

	<p style="text-align: right;">Date : 14/08/2007</p> <p>Special Measures for Special Libraries Analysing Systems, Needs and Workflows</p> <p>Susan Henczel Business Development Manager CAVAL Collaborative Solutions Melbourne Australia</p>
<p>Meeting:</p>	<p>152 Statistics and Evaluation</p>
<p>Simultaneous Interpretation:</p>	<p>No</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 73RD IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL 19-23 August 2007, Durban, South Africa http://www.ifla.org/iv/ifla73/index.htm</p>	

Abstract

The special library environment is a unique one, with emerging technologies and evolving user expectations, combining with diminishing budgets, constantly challenging the special librarian to do more with less.

While willing to rise to this challenge, the special librarian is often surrounded by legacy collections, systems and processes that absorb resources and energy while blurring the role that he/she has within their organisation. If we are to measure and evaluate the contribution that the special librarian is making to the organisation it is vital that we measure the correct processes and systems. Often it is the performance of the legacy systems and processes that are measured and evaluated, rather than those that support current business processes.

This paper examines the issues associated with legacy systems, processes and collections, and suggests ways by which library managers can ensure that they are providing what people need in the most effective way. The paper describes how systems audit and

information audit can be used to determine which systems, processes and collections are relevant to current business processes and suggests methods by which to identify appropriate measures that reflect their operational impact.

Introduction

The environment in which the special library exists is one of emerging technologies, evolving user expectations, diminishing budgets, ever-changing cultural climates and competing organisational priorities. While willing to rise to the challenges and opportunities that this environment presents, the special librarian is often surrounded by legacy collections, systems and processes that absorb resources and energy and blur the role that he/she has within the organisation. Consequently measurements are primarily related to usage rather than business impact and rarely reflect the contribution that the information professional is making to the organisation. Often it is the performance of the legacy systems and processes that are measured and evaluated, rather than those that support current business processes.

It is vital that we measure the strategic processes and systems and measure them in such a way that reflects their organisational impact. To ensure that the information services that are provided are supporting and contributing to the achievement of business objectives it is critical to understand how well they meet the business needs of those who use them, and to identify which needs are not being met by the services provided.

To identify the business needs and determine the most effective storage, access and delivery channels there are a number of investigations that can be conducted to characterise an environment and user population. They include *information audits*, *systems audits*, *cultural assessments*, *capability audits* (of information professionals and of information users), *knowledge audits* and *workflow analyses*.

This paper focuses on:

1. An *information audit* which will identify the business information needs of the organisation and the preferred access and delivery methods for information; and
2. A *systems audit* to evaluate the storage and delivery systems as well as those that are facilitating access to information.

The combined outputs of these two processes will provide the information professional with a snapshot of the information environment within an organisation at a specific point in time. This 'picture' will show duplications and

other inefficiencies in the technical infrastructure used to capture, store and deliver information. It will also show information needs rated from 'critical' to 'nice to have' so that decisions can be made regarding what to provide to whom, and the most appropriate way to do this so that it is aligned with the varying information use behaviours of the user population and can become embedded into workflows.

Auditing information needs

The organisational impact of the information environment is significantly influenced by how well quality information is able to be embedded into work practices and processes. Many organisations have yet to examine their business processes and many more have not examined them in light of the information needed to support them. The information supporting a business process or activity can impact on the quality of the outputs and/or outcomes – if substandard information is used, then the outputs and/or outcomes are also substandard. The problem becomes more serious as the outputs are reused either by other processes/activities within the organisation, or distributed to parties outside the organisation. Interaction between the information specialists and the information users is critical to ensure that the information used in business processes is the best available, delivered efficiently in a usable format, and is able to be accessed and incorporated into the workflow without undue manipulation or intervention.

An information audit is a process that examines the work done by each information user within the context of each business process, identifies the information required, rates its level of importance from 'critical' to 'nice to have' and determines effective ways to deliver the information based on preferred behaviours and existing workflows. The audit findings will define how much the organisation spends on information (including resources and the cost of time); where and how the information is being used and re-used; where and how information is being created within the organisation (and where it goes after creation); and where people get their information from (Henczel, 2005 p 6).

At a strategic level this provides an inventory of information resources required by the organisation and rated according to their importance; details of how much is being spent on information and where the money is being spent (by business or geographic area, project, etc.); duplications in resourcing that are costing money unnecessarily and gaps that are disadvantaging the organisation.

Measurements developed following an information audit can become more strategic because information provision has been assessed with regard to its organisation impact. The types of measurements that can be developed will include usage statistics as well as strategic measurements such as specific contributions to projects and business areas (% contribution to outcomes); services contributing to organisation objectives; and, return on investment (cost of operating the library compared to value of the benefits of the services provided).

Ensuring that the user population has the best information that is available delivered to them in a way that becomes embedded into their work processes provides more than just the obvious benefits. Costs associated with the purchase unnecessary information from external sources, the storage of unnecessary information (information that has no corporate value and that will never be reused), the time spent searching for the information required (both new information and information that has been lost/misplaced over time), and the replacement of workers through declining job satisfaction and strained workplace relationships due to information overload (Portugal, 2000).

Auditing information systems

The suitability of a technical infrastructure used to capture, store and deliver information to a user population is critical to effective information provision and access. As user needs and behaviours change over time, so does the effectiveness of the technology supporting the provision of information.

A systems audit creates an inventory of information repositories and channels and rates the infrastructure according to its suitability, alignment and effectiveness. It provides a snapshot of the technical systems in place and identifies where it provides effective access and delivery and where it does not. It identifies duplicate repositories, inconsistent delivery processes and gaps provision and access.

When combined with the findings of an information audit, the systems audit enables assessments to be made regarding the capture, storage, access and delivery of information. It assesses the alignment of information-use interactions with their business processes and then with the technical infrastructure. This enables judgments to be made regarding the corporate 'value' of information stored, the suitability of access and delivery when compared with the purpose of

the information use, user preferences and workflows, and the duplications and gaps in the technical systems resulting in inefficiencies and inconsistencies.

Measuring performance in the special library environment

Many of the measurements used by information professional in the special library environment are traditionally library-focused rather than organisationally focused and include transactional usage data (loans, reference enquiries, downloads), user data (number of users -current and potential, repeat interactions), collection sizes (items, subscriptions) and management data such as the number of staff, hours worked etc. Taking an evidence-based approach to performance measurement at a strategic level changes the focus of measurements and ensures that the measurements that are established are consistent and relevant from an organisational perspective.

The key measurements selected to reflect strategic information provision and use will vary according to the organisation, but will have the primary components of:

1. Measuring what is needed to provide the services – this goes beyond the library to include organisational technical infrastructure and external infrastructures used to store and deliver electronic information;
2. Measuring the impact on businesses, geographic regions, contributions to projects, strategic objectives etc.; and
3. Measuring and characterising the user population – size, location, needs. Note that some concepts such as service penetration and repeat users are also relevant, but become more difficult to measure once the access and delivery of information is embedded into workflows.

The move from traditional library-focused measurement to strategic measurement requires the information professional to have the ability to acknowledge the holistic role of the library or information service within the organisation.

Conclusion

Information professionals in special libraries must move towards strategic measurement processes if they are to become truly integrated and relevant to an organisation. The measures must be strategic and relevant to the organisation, and they must reflect how the provision of information is contributing to or supporting organisational objectives at a strategic level and projects and work processes at the operational level. Special libraries do require special measures.

References

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