Organizational Learning for Libraries at For-Profit Colleges and Universities

A Manual

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This manual was originally drafted as a component of my EdD degree from Walden University. The full study is available online: https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/5327/

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Introduction

This manual is intended to be an introduction to the concept of organizational learning for librarians working in for-profit colleges and universities, though the suggestions and ideas herein are applicable to librarians working in a variety of institutions. We'll discuss what organizational learning is and why it's important for you to consider in relation to the work you do. I'll also share examples of factors that contribute to organizational learning, as well as factors that make organizational learning more challenging.

In addition, I provide research-based, concrete suggestions for increasing the organizational learning capacity of your library. Though many of the suggestions in this manual would require some degree of leadership authority to implement, the section "Promoting Organizational Learning When You're Not In Charge" provides practical suggestions for lower-level library staff members who want to promote organizational learning on a grassroots level in their libraries.

What is Organizational Learning?

Organizational learning is simply defined as the process by which an organization creates, retains, and transfers knowledge in order to correct errors and continuously improve (Argote, 2012). The term incorporates such concepts as professional development, knowledge management, as well as individual and group learning opportunities.

Inherent in the concept of organizational learning is the expectation that more learning will help an organization be more effective (Argote, 2012; Argyris & Schön, 1978; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Senge, 1990). Organizational learning involves a process of knowledge transfer in which individual learning (e.g., a librarian attending a webinar or reading this manual) is shared with other individuals and teams within the organization (e.g., the librarian shares what was learned at the webinar with colleagues at a team meeting or in an email summary), and ultimately is archived (e.g., in a local library intranet or institutional repository) and becomes part of institutional customs and memory. The learning can then remain with the organization even as individuals leave.

Scholars recognize two types of learning: single-loop learning and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning is correcting an error without significant changes to the way things are normally done (Argyris & Schön, 1978). It is learning that is “action-oriented, routine, and incremental, occurring within existing mental models, norms, policies and underlying assumptions” (Van Grinsven & Visser, 2011, p. 380).

Double-loop learning, in contrast, is correcting an error in a way that involves significant changes to the normal way of doing things, i.e., not only “detecting error but questioning the underlying policies and goals as well” (Argyris, 1977, p. 116). It is learning that involves “changing mental models, norms, policies and assumptions underlying day-to-day actions and routines” (Van Grinsven & Visser, 2011, p. 380).

As an example, think of the differences between a standard thermostat and new artificial intelligence enabled smart thermostats. The standard thermostat detects when a room is getting too cold and turns on the heat to correct the temperature of the room. This is single-loop learning. A smart thermostat may make determinations about what temperature is the appropriate temperature for the room in the first place.

This is double-loop learning. Single-loop learning results in maintaining the status quo, while double-loop learning leads to progress. Single-loop learning is effective for quick, surface changes, while double-loop learning is effective for long-lasting and sustainable deep change.

One concept related to organizational learning is the learning organization, which Peter Senge (1990) popularized almost 30 years ago. Learning organizations are "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the 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" (Senge, 1990, p. 3).

Essentially, organizational learning is a complex process that helps an organization, like your library, create, share, and retain knowledge internally so that knowledge can be better harnessed and applied for progress.

Why is Organizational Learning Important?

In general, organizational learning has been found to contribute to organizational performance, including facilitating organizational change (Mayer, LeChasseur, Donaldson, & Cobb, 2013) and increasing innovation (Dias & Escoval, 2015). In academic libraries, specifically, organizational learning has helped increase innovation (Islam, Agarwal, & Ikeda, 2015), facilitate lasting change (Whitworth, Calvo, Moss, Kifle, & Blåsternes, 2014), and optimize organizational effectiveness (Chidambaranathan & Rani, 2015b).

Modern organizations, and especially libraries (Limwichitr, Broady-Preston, & Ellis, 2015), must consistently adapt. The Internet has changed the information landscape, and libraries have a constant need to prove their value and become leaders of technological developments that affect information (Attis, 2013). Because of this, the positive relationship between organizational change and organizational learning speaks to the importance of an organizational learning strategy.

In my research specific to organizational learning in the libraries of for-profit colleges and universities, I found that, on average, the organizational learning capacity in these libraries was at the medium level. However, organizational learning capacity at the high level is necessary for the flexibility and innovation required in today's environment. The bottom line is that organizational learning can help your library progress and better serve your users. Importantly, organizational learning can also be a catalyst that helps you better demonstrate the value of your library to your institution.

Factors that Contribute to Organizational Learning

Research has shown that certain conditions make organizational learning more or less likely. This section will outline some of those findings.

Library/Institution Size

Though the research is a bit mixed on the specifics, it is clear that the size of an institution (i.e., number of students) and the size of the library (i.e., number of employees) contributes to organizational learning. My own research found that the number of students enrolled at an institution had a negative relationship with organizational learning score, meaning that the more students there are, the lower the organizational learning capacity. Similarly, Bertram-Elliott (2015) found that libraries serving fewer students and with fewer students per librarian had higher organizational learning scores. The results indicated that library staff members with a comfortable workload due to sufficient staff size can spend more time learning and sharing their knowledge to increase organizational learning in the library.

In contrast, Huang (2014) found that larger libraries engaged in more organizational learning activities than smaller libraries. The discrepancy might be explained by the idea that *more* organizational learning activities do not necessarily translate into *better* organizational learning.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is leading through empowering, inspiring, and energizing employees, by espousing a shared vision and eliciting acceptance of that vision, and through facilitating employees in looking beyond their own self-interest to embrace the good of the group (Bass, 1990). Characteristics of transformational leadership include charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1990). Transformational leadership can also be linked to organizational learning.

In their research, Imran, Ilyas, and Aslam (2016) found a positive effect of

transformational leadership on organizational learning. Likewise, Manshadi, Ebrahimi, and Abdi (2014) and Noruzy, Dalfard, Azhdari, Nazari-Shirkouhi, and Rezazadeh (2013) found positive and meaningful relationships between transformational leadership and organizational learning. Noruzy et al. stated that "transformational leadership directly influenced organizational learning" (p. 1073). Manshadi et al. isolated the aspects of transformational leadership—idealized influence and individual consideration—that best predicted organizational learning. Thus, the transformational leader who most effects organizational learning is one who charismatically models the behavior desired in employees and respects employees as individuals, including their differences, and helps them reach their potentials (Manshadi et al., 2014).

Teamwork

Organizations that emphasize teamwork as a part of their culture are also likely to have higher capacity for knowledge management, which is a key component of organizational learning (Chidambaranathan & Rani, 2015a). Teamwork facilitates sharing learning throughout an organization, which is a key factor in transferring knowledge from an individual to the organization. Valuing teamwork may also contribute to group learning, in which experienced members of a group compensate for new team members with little effect on performance (Reagans, Argote, & Brooks, 2005).

Formalized Knowledge Management Processes

Yu and Chen (2015) found that "creating systems to capture and share learning" contributed most significantly to organizational learning culture, though Agarwal and Islam (2014) found that no single set of tools was applicable to every library or every situation.

Support for Professional Development

Bertram-Elliott (2015) found that the best predictor of organizational learning capacity in academic libraries was support for professional development, even if it was only encouragement without financial support.

Challenges

Several primary challenges to increasing organizational learning capacity in our libraries are part of the reason for lower-than-needed organizational learning. I discuss some of the challenges in this section, and then provide strategies to overcome these challenges in the next section.

Limited Understanding

One issue that poses a challenge to increasing organizational learning in academic libraries is a limited understanding of the term and what it entails. Limwichitr et al. (2015) explained that there are many different definitions of organizational learning used in various disciplines and coming from several perspectives. Among library employees specifically, there is confusion about the distinction between their role in helping students and faculty learn, and their own individual learning to contribute to the organizational knowledge of the library (Limwichitr et al., 2015). In my own research specific to libraries at for-profit colleges and universities, about 33% of interview participants said they had heard the term *organizational learning* before and then explained the concept correctly. However, it became apparent that all the participants were familiar with the concepts involved in organizational learning, even when they did not know the term.

Adding to the issue is a lack of published literature addressing organizational learning in the academic library environment, or at least a lack of literature where these concepts are clearly outlined for effective application in academic libraries. Though more and more studies are published in the library and information science literature that focus on organizational learning and related concepts, many are still focused on theory rather than practice.

Large or Scattered Library Teams

A library team that is especially large, or a team that is spread between different physical locations working on different campuses or working remotely, can be a challenge to better organizational learning. My research showed a negative relationship between the number of students enrolled at an institution and the

organizational learning score of that institution's library, meaning that the more students a library serves, the lower its organizational learning capacity. One possible reason for this finding is that communication between library team members becomes more difficult with more employees or with employees who are spread out geographically. Collegiality and informal conversations become more difficult.

Heavy Librarian Workloads

Library employees who are overworked, perhaps due to unmanageable student-to-librarian ratios, have less time to devote to individual learning and sharing their learning with others. When individual learning does not happen, it is less likely that organizational learning will take place. A library team under these conditions may maintain the status quo, and sometimes eke out improvements, but more substantive progress will be difficult.

External Pressures

Another challenge to organizational learning is pressure coming from outside your library, but within the larger institution, and over which the library has no control. Budget cuts, changes in institutional leadership or structure, or a perception among institutional leaders and faculty that the library is unnecessary are all examples of external pressures that can make organizational learning more difficult.

Strategies

Challenges to organizational learning can be overcome with intentionality in applying strategies for organizational learning. In fact, my research found that often the libraries with the most challenges had the highest organizational learning scores, perhaps because the teams at these libraries had to be more resourceful and proactive to keep their libraries as stable as possible despite the challenges. While we have seen that there are some factors that are more likely to contribute to organizational learning, what does that mean in a practical sense? This section outlines specific strategies library employees can incorporate into their practice to help increase organizational learning.

Communicate

A key strategy for increasing organizational learning is communication. Regular communication, both formal and informal, between members of the library team is crucial.

Schedule regular team meetings. Schedule a dedicated time slot for regular meetings for the library team as a whole to meet and discuss problems, concerns, and ideas. Share a meeting agenda several days beforehand to give team members an opportunity to prepare their thoughts, but also make sure the agenda includes time for an open forum, where anyone in the meeting can share a relevant topic with the group.

Encourage informal communication. Don't underestimate the power of informal communication. In libraries where team members work in the same physical location, this could be water cooler talk, but informal communication also happens electronically. Many organizations have an internal system for instant messaging, such as Skype for Business, that library employees can use to informally chat with their colleagues about projects and ideas. Instant messaging as a means of communication is particularly useful for library teams that are scattered, either working on multiple campuses or working remotely.

Meet one-on-one. Managers should meet regularly with their direct reports one on one. While leaders can and should encourage employees to reach out to them as questions or concerns arise, it is also helpful to have a dedicated time slot set aside when employees know they will have uninterrupted time with their

supervisor. Both the manager and the direct report should come to the meeting prepared with an informal list of points they want to discuss. When managers and their direct reports do not work in the same physical location, technology tools like phones with video screens or online meeting software are helpful so that both parties can see and hear each other as if they were face to face.

Develop Onboarding Processes

New employees must learn a large amount of information about local processes in a short amount of time. Facilitating that process can increase overall organizational learning.

Create manuals. Create and regularly update manuals for specific positions and job aids or standard operating procedures documents for common tasks. If you are starting from scratch, consider assigning an employee in the position to create the first draft of a manual about their responsibilities and the work they do—essentially an upload of their individual knowledge of the position to share with the rest of the team. Doing this is particularly important for people who have been in a position for a long time as they likely have institutional knowledge others on the team may not. Even if it is unlikely the employee will leave their position anytime soon, having the record is valuable, especially for purposes of cross-training or helping newer employees in similar roles learn.

Develop an onboarding curriculum. In addition to training materials like manuals, consider developing a formal onboarding curriculum that new employees must undertake. One librarian I interviewed described a formal, 6-week onboarding process that involved set daily tasks and assignments. There were built-in assessment points, and supervisors could track progress via a learning management system. The training also incorporated live webinars from vendors or other sources, which are automatically added to the new employee's work calendar. In the case of this library, the formal onboarding process was in reaction to, and a solution for, high turnover of librarians; a strategy to keep organizational learning high despite external pressures.

Support Learning

Because organizational learning often starts at the individual level, one way to increase the organizational learning capacity of your library is supporting professional development for all library employees. However, keep in mind that learning for the sake of learning is not the goal. Rather, library team members should learn in order to do their jobs better, innovate, and share what they've learned.

Pay their way. Where possible, financially support library employees attending trainings, conferences, or other opportunities that may involve a registration cost or travel expenses. Library employees and leaders can advocate for the inclusion of such funds in the library's budget. Daland (2016) recommended as a best practice that at minimum, 0.5-1.0% of the library's budget should be reserved for employee learning.

Promote opportunities. Even when financial support is not possible, encouraging library employees to take advantage of free opportunities is helpful. These resources could include free webinars, collective knowledge on electronic mailing lists, and library-related publications which can often be obtained freely through interlibrary loan relationships. When you see an email come through about an upcoming webinar, for example, you can forward it to colleagues who may be interested.

Allow time for learning. If library employees are willing to pay their own expenses for a conference, library leaders can make sure that time away is classified as work time so the employee does not need to take personal or vacation time to attend. Likewise, managers can ensure employees have down time outside of staffing a reference desk, monitoring library chat, or other responsibilities, that they can use to pursue learning. Daland (2016) recommended best practice is 10% of work hours dedicated toward learning activities. Another aspect of allowing time for learning is advocating for new positions, or filling vacant positions promptly, if the workload becomes unmanageable.

Require and reward learning. Emphasize that learning is a priority by incorporating continuous learning into annual evaluations or performance reviews. This should not be so prescriptive as to specify what each individual should be learning about, but it should be clear that everyone should be learning something they can apply to their jobs.

Share Learning

Once individual learning takes place, the knowledge needs to be transferred, or shared, so that it can become organizational learning. Develop formal ways to share information that a library employee gains from professional development opportunities.

Report back. After an employee attends a conference or other substantial learning opportunity, make sure the next library team meeting includes time for that employee to share key points from the experience. Make reporting back after a conference a standard expectation, in whatever format works best for your library.

Train the trainer. Assign employees who have attended skills-based training to teach what they have learned to others on the team. This could be one-on-one or in a group scenario. Alavi and Leidner (2001) recommended skills training as the best way to share knowledge that is highly context specific, whereas storing knowledge in repositories makes more sense for more general knowledge.

Store Learning

Going a step beyond simply sharing, institutionalize new knowledge further by archiving it in an institutional repository, library intranet, or other such tool. Create your own databank of library knowledge that employees can return to over time for new ideas or a reminder of the proper process for a task. Library teams need to explore and experiment to discover which technologies or systems work best for their own circumstances. This databank is a great place to store the manuals, job aids, and standard operating procedures you or others on your team may have created. Also include handouts, slide decks, or even recordings from webinars or conferences members of your team have attended. Make sure these materials are only available internally, not publicly, and that you have permission to archive them.

Promoting Organizational Learning When You're Not in Charge

If you are not a director or manager in your library, it may seem that some of these suggestions are out of your control. However, there are still steps you can take to contribute to the organizational learning atmosphere at your library.

Seek Out Opportunities to Learn

Opportunities for library employees to learn are everywhere, often for no or little cost. Be proactive about finding and taking advantage of these opportunities.

Subscribe to electronic mailing lists. Not only will you engage in interesting discussions on the list, but you will also receive notifications about webinars, conferences, and other trainings from various organizations, associations, and providers.

Search and browse the literature. Library workers are already skilled in searching the literature to learn more about topics. Use those skills to find out more about a topic or project on which you would like to work. Interlibrary loan is often an option even if your library does not hold the resource you want to read.

Participate in free webinars. Many professional organizations, interest groups, or other associations hold free webinars on library-related topics. Webinars are convenient to attend from your desk. Often, the hosts will provide participants with access to a recording after the webinar, which is useful if you are multitasking during the webinar time and need to re-watch parts later.

Share What You Learn

Have conversations with your colleagues and supervisor about what you are learning, including what you are learning about organizational learning. When you see free webinars or other opportunities you think would interest colleagues, forward them the information. Offer to assist or informally mentor a new colleague. Sharing learning is a two-way process (Collinson & Cook, 2003), so you should also be open to discussing something a colleague learned and wants to share with you. Ask for help from a knowledgeable colleague when you need it.

Communicate

Develop positive working relationships with your colleagues. Chat with them informally, either in person or through email or instant messaging. Share your ideas and listen to theirs. Collegiality goes a long way toward fostering an environment of organizational learning.

Suggest Practical Solutions

While it is great to share what you learn, it is better to use what you learn to develop and suggest practical solutions to problems in your library. The “so what?” question is important to administrators. How is what you learned going to benefit the library and what steps does the library team need to undertake to implement it? Be willing to take the lead in carrying out the solutions you suggest.

Wrap-Up

Organizational learning is a team effort. Leaders and managers who are committed to the strategies and processes outlined here can have a significant impact on the organizational learning capacity of their library environments. On an individual level, library workers can also do their parts to practice and encourage organizational learning strategies as a part of their work responsibilities. The result is libraries that are more prepared to innovate, adapt, and work effectively, better situating them to serve their students and other users.

As you implement some or all of the suggestions in this manual, I encourage you to persevere through the challenges you will likely face. Also, remember that organizational learning is not an all-or-nothing process. If you can make even small changes to better encourage organizational learning, your library organization, and your patrons, will benefit. Best wishes in your organizational learning journey!

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