Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Review Article

Are Best Practices Really Best? A Review of the Best Practices Literature in Library and Information Studies

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Abstract

Objective - The term "best practice" appears often in library and information science literature, yet, despite the frequency with which the term is used, there is little discussion about what is meant by the term and how one can reliably identify a best practice.

Methods – This paper reviews 113 articles that identify and discuss best practices, in order to determine how "best practices" are distinguished from other practices, and whether these

determinations are made on the basis of consistent and reliable evidence. The review also takes into account definitions of the term to discover if a common definition is used amongst authors.

Results – The "evidence" upon which papers on "best practices" are based falls into one of the following six categories: 1) opinion (n=18, 15%), 2) literature reviews (n=13, 12%), 3) practices in the library in which the author works (n=19, 17%), 4) formal and informal qualitative and quantitative approaches (n=16, 14%), 5) a combination of the aforementioned (i.e., combined approaches) (n=34, 30%), and 6) "other" sources or approaches which are largely one of a kind (n=13, 12%). There is no widely shared or common definition of "best practices" amongst the authors of these papers, and most papers (n=94, 83%) fail to define the term at all. The number of papers was, for the most part, split evenly amongst the six categories indicating that writers on the subject are basing "best practices" assertions on a wide variety of sources and evidence.

Conclusions – Library and information science literature on "best practices" is rarely based on rigorous empirical methods of research and therefore is generally unreliable. There is, in addition, no widely held understanding of what is meant by the use of the term.

Introduction

It is generally agreed that the term "best practice" grew out of the manufacturing industry's interest in and implementation of benchmarking. The process of benchmarking began in earnest in the 1970s and increased in popularity in the 1980s during which time companies became increasingly intent on discovering how they rated amongst their competitors as well as on determining why some companies were more successful than others in specific areas. Today, benchmarking is defined as, "the process of identifying the best practice in relation to products and processes, both within an industry and outside it, with the object of using this as a guide and reference point for improving the practice of one's own organization" (Law, 2009, "Benchmarking," para. 1). "Best practice," correspondingly, is defined as "a practice that has been shown to produce superior performance," and the adoption of best practices is viewed as a mechanism for improving the performance of a process, business unit, product, service, or entire organization (Szwejczewski, 2011, "Best Practice", para. 1).

Not surprisingly, the interest in benchmarking and best practices is no longer confined to the manufacturing sector and the term "best practices" has entered the vocabulary in a number of fields including library and information science. Yet, despite the frequency with which the term is used in library and information science literature, it is not obvious that there is a standard or even a widely-shared meaning of the term amongst the professionals who use it. Clearly, without an understanding in the profession of what is meant when we use the term, there is some question about how meaningful the body of "best practices" literature is and what insights may be gleaned from it.

Problems of definition aside, there remains the further problem of what constitutes solid evidence upon which to ground an assertion that a process or practice is a best practice. By what means do we determine that something is a best practice? Is "best practices" literature in library and information science based on a particular type of evidence or are its foundations as varied as definitions of the term itself? The question is not merely academic — in our current political context, which more than ever demands accountability and measurable

outcomes, it is clear that we must focus our attention on establishing meaningful ways to evaluate our performance and work towards greater consistency and clarity in our discourse.

Literature Review

While there is a considerable amount of literature on "best practices" in a number of disciplines and professions from the humanities to engineering, relatively few articles survey the literature to explore how the claim that something is a "best practice" is defined and determined across a specific discipline or profession. The study and practice of organizational change, notably, is one area in which surveys of the literature have been conducted to determine the basis for the claims of "best practice."

Hallencreutz and Turner (2011), for example, explored the literature of organizational change to determine if consistent models and definitions had been used to declare a process or practice a best practice. They surveyed 160 articles from the Emerald database of management literature that contained some combination of the words organizational change and/or change management and best practice. The authors concluded that "many popular management practices labeled as best practices…are based on anecdotal evidence rather than empirical data" (p. 65). Importantly, this work builds on a previous study in which the authors determined that that no coherent models or definitions of best practice in organizational change were to be found in the literature (Turner, Haley and Hallencreutz, 2009).

Reay, Berta and Kohn (2009) conducted a systemic review of the literature — that of evidence-based management (EBMgt) — and asked three questions: 1) is there a substantial literature concerning the concept of EBMgt?, 2) What is the quality of evidence (where it exists) for EBMgt?, and, 3) is there evidence that EBMgt improves organizational performance? These researchers reviewed 169 journal articles written

in English which were current up to 2008 and which were available using electronic journal databases. Their study found that "a large number of articles are published on the topic, but most provide encouragement to adopt EBMgt based on opinion and anecdotal evidence" (p. 5). They were also surprised to find that there was almost no evidence presented in the articles that EBMgt improves performance.

Simon (2011) conducted a literature review of best practices in corporate libraries in the United States. She found that "although there are many articles in the body of library literature focusing on the importance of incorporating benchmarking and best practices into practice, there is a distinct lack of case studies detailing actual benchmarking/best practices experiences and there are no articles proposing a set of generally accepted best practices for corporate libraries" (p. 139). Simon speculated that the reason for this lies in the work of early library theorists including Shera (1944), Wasserman (1958) and Lancaster and Joncich (1977) who argued that a set of standards could not be developed for special libraries because by their very nature they are not homogeneous and therefore not natural or easy candidates for standardization.

More studies exist across a variety of disciplines which question the concept of best practice in a more general way along with the lack of standardized models and definitions (for examples see Sanwal, 2008; Reay, Berta & Kohn, 2009; Wellstein & Kieser, 2011), and still others suggest models that could be used to evaluate and determine that something is a best practice (for examples see Bardach, 2003; Turner, Haley & Hallencreutz, 2009). While the full exploration of these works across the spectrum of academic and other disciplines is beyond the scope of this paper, what these studies make clear is that this paper is not the first to question these ideas and, of course, that further research is necessary in the field of library and information science to determine whether any of the suggested models

and/or definitions would be applicable to our own services and processes.

Objectives

What is the extent to which best practices library literature fails to define the term "best practices"? Do assertions made regarding best practices rest less on detailed empirical studies and far more on opinion, individual experience and anecdotal information? We wondered if the term "best practice" would be interpreted in any one of a variety of ways including 1) practices carried out by most organizations, 2) practices carried out by "successful" organizations, 3) practices based on observation and experience, 4) practices based on opinion alone, and, finally, 5) practices based on empirical research. Our goals in this study were first, to identify "best practices" library and information literature across all types of libraries; second, to understand the evidence used by the writers of these papers in declaring that a practice is a best practice; and, third, to determine the extent to which there exists a common understanding of the term "best practice" in the literature.

Methods

On February 5, 2013, the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA) database was searched for articles with the words "best practice" or "best practices" in the title. We chose to search the title field only, given the number of papers retrieved (more than 2,000) when a broader search using "best practice(s)" was run in the database.

LISTA, published by EBSCO, was selected for several reasons. The first had to do with the amount of journal overlap amongst library and information science databases and the sheer volume of papers we expected to retrieve. By using one specific database covering "…librarianship, classification, cataloging, bibliometrics, online information retrieval, information management and more" (LISTA, 2013) and indexing "…more than 560 core

journals, nearly 50 priority journals, and nearly 125 selective journals; plus books, research reports and proceedings" (LISTA, 2013), we expected to find the key papers central to the profession. The database was also chosen because articles indexed extend back more than half a century to the mid-1960s.

The search revealed 450 such titles. Brief news items, book reviews, and calls for papers as well as cursory reports of conference talks were then eliminated from this group. Papers with subject keywords which were associated with papers we believed to be too remote from those areas central to the profession were generally eliminated, e.g., Computer and Software Stores, Freestanding Ambulatory Surgical and Emergency Centers. No paper, however, even those with one of the aforementioned subject headings, was eliminated from the group until it had first been examined to ensure that it was not a substantive paper dealing specifically with best practices in libraries.

The remaining articles were reviewed to determine if they dealt with best practices in libraries. Papers on best practices in medical libraries, for example, were included but those in the practice of medicine itself were not. Papers primarily about programming computer systems and network optimization were, similarly, removed from the group. In addition, publications by professional associations which merely announced the existence of best practice guidelines developed by various associations were excluded unless they proceeded to present the substance of those guidelines at some length.

Using this method, 113 papers remained of the 450 originally retrieved. Each researcher read one third of the papers and recorded whether "best practice" was defined by the author, and if defined, we recorded the definition. The papers were then classified with respect to the evidence used by these authors to determine a best practice, and like papers were grouped together. Researchers then re-read their own and, often, each other's papers during this exercise.

The results of the classification exercise are discussed below. All percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number.

Results

Categories of Best Practices within the Library Literature

Best practices papers have been written on a variety of subjects in the library and information science field, but even more so in those areas central to the profession itself. Publications on the matters of teaching and instruction made up the largest group at 21 (out of 113) papers. This topic was followed by cataloguing and metadata (10 papers), digital collections (9 papers), and reference (6 papers). Several categories were tied at 5 papers each, including distance education, management and leadership, multicultural services, and social media outreach. As Table 1 illustrates, the remainder of the best practices papers were spread thinly amongst a variety of other subject categories

Our results also confirmed our sense that the term "best practice" had indeed gained popularity in library discourse. Of the 113 papers we reviewed, the first instance of best practice in a title was in one article published in 1997. In 2001 that number had tripled to 3; in 2006, 14 such articles were published and, by 2011, that number had grown to 17.

Approaches used in the LIS literature for determining "best practices"

Papers were categorized according to the approach used for determining the best practice, and were placed in one of the following categories: 1) literature reviews, 2) practices derived from the library in which the author works, 3) qualitative and quantitative research approaches, 4) combined approaches, 5) opinion and 6) other. Most papers involved initiatives in a single library rather than a comparison of services or practices across libraries.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of the total number of papers in each category. A discussion of each category follows.

1) Literature Reviews

Thirteen papers (12%) consulted the literature and used this information to determine that a process or practice constitutes a best practice. Literature reviews were rarely systematic; where other published papers declared that a particular method was a "best practice," this was accepted as being accurate. One of the few exceptions to this is the paper by Shaw and Spink (2009), in which the authors attempted to distinguish between the types of papers they consulted, noting that "twenty three were identified as empirical papers, and sixteen were opinion pieces" (p. 192). This distinction is, at least, a first step towards pinpointing works with reliable content.

The papers using literature reviews dealt with a variety of topics including teaching (Saunders, 2002), protecting patrons' confidentiality (Maji, 2007), managing organizational diversity (Kreitz, 2008), cataloguing (Alexander, 2008), reference services (Meyer, 2008; Shaw & Spink, 2009), the history of "story time" (Albright, Delecki & Hinkle, 2009), creating an online tutorial (Blummer & Kritskaya, 2009), hiring processes (Shaffer, 2011), and integrating e-books into a collection (Blummer & Kenton, 2012).

2) Practices Derived From the Library in Which the Author Works

Nineteen papers (17%) in our review chose this method to determine whether a practice was a "best practice." Papers in this category explained a system or a method used in the author's library, discussed why it seemed to work well, and declared it to be a "best practice" without any empirical pre-and post-method evaluation. The category covered a variety of topics including teaching (Campbell & Fyfe,

Table 1
Best Practices Papers by Subject

Subject	Number of Papers
Teaching/ instruction	21
Cataloguing and metadata	10
Digital collections	9
Reference	6
Distance education	5
Management and leadership	5
Multicultural services	5
Social media outreach	5
Collection development	4
Interlibrary loan	4
Associations, library	3
Media, managing	3
Outreach programs	3
Hiring	2
Public relations	2
Students with disabilities	2
Websites, management/assessment	2
Best practices, why they matter	1
Citation management	1
Construction projects	1
Disaster recovery	1
Email management	1
Funding	1
Friends of the library programming	1
Impact, library services of	1
Indexing	1
Information Technology departments	1
Laptop lending program	1
Knowledgebase data transfer	1
Protecting library patrons' confidentiality	1
Preservation	1
Story reading/telling	1
Student achievement	1
Student engagement	1
Students, remedial	1
Teams, working in	1
Vendors, selection	1
Weeding	1
Wikis	1

2002; Tempelmen-Kluit & Ehrenberg, 2003), reference (Johnson, 2009), managing media centers ("Best Practices for Managing," 2001), weeding (Gushrowski, 2007), evaluating classroom teaching material (Johnson & Reynolds, 2007), leadership skills (Choh, 2008), offering multicultural library services (Crichton, 2008; Glass & Sheffield, 2008), fostering library as place (Coonin, Williams & Steiner, 2011) and more. As with a number of the papers based on literature reviews, several papers in this category used the term "best practice" in the title without any further reference to it in the article. Interestingly, not one paper in this category defined the term.

3) Empirical Research (Qualitative and Quantitative)

Sixteen papers (14%) appeared in this category. Most of the articles involved surveys and interviews with responses collected through a variety of means including online and print questionnaires, and interviews with specific people. One notable exception to this group dealt with a pre- and post-measurement of library-instruction-learning in which students filled out multiple-choice knowledge tests both before and after library instruction (Stec, 2006). The purpose of this study was to identify best practices in instruction by assessing student learning with different instructor types and instruction methods.

Brown (1998) used surveys to identify best practices in vendor-selection criteria. Hodge's (2000) study of digital archiving identified best practices using a survey of managers of select projects. Cowen and Edson (2002) sent questionnaires to hospital librarians via a listserv asking, among other things, about "successful techniques" for IT collaboration and communication. Shelton's (2003) study about cooperative collection development pre-selected organizations already employing best practice as indicated by "viability, track record and longevity" (p. 192) and then surveyed them about conditions that either facilitated or worked against that cooperation.

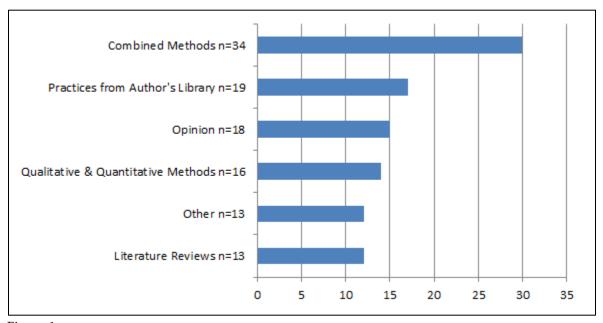Clair's (2012) study on the use of metadata for web content management systems involved a

Figure 1
Percentage of each approach within the best practices literature

survey to determine responsibility for content, the workflows that managed it, the standards that were in place, and the barriers which existed to using metadata in this context. While the purpose, methodology, literature review and discussion of results offered seemingly useful information, little evidence was provided to support what made this information qualify as a best practice.

Renner, Vardaman and Norton (2007) administered an online survey to determine how health libraries delivered services to distance learners. Although their discussion of the results sought to relate practice to established Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) guidelines, common practice, for the most part, was deemed to be best practice.

Finally, in a departure from the survey format, Butler (2009) solicited, analyzed, and compared twelve job descriptions for interlibrary loan supervisors from different types of law libraries, and used the results to provide a sample job description outlining "…the elements that should be included, and the core functions and best practices described in this article" (p. 30). Like many of the papers mentioned above, the practices were determined to be best because they were common.

Papers based on such surveys, interviews, and related methods were problematic because of the bias inherent in the research design. For example, interviewees or survey participants were generally chosen because they are in "cutting edge" programs (Hodge, 2000) or programs with a reputation for success (Shelton, 2003). How "cutting edge" or "success" was defined is unclear. In addition, common practices (which turned out most often to be practices reported by those who responded to the survey) were simply translated as best practices without any rigorous analyses of practices or the designation. Similarly troubling, authors may have selected replies that they deemed "useful," and reported these as best practices (Cowen & Edson, 2002). The papers

which fell into our next category, "Combined Approaches," followed, to various extents, these same problematic practices.

4) Combined Approaches

This category, in which authors use two or more approaches to identify best practices, contained thirty-four papers (30%). The two or more approaches most often consisted of a literature review and a survey of other information professionals (Briscoe, Selden & Nyberg, 2003; Buck, Islam & Syrkin, 2006; Farelly, Fisher & Kurmann, 2006), or a literature review and a description of how things were done in the author's library (Benjes-Small, Dorner & Schroeder, 2009; Boule, 2008; Wheeler, Johnson & Manion, 2008). Other approaches included a combination of literature and document (project reports, procedures, policies) reviews (Mellinger & Starmer, 2002), self-evaluation accompanied by a survey (Bentley, 2006), or literature review, personal experience and a study of practices at a small number of institutions (Hoffman & Ramin, 2010).

5) Opinion

Opinion pieces were generally one of two kinds — those based on feelings or beliefs (discussed later in this paper), and those based, in part, on how practices are carried out in a particular library. Eighteen papers (15%) in this study were the product of opinion alone. These articles covered a variety of topics, including outreach (Huwe, 2006), coaching staff (Will, 2006), public relations success (Postar, 2006), social software (Stephens, 2007), and virtual reference (Perret, 2011). The papers in this category were based on the author's personal thoughts or opinions; in general, few and often no sources were cited.

6) Other

In this final category, thirteen papers (12%) used an assortment of approaches (which did not fall under any of the previously discussed groups) to identify best practices or to discuss best

practices as a general concept. These included self-studies (i.e., comparing a current practice against library association guidelines) (Hunt & Birks, 2004), discussions about what best practices are, the issues surrounding the adoption of them and the steps that libraries might take to implement them (Todaro, 2002) or why best practices matter (no particular study involved), how librarians can apply them and how they can become advocates to help others in their organizations to do the same (Leandri, 2005), and various reviews of library policies (Thomas, 2007), protocols and standards (Kasprowski, 2008).

Definitions within the Best Practices Literature

As Table 2 illustrates, only 20 of the 113 papers (17%) included in this study presented any definition of the term "best practices;" indeed, in some, the term was used in the title only and never appeared again in the text as though its meaning or its use in the title alone is self-evident.

Of the papers that did attempt to define "best practices," what emerged was far from a

common or shared definition. Definitions included practices resulting in better results, standards drafted by associations or organizations, criteria derived through benchmarking and comparison with "successful" organizations, standards appropriate given the circumstances, and practices which have been shown to lead to best outcomes. Samson (2011) defines best practice as those meeting federal regulations.
Some authors relied on existing definitions while other authors created their own. For the purposes of illustration, we have included these definitions under the single most descriptive heading — see Appendix.

Patricia Kreitz (2008), relying on an existing definition, cited *Webster's New Millennium Dictionary of English* which defines best practices as "practices *which are most appropriate under the circumstances*, esp. as considered acceptable or regulated in business; techniques or methodologies that, through experience and research, have reliably led to desired or optimum results" (p. 103). She noted, however, that best practice literature too often relies on "brief case studies or anecdotal stories to

Table 2
Best Practices Papers Sorted by Approach

Approach	Best Practice Defined	Best Practice Not Defined	Total Number of Papers
Literature Reviews	3	10	13 (12%)
Practices from Author's Library	0	19	19 (17%)
Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches	3	13	16 (14%)
Combined Approaches	9	25	34 (30%)
Opinion	2	16	18 (15%)
Other	3	10	13 (12%)
	20 (17%)	93 (83%)	**113 (100%)**

support the authors' assertions" and that the body of empirical research is often too small to determine whether particular practices will "produce desired or optimum results" (p. 103).

Other definitions relied on "better results" criteria include "highly effective or innovative operating procedures and philosophies that produce outstanding performance when implemented" (Leon, DeWeese & Kochan, 2003, p. 420), or even "any procedure which, when properly applied, consistently yields superior results" (Liu, 2004, p. 339). The latter definition is, of course, particularly problematic in that phrases such as "any procedure," "properly applied" and "superior results" are themselves open to debate and interpretation. In addition, they shed little light on what separates a *better* practice from one that is *best.*

A small number of definitions employ the language of *best.* Davis (2009), for example, defines best practices as "the best way of carrying out a function or process" (p. 7). Best practices come about, the author reports, once one has assessed internal needs and identified current practices, and then identified alternate ways of doing things and modeled best practices on those alternate methods. Comparing one's operations to the competition is key in order to see what can be used in one's own operation.

For one other author, "best practices are simply the best ways to perform a specific … function or process" (Leandri, 2005, p. 20). They bring about results desired by the organization; others seek to emulate them, and the results are often measurable. They also, according to this author, transcend boundaries, which means that best practices in customer service in unrelated industries or organizations (e.g., hotels or healthcare) can be employed in others (libraries) with similar results. Hurst-Wahl (2009), in contrast, defines the term as that which "has been determined to work well". "In some circles," this author notes, "they are called traditions" (p. 22).

Shaw and Spink (2009) cite Morin (2004) who suggests that "best practices and guidelines outline a process, practice, or method that can improve effectiveness and efficiency in several situations" (p. 193). A best practice, according to Morin, becomes evident when applied to a specific task rather than larger or more general areas. The term "best practices" is used in these papers as a synonym for "tips" or "good ideas," and this is borne out by Postar (2006) who writes, "…the term implies success; that certain actions, attitudes, and programs are the most efficient and effective way of doing business and that the same measures can be used with successful outcomes in all similar organizations" (p. 12). What is "most efficient and effective" for this author, can be derived from having seen, first hand, certain ideas or principles which, when applied in various libraries, have produced successful results.

As the definitions above indicate, these authors are nowhere near a shared definition. Adding to the difficulty are those papers which rely on existing literature as evidence of best practices, particularly where articles consulted are treated as correct and authoritative merely because they have been published. Virtually no discussion takes place on why the papers selected should be deemed authoritative or reliable.

In addition to "best practices," some authors tackle the definition of benchmarking. Melo, Pires and Taveira (2008), for example, cite Foot's definition of benchmarking as "a process of measuring your service's processes and performance and systematically comparing them to the performance of others in order to seek best practice" (p. 50). As we saw earlier, best practices according to this view, arise from the measurement of one's own services and the subsequent comparison with the services of others. Along the same lines, other authors define best practices as encompassing "quality frameworks, benchmarking and performance measurement of products, processes and services" (Farelly, Fisher & Kurmann, 2006, p. 7).

Finally, many authors do not define best practice specifically but instead use terms such as "practices commonly employed" (Albright, Delecki & Hinkle, 2009, p. 15), or "common practices...that appear to foster success in their use" (Blummer & Kritskaya, 2009, p. 200) as synonyms for "best practices." For these authors, literature reviews and standards drafted by academic bodies seem to offer ideal evidence for "current best practices." It is also suggested that best practices may be identified through "brainstorming" sessions (Campbell & Fyfe, 2002), through newly introduced processes or practices which appear to be doing well or which have garnered positive user responses (Buzzard, Teetor & Travis, 2011); or through traditional practices that have been used successfully for many years (Johnson, 2009).

Discussion

The limitations of this study have to do with the selection of papers. The entire body of Library and Information Science literature was not included — only those papers having to do with libraries and library services and practices were included. Also, only one database was searched.

The findings of this research are similar to those of Hallencreutz and Turner (2011) and Reay, Berta and Kohn (2009) who concluded in their studies of the literature of best practice in organizational change, and evidence-based management, respectively, that there were no consistent ways of determining a best practice, nor were there consistent definitions in the literature. As with these previous studies, many claims of best practice were based on opinion and anecdotal evidence.

Our theory that best practices papers in the library and information science literature would be based far less on empirical data and far more on opinion, individual experience and anecdotal information was borne out by this study. Eighty-three percent of papers on the topic of best practices left the term undefined, and those that did define the term did not agree on the

definition. As a result, "best practice" was used as a synonym for standards, guidelines, good ideas, common practices, practices derived through benchmarking, traditions, and recommended practices. This research underscores the variation in definitions of this term. It also points to the difficulty in building a body of literature around best practices when our understanding of "best practices" ranges from "traditions" and good ideas to the "most efficient and effective way of doing business." (Postar, 2006, p.12)

Also important in providing libraries with reliable evidence on best practices is proper training — training which should begin long before professionals reach the workplace. So, what does this mean for library and information science (LIS) school curricula? Clearly, more attention should be paid, during the education of LIS professions, to the processes involved in the assessment of library services along with the reliability of methods used. Likewise, suitable training requires a more rigorous use of the vocabulary within the profession, so that, as a group, we understand the difference between, say, a good idea, a better outcome, and a best practice.

Some papers in this mix did attempt to adopt a more rigorous methodology by describing a process or service, establishing goals for it, identifying at least two methods of attaining those goals, conducting pre-and post-assessment of the process or service when using those methods (Stec, 2006), and identifying methods that met benchmarked goals (Farrelly, Fisher & Kurmann, 2006). These types of studies, in theory, are those which should be most likely to provide libraries with reliable evidence on best practices.

What does all this mean for practitioners where this type of training has either been completely absent or, perhaps, incomplete? Clearly, good ideas are shared in the library and information literature, and we should continue to adopt and adapt those that are transferable to our own

organizations. At the same time, we must read the literature with caution and ask ourselves the same questions that have been asked in this paper. We need to look critically at anything that claims to be a best practice before we attempt to implement or adapt it in our own library. When we write about best practice we should ask ourselves whether the process or practice is a best practice based on sound research or whether is it just a "good idea," that is, something that we do in our library that works for us. The call is to place a moratorium on the term unless we truly have the evidence to call what we do a "best practice."

Future research in this area might include a similar study of best practice guidelines developed by library associations. Stein (2008) in her discussion of the *IFLA Guidelines for Best Practice for Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery* outlines the relatively rigorous process that was followed to develop the guidelines, and she offers advice for implementing the guidelines in any individual library. One could compare best practice guidelines issued by other library associations to determine the process that was followed to develop such guidelines. Questions one might ask could include: Is best practice defined, and if so, how is it defined in these documents? Are there similarities and differences in the practice used to develop the guidelines? Does the degree of rigour in developing these guidelines differ between library services and processes? One might also seek out and survey libraries which have followed such guidelines to determine if implementing them not only improved service, introduced efficiencies and/or increased impact but were, in fact, a best practice.

As Reay, Berta and Kohn (2009) noted in their study of evidence-based management, more research comparing and contrasting local efforts and their outcomes would help to build a body of knowledge that could be transferable to other

organizations and situations. It is worthy of note that many of the services and processes described in the papers discussed in this study are initiatives implemented in a single library.

As a final consideration, it is important to keep in mind that professionals are increasingly being asked to be more accountable and to quantify and document the impact of services. As such, libraries of all types, more than ever, must engage in a more rigorous assessment of services and programs using sound assessment methodologies and techniques. Among the various outcomes would be a larger body of literature, based in sound evidence, which reliably documents and determines best practices in any one of a number of processes or services.

Conclusion

Increasingly libraries are required by their institutions and funding agencies not only to demonstrate return on investment but also to provide reliable statistics and other evidence-based data. As such, understanding what we mean when we use terms such as "best practices" and increasing the rigour of our analysis is critical to our future.

At the same time, we should recognize the danger in assuming that there is some universal yardstick for libraries' practice. For example, applied too rigidly given our complex and unique environments, a best practice might stifle critical problem solving and creativity and, ironically, bring about inferior results. It may reduce us to merely adopting a practice whose results are not replicable in our own institutions. This is not to suggest, however, that we abandon our search for best practices. Instead, it is to approach with caution that which we conclude is "best," and to remember, as one writer has suggested, that we may, in our pursuit, be chasing a mirage (Liu, 2004).

Acknowledgement

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Appendix
Definitions by Category

Better results

" … common practices that led to success" (Maurer, Gammon & Pollock, 2013)

"A technique or methodology that, through experience and research, has reliably led to a desired or optimum result." (McCutcheon, 2008)

"Practices which are most appropriate under the circumstances, esp. as considered acceptable or regulated in business; techniques or methodologies that, through experience and research, have reliably led to desired or optimum results." (Kreitz, 2008)

" … any procedure which, when properly applied, consistently yields superior results, and is therefore used as a reference point in evaluating the effectiveness of alternative methods of accomplishing the same task." (Liu, 2004)

" … are highly effective or innovative operating procedures and philosophies that produce outstanding performance when implemented (Leon, DeWeese, Kochan, & Peterson-Lugo, 2003)

Benchmarking

"Because the characteristics are descriptive in nature and the result of a meta-analysis of many programs, they may also be used for benchmarking program status, improvement, and long-term development" ("Characteristics of programs," Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Information Literacy Best Practices Committee, 2012, "Purpose and Use", para. 2)

"A process of measuring your service's processes and performance and systematically comparing them to the performance of others in order to seek best practice" (Melo, Pires, & Taveira, 2008)

"… benchmarking … criteria for turnaround time; fill-rate; unit cost; patron satisfaction .." (Farrelly, Fisher & Kurmann, 2006)
"Best Practice *Benchmarking* is the process of the "quest" of looking for, identifying, studying the *best* practices that produce superior performance in specific areas and then applying or transferring the best practice to the organization in need of change." (Todaro, 2002)

Best Way

" … characteristics are closely aligned with many of the best practices in education … the well-known McREL study, A Theory-Based Meta-Analysis of Research on Instruction (1998), which resulted in the identification of instructional techniques for more effective teaching" (Karshmer & Bryan, 2011)

"A best practice is the best way of carrying out a function or process." (Davis, 2009)

"… what has been determined to work well, in some circles they are called traditions." (Hurst-Wahl, 2009)

"Best practices are simply the best ways to perform a specific business function or process, such as developing or marketing a product. They are performance standards that others seek to emulate." (Leandri, 2005)

Evidence-Based

"The quantitative and qualitative measures developed for this study are offered as possible metrics …. Based on these measures …. the authors have derived a set of evidence-based best practices …" (Colburn & Haines, 2012)

"… met some level of evidence-based research. The research quality of those articles was then verified through a paired interrater reliability test that checked them against the EBL Evidence Based Checklist" (Fiegan, 2011)

Goals/Standards

" … guidelines for reference exchanges as a set of goals …" (Luo, 2011)

"quality services … if the needs [of the *Americans with Disabilities Act*] are proactively met in the first place. Best practices incorporate this singular premise." (Samson, 2011)

Transferable

"Best practices and guidelines outline a process, practice, or method that can improve effectiveness and efficiency in several situations." (Shaw and Spink, 2009)

"Essentially the term implies success; that certain actions, attitudes and programs are the most efficient and effective way of doing business and that the same measures can be useful with successful outcomes in all similar organizations." (Postar, 2006)

"… a unique set of criteria that exists for all effective information literacy programs despite the differences in the types and sizes of institutions" (Oberman, 2002)