Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Commentary

Library Assessment and Quality Assurance - Creating a Staff-Driven and User-Focused Development Process

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Abstract

Objective – Gothenburg University Library has implemented a process with the goal to combine quality assurance and strategic planning activities. The process has bottom-up and top-down features designed to generate strong staff-involvement and long-term strategic stability.

Methods – In 2008 the library started implementing a system in which each library team should state a number of improvement activities for the upcoming year. In order to focus the efforts, the system has gradually been improved by closely coupling a number of assessment activities, such as surveys and statistics, and connecting the activities to the long-term strategic plan of the library.

Results – The activities of the library are now more systematically guided by both library staff and users. The system has resulted in increased understanding within different staff groups of changing external and internal demands, as well as the need for continuous change to library activities.

Conclusion – Library assessment and external intelligence are important for tracking and improving library activities. Quality assurance and strategic planning are intricate parts in

sustainable development of better and more effective services. The process becomes more effective when staff-driven and built upon systematic knowledge of present activities and users.

Introduction

Library development greatly benefits from continuous input of internal and external intelligence to be successful (Davies, 2008). Statistics are collected in all Swedish libraries as part of the government-mandated Official Statistics of Sweden (Statistics Sweden, 2016). The impressive array of data, produced and communicated to national authorities every year, can also be of strategic use locally (Høivik, 2008). In addition, qualitative data is collected regularly as patrons are surveyed, introducing ideas and user perspective into the organization.

Quality assurance and strategic planning are vital parts of systematic public management (Young, 2003). For libraries, it is not uncommon that these types of systems originate from the parent organization (Broady-Preston & Lobo, 2011). The University of Gothenburg implemented a university-wide quality assurance framework in 2001 (Göteborgs universitet Universitetsstyrelsen, 2001). A new strategic planning system has been in place at University of Gothenburg since 2013 (Göteborgs universitet, 2013). In addition, a number of departments (such as environment, worker's, and fire safety) have their own systematic processes and auditing procedures to expand the picture.

All these tools are useful and valuable for improving and making our libraries more effective (Dean & Sharfman, 1996). However, they can feel unorganized and hard to communicate to the staff and stakeholders. Gothenburg University Library set out to condense the majority of these activities into one process. Effort was put into building a user-focused and staff-centered bottom-up workflow. The system was further enhanced with a longer-term strategic cycle, which also relies on staff input and statistical intelligence.

Methods and Results

Building the Quality Cycle

The quality system framework, established by the University of Gothenburg Board, mandated all university schools and the library to set up quality systems. The nature of the local quality systems was not described in detail, but left to the different schools to formulate, based on individual circumstances. Later, a system auditing procedure was put in place to give collegial advice on the development of the local systems.

The university library implemented its first quality system in 2003-4, when a set of goals was defined and assessed throughout the organization (Götesborgs universitet Biblioteksnämnden, 2003). The system was then developed and improved upon in 2008 and 2012.

Describing the Quality Cycle

The process, as it is in effect now, is based on a follow-up/planning period in January/February of each year (Figure 1).

In the planning stage, each library team (7-15 staff) defines a few projects (activities) of varying size which should be completed before the end of the year. The resulting activity plans are gathered from throughout the organization and published on the library intranet. To strengthen the strategic relevance, a number of activities are selected from the current library strategic plan by the library leadership and assigned to the individual teams prior to the planning. This means that each team may have one or two activities which must be included in
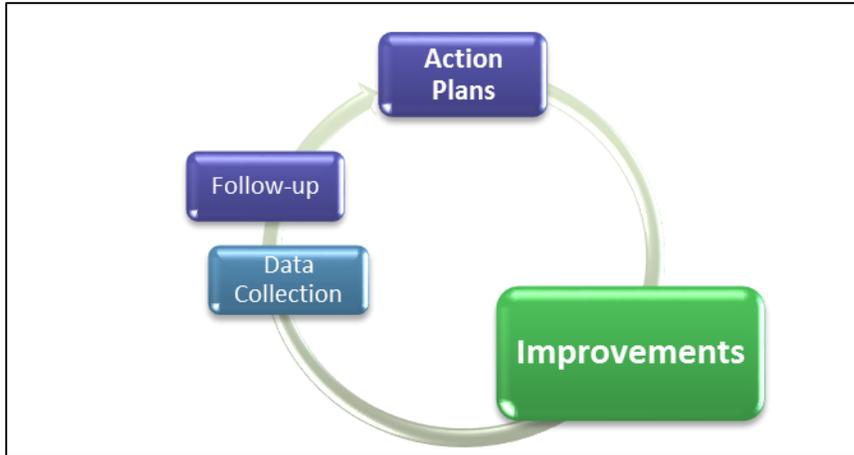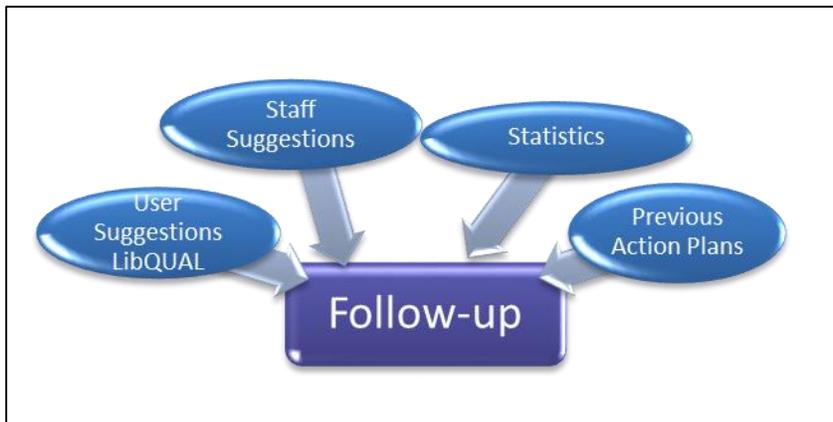
Figure 1
Quality cycle.

Figure 2
Input to follow-up activities.

the activity plan in order to keep pace with strategic goals.

To give the staff teams a current background for their work, the planning period is preceded by a follow-up and assessment routine (Figure 2). During follow-up, the activity plans from the previous year are accounted for. In addition, the teams are asked to study and comment on data from a number of other sources. Each year has a follow-up theme. Centrally prepared reports are presented to the teams. The latest user survey may be distributed, or a report of improvement suggestions from staff or users can be presented. Staff participation often leads to discussions of the current matter, for instance, why visitor

numbers are down, or the nature of the enquiries at the front desk.

The follow-up period has proven to be a great inspiration for activity planning, which normally is scheduled for the following team meeting. It also allows follow-up activities from auxiliary management systems to be incorporated, making them more accessible to the staff.

Building the Strategic Cycle

Some management activities are repeated less frequently than once a year. One of these is the development of the library strategic plan. A

weakness in quality assurance work is that it does not necessarily make the library activities more focused or more effective. A long-term direction has to be established.

The way to handle this challenge was the creation of a Strategic Cycle (Figure 3). Early in the year before a new strategic plan is set to take effect, external intelligence is gathered in a more deliberate way than normal. Vision statements and other long-term documents are revisited and revised. Later that year, seminars and group discussions consolidate the material, and a new strategic plan is drafted. After approval, once the plan has taken effect, the quality cycle is used to drive the implementation.

Collection of Intelligence

Intelligence collection is key to the strategic cycle. One useful technique is benchmarking, which has been performed for a number of different themes using a method derived from

SIQ (Nilsson, Örtelind, & Östling, 2002). The ideal benchmark activity often starts with a specific need, and the definition of a number of themes of interest. Libraries are then scanned to find peers with assets in the selected areas. Identified libraries are contacted and invited to add themes of their own. The library leadership teams then meet to present their library's activities in the selected areas of interest. This often gives a richer understanding of best practices within the selected themes.

The intelligence collection process preceding the latest completed strategic cycle produced a trend cloud, which then was used to develop and focus the plan (Figure 4).

Conclusions

The implemented Quality and Strategic Cycle at Gothenburg University Library has contributed to more user-focused and experience-driven library activities. Staff ownership has facilitated
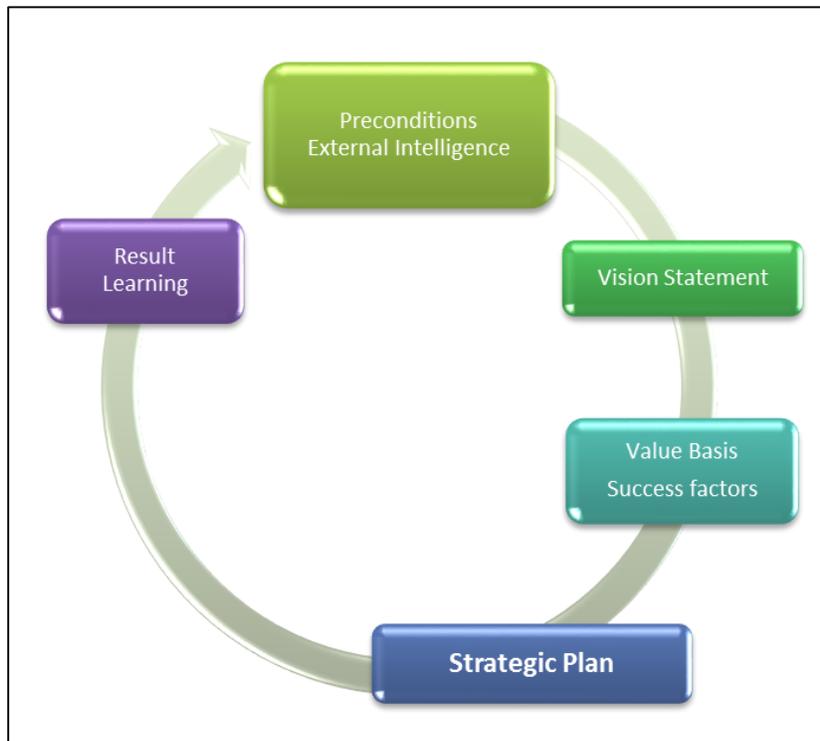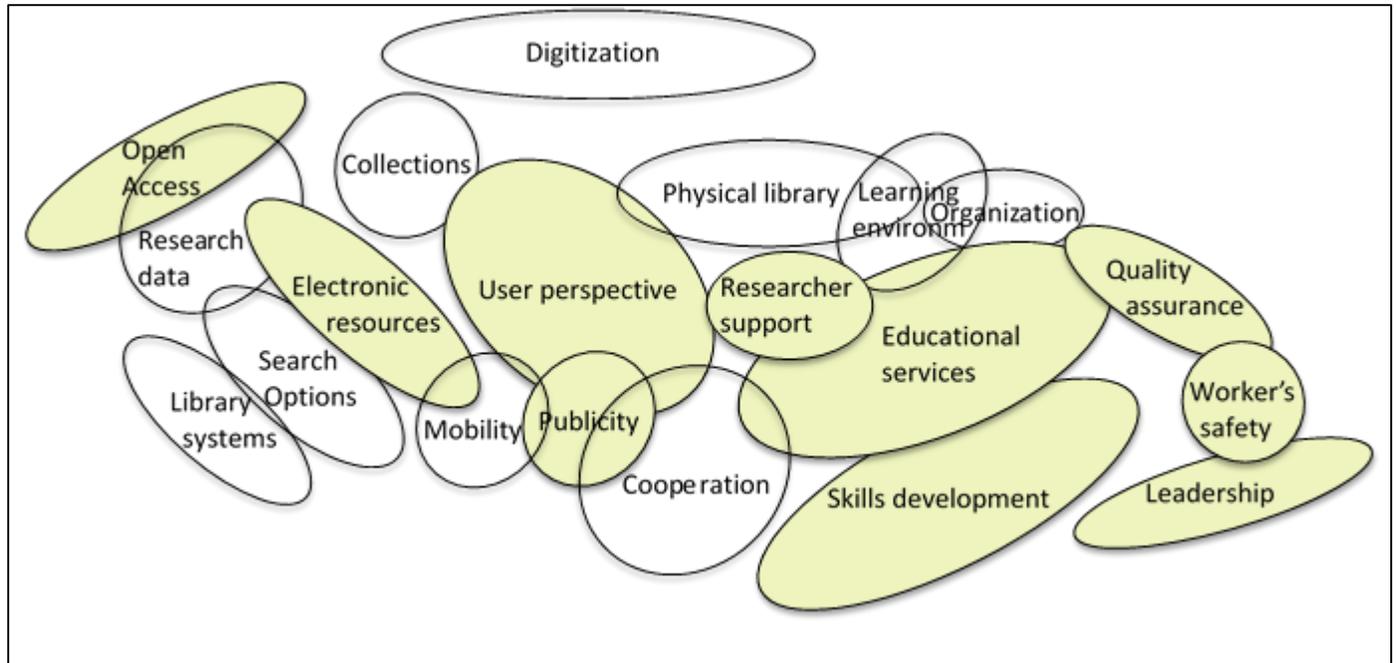

Figure 3
Strategic cycle.

Figure 4
Trend areas from intelligence collection 2012. Main areas accented.

collective involvement in addressing the toughest issues for our changing library environment. Many more employees are now actively involved in change processes, and there is a wider understanding of developments as a result of allowing staff to systematically contribute to changes in their immediate environment.

There is great benefit from including assessment results in systematic change processes. Many surveys and studies of statistical data have precipitated a large number of action plans throughout the years, but the follow-up and implementation steps have been more difficult. Statistical data, especially data collected for national statistics, was rarely used for library development. The definition of a yearly process into which data and previous findings can be funneled has been shown to be a powerful driving force for implementing meaningful change.

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