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Inside, outside and upside down

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Inside, outside and upside down

Abstract

It is said that Abdul Kassem Ismael, the scholarly Grand Vizier of Persia in the tenth century had a library of 117,000 volumes. He was an avid reader and a lover of books. On his many travels, he could not bear to part with this beloved books. Wherever he went they were carried about by 400 camels trained to walk in alphabetical order. His camel drivers thus became librarians who could put their hands instantly on any book for which their master asked. (Hawkins, Brian L and Battin, Patricia (2000) Camel Drivers and Gatecrashers, Educause Review May/June 2000 p50). How did the performance of this mobile library measure up? As there was only one key client and stakeholder, the Grand Vizier, matters were relatively simple and he, perhaps, thought in terms of the number of items in his collection, whether they were correctly arranged for immediate retrieval and whether his wealth was sufficient to acquire even more precious volumes. Such measures are still common today in libraries even though we can now transport our libraries – or at least make them accessible - to the far corners of the earth, not by camel but via electronic publishing and the internet.

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Inside, outside and upside down

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Introduction

It is said that Abdul Kassem Ismael, the scholarly Grand Vizier of Persia in the tenth century had a library of 117,000 volumes. He was an avid reader and a lover of books. On his many travels, he could not bear to part with his beloved books. Wherever he went they were carried about by 400 camels trained to walk in alphabetical order. His camel drivers thus became librarians who could put their hands instantly on any book for which their master asked. (Hawkins, Brian L and Battin, Patricia (2000) *Camel Drivers and Gatecrashers*, Educause Review May/June 2000 p50).

How did the performance of this mobile library measure up? As there was only one key client and stakeholder, the Grand Vizier, matters were relatively simple and he, perhaps, thought in terms of the number of items in his collection, whether they were correctly arranged for immediate retrieval and whether his wealth was sufficient to acquire even more precious volumes.

Such measures are still common today in libraries even though we can now transport our libraries – or at least make them accessible - to the far corners of the earth, not by camel but via electronic publishing and the internet.

Whether Abdul Kassem Ismael considered the question of business performance, that is, whether he received what he regarded as a good return on his investment, is not recorded. There was no apparent need for such evaluation and, for most libraries, even those housed more conventionally in bricks and mortar, there has similarly been no need to answer this question during all the centuries that libraries have existed.

What has changed? How can libraries benefit from adopting a business excellence framework? Do they now need to measure and evaluate their “business” performance?

Environmental change

Firstly, the information technology and communications revolution has meant a fundamental change in the way libraries do business. The products they deliver – information and knowledge *packets* - have profoundly altered in both their form and mode of delivery. Librarians have had to rethink every aspect of their core business – from redesigning individual processes to restructuring the entire organisation.

Developing excellent strategies for managing these changes has, therefore, been of critical importance.

Secondly, for the first time in its two thousand, six hundred year history, there is competition for library services. The internet and other information providers are perceived as overcoming the limitations of libraries which are traditionally constrained by their opening hours and physical location. University libraries are, like their parent institutions, aware of the need to compete for students and use their dollars to fill coffers left gaping as a result of funding cuts made by a government which, unlike Abdul Kassem Ismael, has yet to fully appreciate the competitive edge which knowledge and education represents. Tertiary education must now be viewed in market terms. This is a fundamental - and largely unwelcome - shift for ancient and venerable institutions such as universities.

As a result of the advances in information and communication technology described above, global players are equipped to compete for a share of the multi-billion dollar higher education market. Libraries, too, must look to their laurels as other information providers compete for student eyeballs and dollars.

Within the university there is also competition for dollars. Our key stakeholders – Deans and Senior Executives – have, of necessity, become more focused on efficiency and effectiveness. Traditional library measures told us nothing about the return on investment we were providing for the University or whether students perceived that they obtained value for money in relation to library services.

Today's students are more market conscious than any previous generation, they pay fees and they expect value for their dollar. They want to complete degrees, which enhance their employment prospects, in the shortest possible time. This means they want access to information quickly - not at the end of a long and tedious process involving searching catalogues or printed indexes. They also want access to information resources at a time and location convenient to them – it could be anywhere or anytime – not restricted to library opening hours.

What effect have these changes in the Library's environment and clientele had on measurement and evaluation?

Towards effective measurement

In 1994, when the University of Wollongong Library adopted the *Australian Business Excellence Framework* as its management framework, the measures in place were predominantly statistical and included collection size, study space, budget quantum and number of enquiries at the Information Desk.

None of these measures shed light on whether our services met client expectations, which can be summarised as speed, timeliness, convenience and universal availability.

Although staff had long been service oriented, there was no systematic process in place to capture and record students needs and expectations, nor to gain feedback on library performance – two elements essential for the effective management of client relationships.

Driven, therefore, by client and stakeholder expectations of effectiveness, plus the need to demonstrate internal efficiency, the University of Wollongong Library commenced an evaluation journey which was possibly the most challenging aspect of our entire Quality journey. We were driven also, on this journey by a desire to stay in business and not to be considered the dinosaur of the information age – interesting only as an example of superseded technology or guardians of *antique browsers*, (otherwise known as books).

We still measure collection size but our performance indicator is *collection relevance*. Budget quantum is always important but our performance indicator focuses on return on investment. Enquiries are still counted but our key performance indicator is *client and stakeholder satisfaction*.

That, then, is the thumbnail sketch. Underpinning this deceptively simple outline was a lot of hard work and pain – from determining the expectations and priorities of key stakeholders and client groups and establishing goals and critical success factors - to determining useful performance indicators and associated measures. This process was accompanied by training in measurement and analysis for all staff and the establishment of a data and information management architecture. Analysis of our initial evaluation efforts led to the review and revision of performance indicators to incorporate results, feedback and changing needs.

Inside

Some examples of internal measurement include: correlation of expectations and performance; processing cost trends; availability of resources to meet learning and teaching needs; average supply time for major suppliers.

Feedback from the 1998 Australian Quality Awards process identified a need to develop an overall framework for measurement so that we could demonstrate the linkages between goals, Critical Success Factors and related performance indicators and measures. This model is known as the *Performance Indicator Framework* or *PIF*. Developing the *PIF* has also improved the transparency of lead and lag indicators which alert us early to trends or process variation, as well as enabling us to analyse results at scheduled intervals.

Outside - beyond internal efficiency and effectiveness

The *Australian Business Excellence Framework* also challenged us to compare our performance with others and to develop indicators of future success and sustainability. In the competitive environment described above, it was necessary to measure our performance against others. The benchmarking of both process capability and key management practices has provided us with useful improvement data. We benchmarked with other libraries, where possible, and with other organisations who were leaders in areas strategically important to us.

Some examples of benchmarking exercises are: planning capability; leadership effectiveness and management and improvement of processes.

Upside down

As my title indicates we turned things upside down and this was especially true for staff. From statistics to performance indicators was a huge shift for library staff who are not normally trained in statistics, measurement, spreadsheets and so on. However, we were no strangers to on-the-job training, having successfully made the transition from an almost entirely manual environment of card catalogues and typewriters to one in which all major processes are automated and a large amount of business is conducted online.

The change management strategies we adopted, however, encompassed much more than on-the-job training. Our aim was to drive a cultural change which would achieve a sense of overall responsibility for organisational performance – previously considered to be mainly within the province of the executive team.

Enabling staff to see the big picture was a key strategy and this was addressed through meetings, guest speakers, conference attendance, in-house seminars, participation in SWOT analysis and

strategic planning, dissemination of information and multi-layered communication mechanisms. These elements all form part of our ongoing and integrated strategic planning and environmental awareness processes. Relating general trends to the impact on specific tasks, as well as emphasising the importance of every team's function to overall outcomes, was a transforming experience for many staff. Of primary importance was the development of a system to encourage the sharing of knowledge, information and experiences which led to the construction of our Knowledge Management framework.

Rewards and recognition helped engender a more competitive spirit. Sharing and discussing the results of benchmarking and evaluation was salutary for many who thought that processes were already as efficient as possible. The importance of knowledge and learning is incorporated in our values and *Ideal Culture*, it is represented in our vision, mission and goals. It underpins our human resource management strategies through the identification of core competencies and inclusion in performance management processes. In these ways, we believe we have created a culture in which evaluation and learning go hand in hand. We have positioned ourselves to compete with other information providers and to be recognised as being of indispensable strategic importance to the University.

We know that we are not *finished* with change and that more challenges lie ahead, some of which will be identified through scenario planning and some which will be unforeseen. A climate of evaluation which includes continuous reassessment of everything we do is a vital component of our capacity to manage change – whatever form it takes – and to know that we will be leaders in identifying solutions to whatever challenges both the Library and its parent organisation may face in future.

Postscript

And the camels? Sometimes the old ways can remain part of the solution today. The Kenya National Library was seeking an efficient and inexpensive way of delivering books from the main library to outlying villages and nomadic settlements. The roads are so bad even four wheel drive vehicles get stuck in the sand – camels were the solution. The camel library is on the road five days a week and the service is so popular it cannot always meet the demand.