Ensuring the academic library's relevance to stakeholders: The role of the Library Director

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a substantive grounded theory about how the Library Director can ensure the library's relevance to university and external stakeholders in the face of rapid changes in technology and higher education. A constructivist grounded theory research approach involved 14 semi-structured interviews with 12 Library Directors of publicly funded university libraries in Australia and the United States. The substantive theory and the conceptual model presented in this paper suggest that the Library Director responds to the problem of rapid change by enacting the following strategies: aligning strategic vision with the university; continuously reinventing the library; engaging with stakeholders; building an agile and engaged culture; and demonstrating value to the university. The strategies interact with each other in a cyclical pattern. This is an original theory that emphasizes the important role of the Library Director as the agent and model for library strategy and culture. The theory requires library leaders to be strategic thinkers and to be engaged in strategic planning processes that aim for continuous improvements that make the library agile and engaged with stakeholders. The theory also has a significant impact upon the behaviours required for all library staff members.

Introduction

This paper explores how the Library Director, as chief executive officer (CEO) of the university library, can ensure the library's relevance to its stakeholders in the face of rapid changes to its environment. In recent years the university library's digital resources have struggled to compete with free open access resources such as Google Scholar and open access journals (Connaway, White, & Lanclos, 2011; Corrall, Kennan, & Afzal, 2013, p. 637; De Rosa et al., 2014; Gwyer, 2015, p. 279; Saarti & Juntunen, 2011; Shapiro, 2014, 2016). More importantly, the pressures of domestic government higher education policies, competition in the global higher education environment, and economic realities such as the global financial crisis (GFC) have manifested in budget cuts to academic libraries (Association of Research Libraries, 2013; Jubb, Rowlands, & Nicholas, 2013; Nicholas, Rowlands, Jubb, & Jamali, 2010).

This situation means that the Library Director must ensure that the library is continually realigning strategies, innovating new products and services, and that it is sensitive to changes in client behaviour and expectations (Chan & Soong, 2011; Teece, 2007). These things must occur rapidly in order to maintain the library's competitive position within the university and ensure its long-term survival (Harland, 2017; Jantz, 2012a, p.526).

The term Library Director as used throughout this study refers to the CEO of the Library. This is a university-focused rather than a library-focused role, and includes responsibility for defining the library's strategic direction, articulating its vision and participating in the academic life of the university (Garrison, Ryan, & DeLong, 2012). The Library Director "can have a profound impact on organizational outcomes and the ability to innovate" (Jantz, 2012b, p. 4). This role is important because institutions that are successful innovators and change managers are led by individuals with "line authority" who drive the change, rather than by delegated committees or other team structures (Furst-Bowe & Bauer, 2007).

We refer to stakeholders as anyone with a stake in the activity of the library. According to Bourne (2009) the stake may be "an interest; rights (legal or moral); ownership; contribution in the form of knowledge or support" (p.30). Stakeholders of the university library include all teaching, research and administrative staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students, and a broad range of community groups, communities of practice and professional groups.

Despite a substantial body of literature that urges the need for change in academic libraries (Cox & Corrall, 2013; Jubb et al., 2013; Nicholas et al., 2010), there is a paucity of empirical research that

generates a theory of the overall strategy that the Library Director can use to ensure the library's relevance to its stakeholders. The only recent research to investigate such a theory is the doctoral dissertation of Harland (2017), upon which this paper is based.

This paper reports a substantive grounded theory, which, according to Charmaz (2014) is "a theoretical interpretation [emphasis added] or explanation of a delimited problem in a particular area" (p. 344). It also presents a conceptual model. During this research, we were guided by the question:

> How can the Library Director ensure the relevance of the university library to its stakeholders in the current environment of rapid change?

This paper proceeds with an overview of current literature to determine the research gap (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). This is followed by a description of the constructivist grounded theory research approach and research design. Following this we present our substantive grounded theory and conceptual model. Finally, we discuss the research results and how they relate to current research literature. We also include a discussion of the limitations of our research and the theoretical and practical implications of the theory.

Literature Review

While there are several recent studies that examine the role, strategies and priorities of the university Library Director (Casey, 2011; Jantz, 2012a, 2012b, 2015; Otero-Boisvert, 2015; Wolff-Eisenberg, 2017), there are none that provide a theory about how the Library Director can ensure the relevance of the University Library to stakeholders. Therefore, this literature review examines the library and information science (LIS) research literature from two strategic management perspectives: learning organization theory, and the dynamic capabilities concept of competitive advantage.

The Learning Organization

According to Peter Senge (1990), the learning organization is:

> …where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together (p.3).

Most learning organization authors agree that the learning organization purposefully strives to achieve a state of continual learning, accordingly adapting its organizational culture and behaviour (Schwandt & Marquardt, 1999, p. 26; Sun & Scott, 2003, p. 203). Several learning organization authors agree that leaders are change agents, developing purpose, value and vision, gaining commitment to them, and modelling the values and vision to others (Marsick & Watkins, 1999; Pearn, Roderick, & Mulrooney, 1995; Senge, 2006; Watkins & Marsick, 1993).

Several learning organization frameworks provide a systematic and practical framework for continual learning. Senge (1990) proposed that learning occurs at executive level of an organization through *shared vision* and *systems thinking*; team level through team learning; and individual level through *personal mastery* and *mental models*. Watkins and Marsick (1993) and Marsick and Watkins (1999) produced a framework that emphasizes the strategic role of the leader in developing learning, connecting the organization to its wider environment; establishing knowledge management systems; and sharing a vision that empowers people (Watkins & Marsick, 1993, p. 11). Team collaboration and learning are encouraged; and inquiry, dialogue and learning opportunities are fostered for individuals (Watkins & Marsick, 1993, p. 11). Authors such as Huber (1991), Nevis, DiBella, and Gould (1995), and Pearn et al. (1995) also developed frameworks, and Anders Örtenblad (2004) proposed an integrated learning organization model.

Fowler (1998) judges that the ideas of Watkins and Marsick (1993) have an empirical basis in several case studies and that they describe "operational terms that may be more readily tested" (p.22). Fowler was writing before the later work of Marsick and Watkins (1999) appeared, and we consider this later work to be more comprehensive because it adds the leader action of *provide strategic leadership for learning.*

The Learning Organization and LIS Research

Study of the academic library as a learning organization is an emerging field of research and there is little theoretical literature or empirical research that investigates libraries as learning organizations (Hallam, Hiskens, & Ong, 2014). A meta-analysis of learning organization literature by Örtenblad et al. (2013, p.39) identified only eight research studies of libraries as learning organizations. Indeed both Rowley (1997) and Örtenblad (2015) suggest that current learning organization frameworks may not be suitable for the library context, and to advance the discipline, Örtenblad (2013, p.9; 2015) has proposed the development of learning organization frameworks for each organizational context, and the development of empirical research within those contexts.

Several studies suggest that cultural factors may inhibit the development of certain learning organization attributes, particularly at the leadership level. This view is supported by Örtenblad et al. (2013, p.38) who state that studies conducted in non-Western contexts often account for cultural factors. For example, the research of Tan Siew Chye and Higgins (2002, p. 173), conducted at Nanyang Technological University, showed a marked learning organization weakness at the library's leadership level. The studies of Kassim and Nor (2007) and Abdullah and Kassim (2008) produce similar findings. Tan Siew Chye and Higgins (2002) note that the Asian cultural mindset inhibits employees from participating in knowledge sharing or being proactive in decision making. A conference paper by Su (2006) describes a quantitative survey of 145 librarians in five Taiwanese university libraries in 2005. This paper recommends the responsibility of the executive library leadership in being committed to the concepts of the learning organization, empowering staff and promoting learning (Su, 2006, p.250). While having a solid empirical basis, this paper does not make recommendations about how academic library leaders can establish these processes.

Several North-American research studies examine the three learning organization levels in academic libraries. Fowler's (1998) case study examines the mechanisms that enable organizational learning to facilitate innovation. Giesecke and McNeil (2004) describe a learning organization program begun at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries in 1996 that found the library had developed a vision, but had not yet developed systems thinking some eight years later. Another case study of Kuopio University Library by Saarti and Juntunen (2011) describes the library's systematic approach to creating a learning organization through concentrating on staff development. The studies of Fowler (1998) and Giesecke and McNeil (2004) do not reflect current realities, while the single case study of Saarti and Juntunen (2011) does not have the broader empirical basis offered by this research. None of these studies examine the role of the Library Director as the instigator of organizational learning.

Papers by Leong and Anderson (2012) and Leong (2014) describe the development of a learning culture at RMIT library in Melbourne, Australia, that is aligned to the university's strategic plan. Renner et al. (2014) describe the use of learning organization concepts to implement change in the library of the University of Western Australia. A paper by McBain, Culshaw, and Walkley Hall (2013), and follow-up research by Hall and McBain (2014) examine the impact of the establishment of a Research Working Group (RWG) at Flinders University Library, Australia, that was designed to produce librarians who could engage more effectively with the university's research culture (p.449). While the Library Director was the instigator of the process (McBain et al., 2013,