case of an academic library include: managing, organizing, evaluating and disseminating information, providing support to members of an academic community (e.g. students, researchers, lecturing staff). An academic library is also a learning non-profit organization [3], which continuously activates a transformational process (learning) by which it as a whole changes its methods, practices and procedures, including the professional and personal development of all its members [19]. In library and information science literature exploring the issue of intellectual capital of libraries (including academic libraries) there has been constant but moderate interest in the issue of intellectual capital for the last twenty years' period among Polish authors [4; 5; 12; 20; 27; 28; 29; 31].

Intellectual capital can be defined as the intangible capital (resources with economic and social value that cannot be seen or touched) or immaterial value created in an organization as a result of mental process of decision making. The university library's intellectual capital (IC)¹ is a part of the university's IC and consists of the three main components (resources): structural (organization) capital, relational (society or customer) capital and human capital [10]. The article focuses on describing the Gdańsk Tech Library Circulation Services (GTL CS)² case. The authors discuss the role of the intellectual capital only in terms of relational and human capital resources of an academic library's circulation. Effective management of intellectual capital resources [1] can maximize a library's value creation in the eyes of its stakeholders – students, researchers and other types of users, but not only. The authors conclude with the statement that an academic library section's intellectual capital may increase the intellectual capital of the library in which structure it functions and indirectly it may also contribute to the level of intellectual capital of the university³.

¹ Intellectual capital is also called intangible assets, knowledge assets, knowledge capital, intellectual assets. See: https://www.tlu.ee/~sirvir/IKM/Strategic_Issues/alternative_terms_for_intellectual_capital.html.

² The abbreviation GTL CS will be used throughout the text instead of the full name of the section: Gdańsk Tech Library Circulation Services.

³ Some authors go as far as to suggest that intellectual capital of public libraries indirectly influences the growth of the country's economy as libraries contribute to a country's literacy level which in turn contributes to a country's economic productivity (compare: Lewis Liu: The contribution of public libraries to countries' economic productivity: A path analysis [16] and The economic value of public libraries [23]).

The main aim of this article was to show the role of the intellectual capital of an academic library focusing on describing the Gdańsk Tech Library Circulation Services experience in the area specified in the topic of the text⁴ within the years 2019-2021. The authors selected the time period for two reasons, because of its immediacy and dynamic nature. The former element provides a fresh perspective and the latter one shows the dynamics of changes in the Gdańsk Tech Library User Services' staff training processes. In general opinion – from library users, librarians themselves to decision and policy-makers at various levels – the services offered by circulation sections of libraries are often underrated and labelled as simple and not requiring any particular qualifications or education. The authors aimed at showing the real value and quality of an academic library's circulation services through highlighting the existence and importance of their intellectual capital. First line beneficiaries of the research will be academic library professionals, academic circulation services librarians in particular, especially those who specialize in upgrading the quality of academic library circulation services.

Intellectual capital in academic libraries – more than a definition

Intellectual capital can be defined as non-financial *capital* and is the *real* wealth (as the financial capital is) of profit and non-profit organizations, including academic libraries. In essence, it is knowledge and experience that creates value, or in other words it is a group of intangible assets [21], e.g. human and relational⁵ resources that influence a library's performance and value creation. The library's relationship capital includes the relationships that function within a library, e.g. among its employees, its users and other types of shareholders⁶. Human capital of an academic library consists of the knowledge and experience of the library staff – their capabilities, competencies, education, life and work experiences.

Neither human nor relational resources, however, have any direct financial worth. Probably this is the reason why their role in libraries and other kinds of profit or non-profit organizations is often underestimated or totally unrecognized. After all, these intangible assets or resources are not included in an organization's balance sheet [7]. In fact, however, these nonphysical, abstract assets can be not only identified, but also analyzed as separate entities [14]. What is more, they can have a considerable impact on value creation in an academic library. Being intangible does not mean that the intellectual assets are financially unviable for a university environment or taking a broader perspective – for the society as such. Relational and human resources belong to a library and are directly connected with a library's personnel's relational skills (how well they interact with and relate to other people), personal attributes, professional skills and the employees' participation in various staff training programmes, projects and other types of training events designed to efficiently and appropriately support a library's stakeholders. Libraries have been considered as

⁴ Without discussing structural capital as the authors have the least experience in this area.

⁵ The authors do not discuss the structural capital in the article.

⁶ This article does not refer to structural capital resources, however, it refers to „belief system” of an organization (i.e. to its work culture, and its organizational structure).

gateways to knowledge since beginning of recorded history, thus it can be argued that intellectual capital has always been present in the library as such. *It is almost impossible now to imagine the world without libraries⁷ – how would it be possible for human beings to accumulate the world's knowledge passed down to us by our ancestors and how could people advance research if it was not for libraries* [26]? Today, libraries organize materials for the purpose of retrieval and to manage their collections. They also educate the library users about e.g. library orientation, bibliographic instruction, information skills – in other words they create a bridge between the user's information need and the materials in the collections. Through effective intellectual capital management an academic library can maximize its value creation in the eyes of the stakeholders – students, researchers and other types of user.

Circulation Services of Gdańsk University of Technology Library

Gdańsk University of Technology Library (English abbrev.: Gdańsk Tech Library; Polish: Biblioteka Politechniki Gdańskiej) is an academic and research library that holds the largest print collection of technical literature in northern Poland and provides a rich array of electronic resources. The Library fulfils its statutory function by collecting and cataloguing new books and periodicals, growing and maintaining the existing infrastructure of the digital library, making the collections available via online catalogue, offering user training activities and organizing exhibitions that promote Gdańsk University of Technology Library. The Gdańsk Tech Library has been playing a leading role in the implementation of the Pomeranian Digital Library project (since 2010). Furthermore, the library plays an important role in developing the institutional repository, open access and open research data initiatives at the Gdańsk University of Technology, especially within two projects, MOST Wiedzy (Bridge of Knowledge) and MOST DANYCH (Bridge of Data). Last but not least, the Gdańsk Tech Library develops international cooperation – it offers many learning opportunities for international users and provides access to well-managed library collections and other services. The other objectives of the internationalisation process carried out by the library include library staff Erasmus+ mobility and cooperation with several international library and open access organizations.

The Circulation Services is a part of Gdańsk University of Technology Library organizational structure. The Gdańsk Tech Library Circulation Services are provided by the Lending Library, the Main Reading Room, the Main Library Store, and 8 Branch or Faculty Libraries with the basic tool VIRTUA as an integrated library system. The main tasks of the Circulation Services librarians include e.g. (in the alphabetical order)⁸:

- assessing and responding to diversity in user needs, user communities, and user preferences;

⁷ Issues worth of attention while discussing libraries in historical perspective are intellectual freedom, censorship and information control, which for obvious reasons this text does not deal with (compare with: Alex Byrne: The end of history: censorship and libraries [6] and Olugbenga Ademodi: Censorship issue in librarianship: analysis and the way forward [2]).

⁸ See too Gdańsk Tech Library Circulation Services: <https://pg.edu.pl/en/gdansk-tech-library/about-library/organizational-structure/circulation-services>.

- dealing with overdue charges for late book returning;
- delivering from the stacks books ordered by the users;
- designing appropriate resource development – shaping the content of the Library's collections in cooperation with Gdańsk Tech Library Traditional Collection, Acquisitions and Cataloguing Services (purchase of new products, selection, inventory);
- interacting with individuals and groups to provide consultation and guidance in their use of recorded knowledge and information;
- lending collections and making them available in the reading rooms;
- performing internal bookbinding work;
- promoting the services of the Gdańsk Tech Library;
- providing access to relevant and accurate recorded knowledge and information to individuals;
- providing comprehensive information on the resources and services of the Gdańsk Tech Library;
- setting up, updating and modifying the library users' accounts in the VIRTUA library system;
- shaping the content of the Gdańsk Tech Library's print and electronic collections in cooperation with the Gdańsk Tech Library Traditional Collection, Acquisitions and Cataloguing Services (purchasing of new materials and disposing weeded materials);
- teaching information literacy competence techniques and methods, and organizing user library information skills training (for Gdańsk Tech Polish and international users)⁹.

The librarians who work in the GTL CS's units are „the faces of the library” – customer service-oriented, problem-solving, improving library materials access, maintaining usability and seeking to improve the overall user library experience. Possessing good public relations skills – e.g. excellent interpersonal skills, presentation skills and good IT skills, apart from being experts in information searching, selecting, acquiring, organizing, preserving and disseminating – seems to be a must for staff performing circulation work [17], hence the importance of developing both relational and human capital in the context of the library's services.

Relational capital – GTL CS's user relationship, personnel networks and user training

The GTL CS librarians strive to create friendly environment for every user – student, academic teacher, other librarians, university administrative clerks, and for other patrons [13]. The Circulation Services unit in the Gdańsk Tech Library is the library's welcome and information center. In most cases, the GTL CS librarians' relationship with the social environment in which they operate is based on three-level structure composed on cooperation, trust and involvement [30]. The Gdańsk Tech Library Circulation Services librarians work at

⁹ Compare with ALA's Core Competences of Librarianship: <https://www.ala.org/educationcareers/sites/ala.org/educationcareers/files/content/careers/corecomp/corecompetences/finalcorecompstat09.pdf>.

the front line – the library patrons often turn to the circulation librarians for research questions. The Circulation Services librarians establish and maintain direct contact with the library users. Not only do they make the library materials available to the users, but they also assist them in reaching valid and relevant information for study and research purposes. Some of their tasks include user training as well. Front line librarians provide library users support in a way that makes it easier for the patrons to navigate the services and resources that the library has to offer. Sometimes the librarians need to pass the query along to other specialists for their contributions. It is, however, the GTL CS staff's duty to ensure that the users eventually receive the information they need. No patron will leave a librarian's desk without a valuable tip, helpful instruction, guideline and a word of support. The librarians advise a user that a particular resource or access to information a patron seeks is held in the library print or electronic collections or not, whether to submit an interlibrary loan request or select another source from outside the library system which might be more suitable and relevant for the individual. The impression circulation librarians make upon library patrons by how they communicate and fulfill their duties determines the success of a library's public relations.

In the Gdańsk Tech Library circulation services units, relational capital as far as a librarian-student (user) is concerned, starts with a simple smile encouraging a user to feel free to share their doubts, questions and suggestions with the library staff. Library information skills are taught to the Gdańsk Tech Library users in a form of an obligatory e-course and in a form of in-person individual or group training sessions on request. Both kinds of training events are designed to help patrons use the print and electronic resources the Gdańsk Tech Library has to offer, as effectively as possible. The key information skills include: being able to locate and access the information the users need, being able to compare and evaluate information, being able to organize, apply and communicate the information to others e.i. citing references in an essay, presentation, article or diploma paper and creating a bibliography. It is essential that students have not only the skills to enable them to exploit the resources available, but also the ability to understand how to retrieve, evaluate and use them effectively. After completing the training the users should know how to use the Library's services – how to search and access the Library's resources, distinguish among different types of information sources, evaluate information, distinguish between popular and academic (peer reviewed) information, manage information (by referencing and avoiding plagiarism) and possess knowledge about copyright and Open Access issues. It is worth highlighting that in-person individual (and group) in-person training sessions are usually organized at the branch libraries and are popular among students. A librarian often offers a tour of a particular branch of the library with a brief overview of the book collections and its locations, and the introduction to the issue of access and navigation through traditional and electronic resources. Next, there is an initial familiarization of the user with the functioning of the library materials searching tools: online catalogue and multisearch tool. The human factor plays an important role in the library information education as well. The users know the face of the librarian and know who to contact in case they have a question related to the library services. A librarian who works in a branch library must have high level of personal culture and extensive (interdisciplinary) knowledge. At the end of this part, it is worth mentioning that an inseparable element of relational capital as such is building



effective relations and a positive image of the library among its stakeholders through the organization of library orientation games, exhibitions and through constant presence in social media, which the GTL CS librarians try to do on regular basis. Relation capital building process in GTL CS is created on the action-reaction principle with benefits for both parties involved in the process, „the giver and the taker”, or in other words „what you give is what you take”. Building relational capital requires adopting an active attitude in the area of its initiation, maintenance, improvement and development [8]. Relational capital in the GTL CS is based on interpersonal trust, existence of shared norms, identification with other individuals and last but not least engagement-focused models of services¹⁰. The quality of relational capital in an organization has a significant impact on the level of social capital, especially in terms of the sense of bond with the community of the organization serves.

Finally, *the GTL CS's relational capital* encompasses relationships within the community of the GTL CS librarians themselves, other library sections' staff and the university faculty. The librarians are members of cross-sections teams set up in the Gdańsk Tech Library. In the teams librarians do not only exchange their strong points, their work and life experience, but they can also receive the group's support in crisis [22]. The GTL CS staff often act as liaison librarians. In this role the librarians „liaise” the library and the university's research and teaching staff, and other departments of the university as well. The librarians provide the academic staff assistance with acquiring books or journals for the library's collection related to the staff's research, help locate specific resources for the projects researchers work on and provide information about Open Access (OA) publishing and copyright issues. The librarians also instruct the users about how to use the licensed and open access e-resources. Last but not least, GTL CS librarians develop cooperation and exchange of knowledge, good practices and experiences with other university departments within the university.

Human Capital – GTL CS librarians' training participation

Human capital can be divided into staff training and education, staff skills and experience and staff attributes and culture. In this article the authors discuss participation of GTL CS librarians in training events (training sessions and conferences; in-person and online) in the years 2019-2021¹¹. Training in various organizations, including academic libraries, is considered a very important device in personnel management [11]. Education – in a broader sense – is one of the key components of academic libraries' staff's professional and personal development. The figures reflecting the GTL CS librarians' training participation (2019-2021) presented below are based on the library's statistics of the Gdańsk Tech Library compiled for the needs of the yearly reports for Central Statistical Office of Poland.

¹⁰ It is a real challenge for circulation librarians to deal with so-called „difficult patrons” who show disinterest, confusion, or sometimes even disrespect.

¹¹ In the period 2017-2019 GTS CS experienced „a boom phase” as far as the numbers of various training events are concerned. 2019 seems to be until now the last year of the „boom” period. Since 2020 the number of training hours has been decreasing (in comparison to the year 2019), with a temporary growth in the numbers of training events in 2020, most of which were basically webinars with relative short hours of duration.

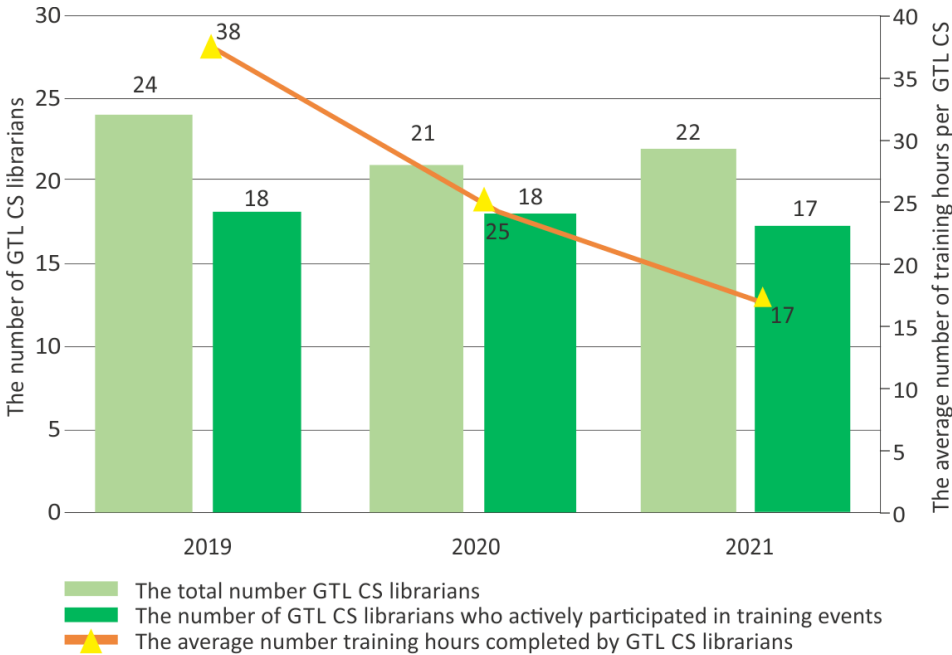
Table 1. The GTL CS librarians' training participation in the years 2019-2021

The year	The total number of Gdańsk Tech Library (GTL) staff	The total number of GTL CS librarians	The total number of GTL CS librarians who actively participated in the training events	The total number of training hours completed by GTL CS librarians	The average number of training events GTL CS librarians participated in	The total number of training events GTL CS librarians participated in
2019	54	24	18	914	38	196
2020	53	21	18	518	25	452
2021	58	22	17	369	17	173

Source: self-elaboration.

The GTL CS librarians made up 44, 40 and 38 percent of the total number of Gdańsk Tech Library staff in the years 2019, 2020 and 2021 respectively.

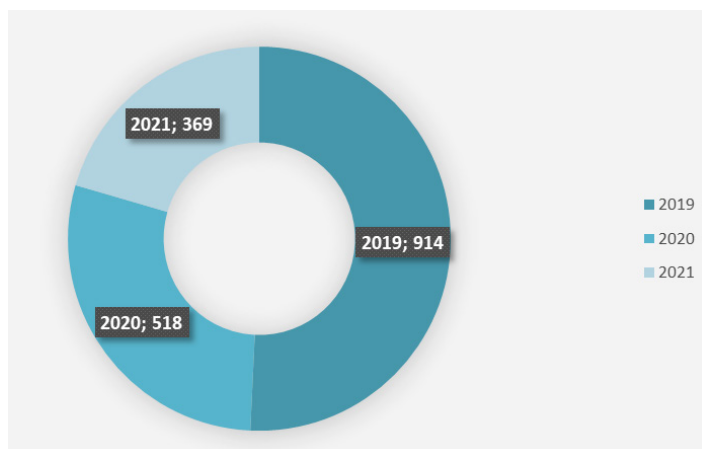
Figure 1. The GTL CS librarians' training participation in the years 2019-2021 (selected data)



Source: self-elaboration.

Figure 1 shows the total number of GTL CS librarians (light green bars), the number of librarians who actively participated in training events (dark green bars) and the average number of training hours per GTL CS librarian (orange curve) in the years 2019-2021. The figures show that number of GTL CS librarians decreased from 24 in 2019 to 22 in 2021 (75.0% up to 85.7% of all GTL CS librarians participated in the training events in the respective years). In the year 2021, 17 GTL CS librarians participated in the training events (77.3% of all GTL CS librarians). Interestingly, the average number of hours per GTL CS librarian in the year 2019 equals 38 hours, in 2020 – 25 hours, in 2021 – 17 hours.

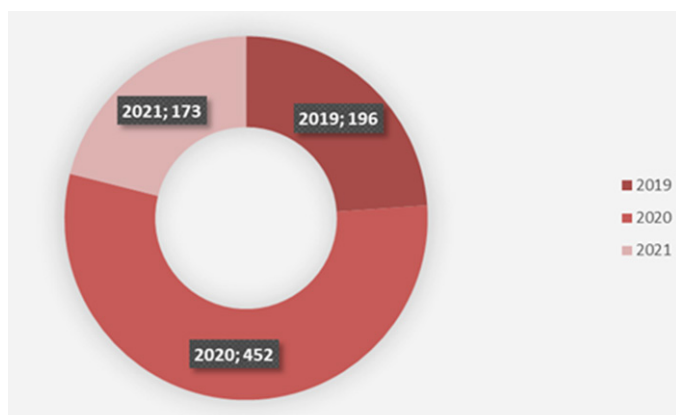
Figure 2. The total number of training hours completed by GTL CS librarians in the years 2019-2021



Source: self-elaboration.

Figure 2 shows the total number of training hours completed by GTL CS librarians participated in the years 2019-2021. The greatest number of hours (914, ca 50% of all hours in years 2019-2021) were devoted to training events (in-person and online training sessions and conferences) by GTL CS librarians in 2019. In the year 2020, GTL CS librarians devoted 518 hours for the training sessions and conferences, which constitutes 29% of all the hours devoted to the training events in the years 2019-2021, while in year 2021, GTL CS librarians devoted to the training events 369 hours, which constitutes of 21% of all hours devoted to in-person and online training sessions and conferences in the years 2019-2021. Based on Fig. 2, it can be seen that the number of hours devoted to training events by GTL CS librarians decreased.

Figure 3. The number of training events (in-person and online training sessions and conferences) in which GTL CS librarians participated in the years 2019-2021



Source: self-elaboration.

Figure 3 shows the number of training events (including in-person and online training sessions and conferences) in which GTL CS librarians participated in the years 2019-2021. According to Fig. 3, it can be seen that GTL CS librarians participated in 452 training events in 2020, which constitutes 55% of all the training events in the years 2019-2021.

Analyzing the presented data shows the downward trends in almost all of the examined areas, except for the number of training events GTL CS librarians participated in, which was the highest in 2020. The training events in 2019 and 2021 constituted 24 and 21% of the total number of the training events in the period 2019-2021 and were heavily outnumbered by the training events in 2020. The downward trends and the high number of the training events in 2020 showed in the table and graphs (Fig. 1-3) can be explained in the context of global changes caused by COVID-19 pandemic situation [24] which affected societies all around the world in every aspect of life, including processes of workplace professional competence improving. On the one side, the GTL CS librarians actively participated in a number of training events prior to 2019. The years 2017-2019 were a period of GTL CS staff's high level of participation in various training events, e.g. Erasmus+ Staff Training Weeks, participation in in-person trainings under the POWER 3.5 programme, academic libraries and open science related conferences in Poland and abroad (Pomeranian Open Science Conferences and others), language courses and many more. All the mentioned activities were characterized by a large number of hours – on average, they lasted 23 hours each. Consequently, although there were fewer training events in 2019 than in 2020, however, they were all „long-hour” training sessions, which altogether resulted in much higher number of GTL CS librarians' training hours statistics for 2019 than for 2020 (when the number of training events was the highest when compared to 2019 and 2021). In 2020, all in-person training events were delayed and finally cancelled due to the COVID-19 restrictions. The training activities of academic libraries were transferred to the space of the Internet – the web was packed with a great number of trainings for university

librarians. In the following year (2021), this activity transformed into a hybrid system of online and in-person trainings. One of the characteristic features of webinar-type of trainings is their more concise form and shorter duration in comparison to in-person training sessions and conferences. The above description may partially explain the downward trends in the numbers of training hours and the average number of training hours per GTL CS librarian discussed above and the high number of the training events in 2020 [8].

In the decision-making process at the Gdańsk Tech Library certain themes and areas of interest were identified as crucial for professional development of the library's staff. In the years 2019-2021 the GTL CS librarians participated in the training events (in-person and online training sessions and conferences) devoted to new trends and competences of the future in academic libraries, open science, open access, open education, open scholarly communication, open research data management, data management support through the research process, data management plans, altmetrics, digital humanities, quality control of publications, citizen science, library electronic resources, digital services, university repositories, academic library remote services, copyright issues, academic libraries and social media, the Fahrenheit Union of Universities in Gdańsk, participation in Erasmus+ mobility projects and Gdańsk University of Technology Library Open Science Competence Center. It is worth mentioning that theoretical trainings dominated over the practical ones, and hard skills trainings outnumbered soft skills courses, which might be balanced in the future. It is frequently discussed in the library and information science literature that for today's academic librarians having professional degrees in library and information science is not enough. At present it is vital for librarians to be able to provide user oriented services along with soft skills (e.g.: listening skills, communications skills, interpersonal skills, public relations, customer services skills, teamwork skills, negotiating skills, presentation skills). In the period 2019-2021 the GTL CS librarians participated in the soft skills classes devoted to the following issues: difficult situations in the workplace, resistance to stress, positive stress tolerance, efficiency in overcoming adversities, methods of resolving conflicts, intercultural competences for the administrative staff of the Gdańsk University of Technology, cultural differences, effective communication, empathy and creativity in the workplace. To sum up, it is vital to notice that the training activities are still (in 2022) crucial for GTL CS staff's professional education and play an important role in building up the human capital of the Circulation Services section despite the downward tendencies in some areas of the training process in the described period. These tendencies, the authors wish to make it clear, did not result from the staff's negative attitudes or negligence. Instead, they have to be attributed to the external factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. training events' cancellation, shift in training models from in-person sessions or conferences to online or hybrid models of concise and short-houred training events). Most people were eager to spend the pandemic time profitably and they willingly took part in training events which is well represented by the numbers of online training events in 2020. Lower frequency of active participation in training sessions in 2021 might be to some extent caused by anxiety, depression, existential threats and global uncertainty and chaos evoked by the pandemic situation in the discussed period. The trends in trainings for librarians mentioned above may be

extrapolated beyond the current period and the subjects connected with open science, research data management, international cooperation and communication soft skills might still be prevailing among training themes in the years to come. It is, however, difficult to rule out the possibility that totally new issues will appear.

Conclusion

The article describes the Gdańsk Tech Library Circulation Services case in terms of creating value defined as intellectual capital and the role it plays in academic environment. The authors have focused on presenting two aspects of the intellectual capital, relational and human capital created within the time period of three years (2019, 2020, 2021). The Gdańsk University of Technology Library Circulation Services can play an important role in guiding the users in the world of information within and outside of the academic library system as it has been presented in the text. Some results of the study in terms of GTL CS staff's training participation show downward tendencies, it is however vital to analyze them taking the COVID-19 crisis into account. GTL CS staff continued their participation in in-person and online training events despite the challenges and as far as the circumstances allowed in the described period. The GTL CS's intellectual capital as described in the article can maximize in the library's value creation in the eyes of its stakeholders – students, researchers and exterior users. It can also indirectly contribute to the growth of the intellectual capital of the university.

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