

Creating the Innovative Library Culture: Escaping the Iron Cage through Management Innovation

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Escaping the Iron Cage through Management Innovation
Ronald C. Jantz

Introduction

To survive and thrive in the future, academic libraries must change and adapt to a rapidly evolving external environment. In advocating for a transformation, Stoffle and colleagues (2003, p. 363) have clearly stated the challenge for library leaders “the choice is to change and thrive or live in the past and fail.” The for-profit world has amply demonstrated how the risk of holding on to traditional business models can quickly render a product obsolete. These same disruptive forces are acting on the academic library. Although many have called for a transformation in the library, there is relatively little discussion about what the transformation entails. The obvious challenge is how to bring about this change in a world in which most major organizational changes simply do not work (Burke, 2002, pp. 1-7).

Culture can be defined as the deeply seated and often unconscious values and beliefs shared by the personnel in an organization (Martins & Terblanche, 2003). In an historic and well-established institution such as the academic library, the culture acts in a way to preserve the status quo, making it very difficult to implement a major new innovation. The “iron cage” metaphor (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) accurately portrays this situation and suggests that library culture perpetuates some of the more restrictive aspects embedded in the norms and traditions of the profession. In these more bureaucratic organizations, “There’s little room for passion, ingenuity, and self-direction” (Hamel 2000, p. 8), resulting in an inability to respond to a rapidly changing environment that requires flexibility and creativity.

Management Innovation

Recent innovation research (Birkinshaw, Hamel, and Mol 2008) has begun to focus on management innovation, a promising new area that relates to the work of the organization—administrative practices, efficiency, organizational structure, and strategy. Hamel (2006, 4) defines management innovation as “a marked departure from traditional management principles, processes, and practices or a departure from customary organizational forms that significantly alter the way the work of management is performed.” The premise in this editorial is that management innovations can become the primary enablers of the transformation that library leaders are seeking.

In his review of innovative business enterprises, Hamel highlights the need to challenge conventional management practices and to search for radical management principles. Wong's (2013) study demonstrated that management innovations affect critical dimensions of the work environment including human resources, process, and marketing. In a study of public libraries in six Northeast states, Damanpour and Evan (1984) found that the relationship between administrative and technical innovations is even more impacting in high-performance organizations.

Major sources of management innovation are the leaders and managers themselves. However, these innovations do not result directly in new products or services for the end user. Rather, the innovation relates to how the organization does its work. In a recent study, Damanpour and Aravind (2011, p. 429) reviewed the changing vocabulary related to management and innovation and proposed an encompassing definition for managerial innovation that includes "*new approaches in knowledge for performing the work of management and new processes that produce changes in the organization's strategy, structure, administrative procedures, and systems*" (italics in original). Within these broad categories, one can imagine variants or subdivisions including innovations for marketing new products and services and approaches for collaborating across institutional boundaries. All of these innovations are important, not only for the efficient operation of the organization, but also for driving organizational change and renewal.

Management Innovation in the Library

For the library, the norms of the profession and the bureaucratic traditions of the university are part of the academic culture that limits the organization's ability to innovate. Established organizations do not change easily, and there is considerable emphasis on preserving the status quo, avoiding the risks that might lead to major innovations. A study of how future library leaders view their culture is revealing. Using the Competing Values Framework, Maloney and colleagues (2010) found that future library leaders viewed the library culture as primarily hierarchical with a focus on stability and the associated rules and procedures. These future leaders preferred a more innovative culture that could respond to both the disruptions and the opportunities emerging within and outside of the university.

The library focus on service quality and adherence to rules and processes is part of the culture that can limit the ability to innovate. In a case study, McCabe (2002) examined how managers' subjectivity becomes embedded in the culture of an organization, resulting in

resistance to a new way of doing things and perpetuating established practices. This cultural inertia typically results in incremental innovations and only minor improvements to existing services (Jantz, 2016, p. 129). Conner's (2014, p. 147) case study of four academic libraries supports this view in reporting that most innovations are a repurposing of what is already there.

How might management innovations emerge in the library? Jolts from the external environment or dissatisfaction with current performance can cause a leader to take action. The embedded culture, however, can act against any change in order to preserve the status quo. Managers, however, do initiate innovations and they are not merely passive agents of the environment or subject to the restrictions of the established culture. Management innovations are frequently tacit and difficult to define and can take a long time to thoroughly diffuse throughout the organization (Birkinshaw, Hamel, & Mol; 2008). Few professional librarians have formal training that prepares them to create these truly innovative management approaches. A focus on management innovation will require a reorientation in order to innovate in the critical dimensions of administrative practice. Three areas of opportunity for creative management innovations are discussed here – human resources, marketing, and library R&D.

Human resource (HR) practices are critical in order to provide an organizational climate that fosters creativity and critical thinking. These practices, such as employee training, performance appraisal, and reward systems, do not directly affect organizational performance but rather work through other processes, including administrative practices and technical innovation, to enhance the performance of the organization (Ceylan, 2013; Chen & Huang, 2009). Careful selection of people for a project, establishing innovative compensation strategies, mentoring, and revising performance appraisal systems can all improve the flow of knowledge throughout the organization—how this knowledge is acquired, how it is shared, and how it is applied to solve problems. As an example in the HR domain, performance appraisal is probably one of the most challenging HR tasks for managers, the least effective for improving individual performance, and one that creates more dissatisfaction among organizational members than any other administrative process. The academic library generally follows the procedures established by the university HR organization in terms of how to do performance review. However, with some creative thinking, these institutionalized practices could be augmented with complementary procedures that improve the process and yet are compatible with university practices.

The HR function is closely associated with the creation of new roles in the library. As

libraries innovate and introduce new services, marketing of these services becomes even more important (Spalding & Wang, 2006). In discussing the opportunities for libraries in educational technology, Wolpert (1998, p. 33) emphasized the role of marketing: “Libraries must become substantially more sophisticated about packaging, advertising, and promoting their valuable resources.” In a study of organizations in a U.S. government agency, Hurley and Hult (1998) report that a market orientation can enhance performance when it is combined with organizational learning—the development of new knowledge. Marketing can help the organization anticipate user needs whereas organizational learning helps the organization translate these needs into innovative services. The continued decline in the library budget sends a not-so-subtle message that library contributions have diminishing value within the university. This budget situation is, in part, due to the university administration having a traditional and limited view of what the library can do. One of the primary responsibilities of the marketing librarian is to communicate with the stakeholders in the university – vice presidents and provosts (Robertson, 2015), and make sure they understand how the academic library can advance the strategy and goals of the university.

The benefits of exploration—the generation and use of new knowledge—cannot be overstated. Although the librarian profession can be considered “information intensive,” as Neal (2006, p. 1) points out, it is an information-poor profession where “decisions are not supported by evidence” and “research in the field is poorly understood, communicated, and applied.” In a classic paper, Cohen and Levinthal (1990) observe that an increased R&D investment creates a capacity to assimilate and exploit new knowledge that, in turn, enhances the innovativeness of the organization. However, relatively few research libraries have created R&D units. In a recent ARL Innovation SPEC Kit, the authors (German & Namachchivaya 2013) report that 31 libraries have invested in R&D. However, only nine of these libraries have separate R&D units. The following quote characterizes how the other 22 libraries conduct R&D: “There is no formal staff or structure” and leaders “want the organization to be flexible enough to allow for different units to engage in R&D activities as necessary” (p. 16). These haphazard approaches to developing new knowledge represent an opportunity to introduce a management innovation that addresses how R&D can become an integral part of library culture.

Concluding Comments

Mol and Birkinshaw (2006, p. 26) state that management innovation is “the missing piece of the innovation puzzle.” It was suggested earlier that the academic library is embedded in an iron

cage in which over time the established norms and rules restrict administrative flexibility. Therefore change in the library is incremental with little opportunity for introducing radical new concepts. How do academic libraries escape the iron cage?

John Budd has written extensively about the academic library and his book on self-examination represents a quest for meaning in the profession. Budd (2008, p. 225) states “. . . our foundational future requires that we think differently than we have and that we question our previous practices and ideas.” He goes on to suggest that we, as librarians, should overcome a conservatism that preserves past action as inherently good. In the transformation of the library, creativity and innovation have a major role to play. Looking inward, reflecting on what the library has been and envisioning a promising future, can lead to major new administrative practices. For this transformation of the academic library, we will need leaders who can think in unconventional ways, recharging existing services and establishing radical new service concepts.

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