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Together we shape better libraries. The Swedish Quality Handbook Project

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Abstract:

Quality management is a necessity in a changing world. There is a demand for increased services and changed offers from the customers. There are also demands for efficiency and value for money from our funding bodies. One way to meet these demands is to increase the knowledge about the library's activities and to obtain tools for improvement. The Swedish Quality Handbook Project supports the library in this. The aim of the "Quality Evaluation Handbook" project is to help Swedish libraries in all parts of the public sector to start conducting systematic quality management, by utilising performance indicators. The project is intended to serve as a springboard for libraries interested in engaging in quality development. The co-operation is based on the collection of data for the twelve indicators over a period of three years and a comparison of the results over time and with those of other libraries. The most important outcome from the project is that it has led 50 Swedish libraries to start performing systematic quality management.

The project is run by The Special Interest Group for Quality Management and Statistics within the Swedish Library Association who plays an active role in encouraging Swedish libraries to engage in quality development and evaluation.

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Opinions expressed by a few of the libraries participating:

“I am very pleased with this national project, which led us to start performing systematic quality management across the board!”

“Our awareness of processes and flows in the library has increased, and we have become more interested and have obtained more ideas about how statistics and measurements can be presented.”

“This is a very good way of investigating how one's activities are functioning and of obtaining assistance with questions for questionnaires.”

“The different measurements are covered by the library's 'evaluation clock'. Everybody knows the different measurements that are in progress, as well as the results.”

“Questionnaire responses and results measured have given rise to many good discussions among the staff. We have obtained good tools for measuring the quality of our activities and thereby also tools for measuring whether our 'improvements' give the desired result.”

“It has developed our activities and above all renewed our modes of thinking concerning different ways of giving better service, etc. The discussion about the target population among the staff did not lead to any easy answers, but to important questions and conclusions.”

“A very positive result of our work is that the staff acquire an overview of different aspects of the organisation. We have had meetings and have continuously given an account of everything that has happened during the past year. One of my biggest objectives as Project Manager is to involve all the members of staff in what is happening, so that everyone may adopt a way of thinking oriented to quality improvement on the whole.”

“We will make use of the results as part of a larger project where we will also work on acquisition plans (and perhaps a library plan later on), as well as a recently completed study of cultural and leisure habits. In this context the results of the *Handbook* project will be a very useful complement. Moreover, it is very useful to be able to compare one's results with other results.”

Outcomes

The most important outcome from the project is that it has led 50 Swedish libraries to start performing systematic quality management.

One of the ideas with the project is that it is not only the results that are important, but also the road to their achievement. A process in which many members of staff are involved and

where no stone is left unturned will provide an increased awareness of the way in which the organisation functions. The competence and interest of staff will increase.

We have a strong belief in that the best way to increase awareness is not endless information – but learning by doing. To make this journey in collaboration with other libraries and learn from each other – gives a lot in return. We think that this is the right way to go.

There are additional reasons for performing quality management in libraries. The results will arouse great interest. Many people, including both users and commissioning bodies, as well as colleagues both within the organisation and at other libraries, will pounce on the results, scrutinise them closely and make comparisons, and will give praise and criticism. Interest in the tasks of libraries and how these tasks are fulfilled will increase.

50 libraries of different types and from different parts of Sweden are participating in the project. The project includes 32 public libraries of different size from different parts of Sweden, five hospital libraries and 13 research libraries. The co-operation is based on the collection of data for the twelve indicators over a period of three years and a comparison of the results over time and with those of other libraries. On the basis of these indicators a co-operation project was initiated in January 2002, after one and a half year of planning. 2004 is the third and final year of the project.

Aim

The aim of the “*Quality Evaluation Handbook*” project is to help Swedish libraries in all parts of the public sector to start conducting systematic quality management, by utilising performance indicators. The project is intended to serve as a springboard for libraries interested in engaging in quality development.

The co-operation is based on the collection of data for the twelve indicators over a period of three years and a comparison of the results over time and with those of other libraries. The libraries participating in the project thereby develop an evaluation competence within the organisation and acquire tools with which they can continue their quality management.

The indicators – selection and criteria set up

The performance indicators have been taken from international standards and projects, e.g. ISO 11620, IFLA (Measuring Quality, 1996) and EQUINOX. The criteria selected on the basis of that they fit all types of libraries and cover different spheres of activity pertaining to libraries. They should be relatively simple to use. A maximum of 12 were selected so it would be possible to repeat them for three consecutive years. Some 40 indicators were identified and sent out to library managers and posted on e-mail lists for voting. Respondents were asked to choose those indicators that they found most relevant for their library. There was a good response rate and the resulting twelve indicators were the basis for Quality Handbook. Luckily the set of indicators met the criteria of covering different spheres of activities. One of the chosen indicators (Correct answer fill rate) was exchanged for another indicator based on reference service due to practical reasons.

The purpose of the chosen indicator’s is as follows:

- To find out what the library’s users think about its activities. (To achieve this a questionnaire survey is included.)

- To obtain information on how the libraries are used. Apart from traditional use, libraries must know how their digital collections are utilised and how much user education is provided in the library, as well as many other facts.
- To provide our funding bodies with descriptions of our activities in terms of what and how much they obtain for their money. Is the library run in such a way that the objectives set are achieved in a cost-effective way?
- To find out how efficient the internal processes in a library are. To measure how long time it takes to acquire or catalogue an item. To measure how efficiently the circulation and reference processes function. To succeed not only in doing the right things, but also in doing them right.

Project organisation

The measuring activities are led by steering committee. The libraries communicate via a mailing list. They report their result on a web-based form and all results are published on the project webpage. A kick-off was arranged in 2002 and a seminar in November 2004 marks the end of the project. The libraries receive support from the steering committee. It is stressed that each library should have their own project manager who is responsible for the inclusion of the rest of the staff in the quality management.

The project is evaluated each year and a final evaluation of the outcome of the project will be conducted in the beginning of 2005.

Benchmarking

The libraries report their results continuously online. The results are openly accessible on the project website. The libraries are asked to present some annual core facts about the library: number of loans, size of the population to be served, budget, acquisition, etc. The libraries can choose another library to be compared against based on these core facts. Some small groups have been formed within the project where the library managers meet and discuss the indicators and their results. We have a very active group of public libraries in Stockholm and one group in the south of Sweden. The research libraries compare with each other and the hospital libraries study each others results.

Some of the libraries are more experienced in evaluation issues than others and there is a great possibility to learn from one another not only from the results and the way to improve the results, but also from the methods in evaluation itself.

Population to be served – a definition problem for public libraries

In the start-up phase of the project the libraries had to define their population to be served. Some of the indicators are population based so this is a really important task to do. The research libraries in general did not have any problem doing this. But for the public libraries there were a lot of different issues to deal with. What is the population to be served for the main library? What is the population to be served for the branch libraries? What is the population to be served for the mobile libraries? Is it only the people living in the area that should be counted, what about all the people that work or attend school close to the library and use it, but may live elsewhere? What about all the people who live in the area during the summer, but not in the winter? In some areas the population is doubled or tripled during certain months of the year. The definition we use in the problem is the same as in ISO11620. It may be noted that this population figures does not always correspond with what is being said in the public library's goal document.

ICT – a problem for most of the participating public libraries

There are a couple of indicators for the electronic library. This has been a problem for some libraries to deal with. They don't have their own IT-staff and are dependent on the municipality IT-department that they share with a lot of other activities in the district. To have them set up a system for counting virtual visits on the library's website is difficult. The library website is usually only one or two pages in the local authority's website. In Sweden most of the public libraries are using a library system from one dominating provider. The statistics are not very developed and do not meet the need for the project. Contacts have been made with the provider but not much has happened during these three years. To solve these problems is only a matter of time.

An example: The public library of Hisingen, Gothenburg

The public library of Hisingen is situated outside the second largest town in Sweden, Gothenburg. Hisingen is an island and the northern part of the second largest town in Sweden, Gothenburg. The population in Hisingen is about 120.000 and is an average of the population in Gothenburg as a whole. Hisingens public library has about 200.000 visitors per year and around 100.000 volumes with a special assignment regarding media for disabled persons and non-Swedish citizens.

Unfortunately, the project coincides with a reconstruction of the Swedish public sector including the libraries due to diminishing tax revenues. This adjustment to financial realities has had the effect for the library at Hisingen: the staff is smaller and subsequently the opening hours fewer. The lessons learned from the poll within the project is that the visitors previously have been satisfied with our opening hours but dissatisfied with the amount and diversity of media available. Thus the focus in the day to day work has been on literature, music and films instead of opening hours (personnel). This has also been the political aims for the library function in the city council.

As a result of the project the library have discovered that some of the internal processes like acquisitions (indicator 9) and the order keeping of books on the shelves (indicator 12), must be better in order to give good service.

The library computer systems in use in Swedish public libraries are not developed enough to gain appropriate statistics concerning electronic services. This has made quality indicator no 5 impossible to measure. At least this has made the participating libraries aware of the problem so we have hopes for a fast development of the statistics modules.

The National Council for Cultural Affairs in Sweden gathers and publishes annually data concerning indicators 6 and 11. There have been discussions with them if it's not time to broaden the perspective so it better will reflect the facilities at public libraries of today. The Council is positive to the project and follows it with interest. Perhaps it will result in some new national indicators.

A general problem for public libraries open for all citizens and which also has raised a discussion among our project's participants is the size of the target population. This is of great importance for the result of some of the indicators. This is something every library should discuss regularly since it so deeply affects which services the library should offer. A common definition of the target population issue is also decisive for benchmarking and over all the possibility of comparing libraries of the same kind.

The partial benefit of each indicator, however, cannot match the importance of the project as a whole. The discussion on quality measurement issues and the questions that are raised creates an awareness of always putting the customer in focus and that all other matters are this subordinated.

Life after the project

The project will end in early 2005. Thereafter the libraries have to continue with their quality management individually – or in cooperation with others. Hopefully by then they will have decided which one of the indicators they want to use in the future – and which they do not need or which don't fit into their activities and goals.

We have had discussions with Kulturrådet (Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs) who are responsible for the public library statistics in Sweden. In the revision of the statistics they will take advantage of the experienced gained by the project. The public libraries will benefit by revised statistics more accurately reflecting their needs.

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The Performance Indicators:

1. User satisfaction
2. Opening hours compared to demand
3. Percentage of the target population reached
4. Percentage of the target population reached by remote electronic library services
5. Number of sessions on each electronic library service per member of the target population
6. Library visits per member of the target population
7. Number of information requests per member of the target population
8. Programme/activity attendances per member of the target population
9. Median time for document acquisition/Median time for document processing
10. Proportion of interlibrary loans to total loans
11. Collection turnover
12. Misshelving

A Swedish version of the *Handbook* can be downloaded from:

<http://www.biblioteksforeningen.org/>

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