

Libraries: Centre or Periphery?

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Abstract: The paper examines the role and position of libraries and their funding organisations from multiple perspectives. While customer orientation has become increasingly important for libraries for many years, their contribution to the overall corporate strategy has played a rather subordinate role. Libraries began defining their own library strategy very much oriented on user needs and by changing library services and products. What attracted less attention was the contribution of the library in achieving the overall corporate objectives of the funding organisations, i.e., its contribution to the company strategy. This is a critical point, because a visible and demonstrable contribution of the library characterizes the perception of top management. Does the library help achieve the long-term direction and goals of the institution? How can results be demonstrated? The paper addresses the different directions of communication that modern library management has to apply within the organisation. It is not only that embedded or liaison librarians are needed to firmly anchor the library in the centre of the institution. It is an embedded library as a whole that has to prove relevance and importance to the future of the institution. Without strong links to top management of funding institutions, even very well-performing libraries will stay at the periphery instead of at the centre of their institutions.

Keywords: Library strategy, Funding organisation, Library management, Results, Performance measurement

1. Introduction.

When it comes to a critical reflection of the overarching goals of an institution, which role does a library play? Is it at the centre or on the periphery? From which criteria can we derive an answer? A look at long-term plans and actions quickly reveals an institution's strategy. The word *strategy* has military origins and once referred to the art of leadership of armed forces during war (Raps, 2009, 9). Today it is used in very different settings and often relates to economics or finance, emerging only in the 1960s as a field of study and practice in business administration (Kiechel, 2010, xii). In those days, strategy

was defined by ‘the determination of the basic long-term goals of an enterprise and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out these goals.’ Kiechel coined the famous thesis, *Structure follows strategy*, meaning that structure is the organizational design through which strategy is administered (Chandler, 1962, 13). In the 1980s, Porter (Porter, 1980, 17) introduced the aspects of competition and the learning organization in his definition of strategy, and twenty years later, Henry Mintzberg further differentiated the term into five different components: plan, pattern, position, ploy, and perspective. In his view, strategy and structure complement each other and need to be refined and adapted over time (Mintzberg, 1998, 9). For a library that would mean being included in the business strategy and having the organizational structure reflect that position. Additionally, aspects of competition and sustainability have also become increasingly important.

It is difficult to settle on one single definition, especially in light of the fact that libraries are not private enterprises but public sector organizations or authorities, whose (financial) framework differs from those of corporations. However, all the definitions mentioned above have some common characteristics that are valid, in general, for different kinds of organizations:

- forward-looking,
- long-term,
- include plans and actions,
- aim to ensure success,
- act at different levels.

To put it in a nutshell, strategy closes the gap between the current state of an organization and the state the organization wants to reach in the future; it is the planned path to future success. As defined concisely by Freek Vermeulen (2010, 22), a strategy is ‘an action plan and a rationale’.

But what constitutes success in a public organization? Unlike in corporations, it is not sales and revenue generation that is of most interest in the public sector but rather stakeholder value, and this means meeting the expectations of the stakeholders. With emphasis on these aspects, two newer definitions of strategy can be applied with good success to libraries in the public sector:

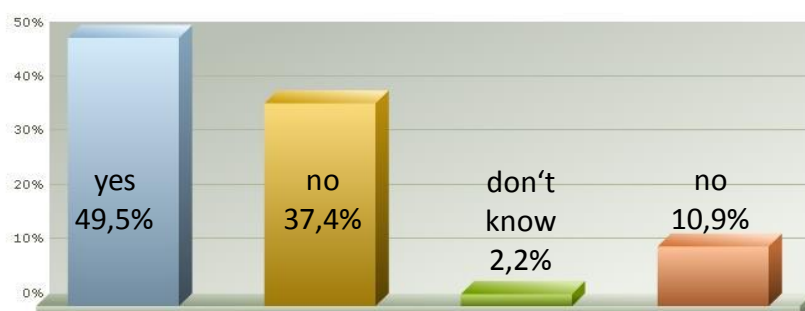
‘Strategy describes the long-term orientation of the tasks of an organization, which obtains competitive advantages in a changing environment by using resources and competences with the aim of meeting the expectations of the stakeholders’ (Johnson et. al., 2011, 8).

‘Highly individual system performance, which depends on the overall framework’ (Nagel / Wimmer, 2009, 26).

Aspects of competition in a changing world, stakeholder expectations, and the individual character of a strategy will be picked up again later, but first, let's consider the general usage of strategy in libraries.

2. Who is working on using a strategy? - State of the art

Among European libraries, the current state of the art concerning library strategy differs. Whereas the Association of Research Libraries in the UK has published a common strategy document for 2014-2017, an equivalent document for the German-speaking countries is lacking. It turns out that the first three pages of a simple Google search for the English term 'library strategy' delivers more than twenty different results for British libraries, along with some Swedish examples. The same Google search with the German term, *Bibliotheksstrategie*, produces very different results. Apart from a brilliant description of how to develop a strategy in the public library of Biel, Switzerland (Moser, 2014), and some smaller examples from Switzerland, hardly any other strategy documents for libraries can be found. All other results concern discussions of the need for national library strategies or for offering further educational courses for establishing your own strategy. The situation, however, is not as bad as it appears to be. An online survey conducted prior to the conference "*Chances 2014 – success factor library strategy*" asked the participants whether their library had a written library strategy or library concept. The following diagram shows the distribution of answers (Ekz 2014,1):



Bearing in mind that a conference about strategy will be visited primarily by those who have greater interest in that topic and that the survey noted above is not representative, those figures paint a somewhat too-pretty picture. Compared with Anglo-American libraries, large-scale libraries in German-speaking countries are still in their infancy concerning strategy and obviously have far fewer publications in this area.

3. Stakeholder bias

Returning to the expectation of library stakeholders, according to Umlauf (Umlauf, 2013), typical library stakeholders include:

- Funding bodies (persons, committees)
- Employees
- Executives
- Personnel Representatives
- Users
- Friends
- Suppliers

Looking at the relationships the different stakeholders have with the library, a clear hierarchy can be identified. First, the funding bodies is the most important stakeholder, as it provides all major resources. For that reason, the strategy of the funding body, which is generally created for the whole organization by upper management, plays an important role for all subordinate areas and divisions. The corporate strategy aims at reaching specific goals which, in turn, provide the basis for reporting or benchmarking with similar organisations. This can be broken down into objectives and processes to ensure that the strategy is relevant all the way down the organizational hierarchy – a hierarchy where the library finds its place somewhere in the organizational structure. The next three stakeholders: employees, executives, and possibly personnel representation, belong to the inner circle of the library and can develop a special library strategy. Users can be differentiated into different target groups - e.g., primary user group, administration, library products and services – in order to meet different user expectations to the highest possible degree. Friends and Suppliers, while not part of the Organisation, provide support in different ways from outside.

The relationship between the stakeholders and their contributions to the different strategies is shown by the following graph:



The library finds itself in a sort of sandwich position between the funding body and the users. After reading several library strategy documents, it was noticeable that much more focus was put directly on the users' side rather than on the corporate side.

A research group analysed more than 50 library strategy papers (57 papers) from different European countries. Half of the papers came from academic (including research) libraries, and half came from public libraries. The small study group employed a word frequency count and content analysis and determined that a stakeholder bias existed. In contrast to the importance of stakeholders, the specifics of the libraries' strategies is distinctly smaller than the topic of the users. Eighteen strategy documents mentioned nothing about their corporate bodies. Twenty-one documents described the position or the role of their library in the corporate context in general terms. Only 18 documents revealed that the library strategies were closely linked to the strategic goals of their funding institution. Before any misunderstandings arise, users are definitely one of the most important, if not the most important aspect, of a library strategy, but the fact that nearly a third of the analysed strategy documents didn't mention their funding body at all is rather astonishing.

4. Thinking and planning in all directions

Creating a customer-driven library is not the only way to achieve a strategic alignment.

Matthews states that one of the primary ways of differentiating a library is either by being better or being different: (Matthews, 2005, 52):

Being better (preservation / optimization)	Being different (reorientation)
Focus on your existing position	Identify new or unexplored customer segments to focus on

	(a new who)
Try to improve your position	Identify new customer needs that no competitor is satisfying (a new what)
To make improvements, organizations will focus on quality programs, process reengineering, employee empowerment ...	Identify new ways of delivering and distributing your products and services (a new how)

Most of the analyzed strategy documents focused more on being different than on being better, and since *being different* is more user-oriented, whereas *being better* is more top management oriented, the link to the top management level of the funding body needs to be strengthened.

5. Making links to corporate level strategy




Depending on the kind of library, strategic planning can be found in different places:













- Public libraries: local authority planning documents
- Academic libraries: university development plans
- Research libraries: research development policy of one or more research institutions

As for German research libraries, a Joint Science Conference dealing with all questions of research funding, science and research policy strategies and the science system has existed since 2008. For each of the four national research societies (Max-Planck Society, Helmholtz Society, Fraunhofer Society, Leibniz Society) the GWK formulated a set of performance indicators that are used to compare the different societies in a monitoring report published yearly. Interestingly, there are several aspects affecting the libraries and their services and products, but the libraries (approximately 200) are not mentioned directly in that context. The same applies obviously the other way around, if some libraries happen to forget to mention their funders in the strategy document.

An exemplary matrix can be developed that is adaptable by different library types to show to which extent the research library is able to support and influence the level of different performance indicators and thereby contribute to the overall goals of the organization

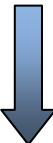
6. Library involvement

fully  partly  no involvement 

Area	Categories of comparison / indicators	library involvement	Level 1 5
Dynamic development of the science system	German science in international competition		1
	New strategic science fields		3
	Competition for resources		2
Networking in the science system	Research infrastructure		4
	Individual based cooperation		3
	Science based cooperation		1
International cooperation	Regional cooperation		2
	Internationalization strategy		
Science and Economy	European cooperation		
	Economic value creation		3
The best brains	Awards and prizes		3
	Women in science		
.....

The table is just a fictitious example, but the strategic areas and the categories of comparison among the different German research societies are real (Pakt für Forschung und Innovation, 2015, 3-6). So far, the value of research libraries has usually been seen as supporting the research process for the users in the best possible way. As more competition arises even between different research institutions or societies, the role of the library respecting the contribution to the stakeholder strategy opens up another perspective.

The first important step is identifying and gathering corporate strategic objectives, which can be classified in comparison with the level of possible library involvement. The metrics to compare the libraries or to measure the degree of attainment of targets are to be found at the end of the strategic planning process:

-  **Mission** – why we exist
Values – guiding principles
Vision – world picture of the future
Strategic focus – differentiating the library
Critical success factors – identifying what is important

Moser (2014) is one of the sources explicitly mentioning the role of the funding bodies in the process of library strategy development. He argues that the funding organisations (e.g. office, supporting agency) must be convinced of establishing a strategy. It should give the library a written mandate to develop a new strategy so that the library is politically and financially secure. Although it is not specifically mentioned, this strong involvement right from the beginning will develop a strong link. That is the opposite of libraries existing simply for historical reasons, where no one knows exactly what they are doing in the age of digitalization.

Here we come full circle: There is always an awareness of costs and benefits at top management levels, but if the library has a permanently defined task to fulfil on behalf of the funding body, there will always be communication about the degree to which targets have to be met and about new plans for the library. The best case scenario is an ongoing dialogue about library development, instead of a somewhat anxious justification and the fear of being overlooked.

7. Summary: Challenges for Library Management

The connection between the library and its supporting institution needs to be the central aspect of formulating an individual strategy. It is essential to demonstrate the either direct or indirect contributions library services can make for the long-term objectives and interests of the base institution (university, community). Demonstrating these relationships is essential, because the library's role as a service provider and infrastructure facility chiefly consists in decisively advancing either the performance of scientists and students or the education, culture, and recreational activities of citizens, and because its performance in this respect cannot be directly *experienced* by the funding body. The strategy has to be communicated, thus guaranteeing sufficient visibility of the library's achievements with top management as well as with customers. Consequently, it is also necessary to develop new marketing activities – for specific target groups, for new (and *invisible*) electronic products, for an attractive workplace, and for a larger visibility of the library's performance and service capabilities. If the library succeeds in not only showing its performance to the users but also to those at the corporate level, the library will play a different role in and for the organization. The ability to show this contribution means more than having embedded or liaison *librarians*; it means having and being an embedded *library* positioned at the centre instead of on the periphery.

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