The impact of organizational structure on internal communication at the main library of Sultan Qaboos University

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to examine how the organizational structure of the largest academic library in the Sultanate of Oman ensures and enhances the internal communication between its staff at all levels to work together to achieve its’ goals. To achieve this main aim, the study explored the following three issues: first, the design of the structure, to examine the flow of information between staff members; second, communication channels between departments at the operational strategic level and how they help employees to perform their overlap duties; and finally authorities and decision making process as they are reflected in the structure and in the strategy of the library. Mixed method was utilized for data collection and analysis for this study. This includes content analysis of reports and strategy of the main library of Sultan Qaboos University; and semi structured survey with staff members. The study concluded that most library employees have positive impressions of the OS and its implications for internal communication in the library. Seventy percent believe that it supports internal communication at both vertical and horizontal level, and 60 percent consider that communication channels at different levels are clearly identified. Moreover, 52 percent indicated that all positions in the OS have appropriate job descriptions. Meanwhile, the investigation on consistency between the OS and strategy for the library revealed a mismatch in management levels between the OS and strategy initiatives and processes. However, many respondents (45%) indicated consistency between the OS and the strategy in the measurement process.

Keywords: Organizational structure, Internal communication, organizational culture, academic libraries, Main library, Sultan Qaboos University
1. Introduction

Organizational structure (OS) is the formal system of task and reporting relationships that coordinates and motivates organizational members to work together to achieve organizational goals (George, and Jones, 1999). Mullins (2007) and Mabey et al (2001) describe the structure of an organization as the pattern of relationships between roles in an organization and its different parts. They see the purpose of this structure as serving to allocate work and responsibility in order to direct activities and achieve the organization's goals. In this way, the organizational structure concerns formal arrangement of the responsibility and interaction between tasks, people and resources in an organization, and it is usually seen as a chart with positions or titles and roles in a cascading format (Karim, 2006; Pearce & Robinson, 2007). It therefore assigns members to specific value-creation tasks and roles and specifies how these roles and tasks are to be linked together in a way that increases efficiency, quality, innovation, and responsiveness to customers (Biggiero & Laise, 2003).

Internal Communication is the building block of the organizational culture (CIVICUS, 2010). It consists of various kinds of communication taking place internally at all levels of an organization, with a strong focus on exchange of information between employees to create a shared understanding that drives the behaviors and actions needed to move the performance of the organization forward (Kazmi, 2011). It is, therefore, a crucial bridge that connects various processes and activities of the organization towards the achievement of its’ goals (Hola & Pikhart, 2014).

The connection between strategic management and internal communication is reflected in the accountability of such management for utilizing internal communication within the organization to enhance employee morale, engagement, and acceptance of their importance as communicators and partners (Armstrong, 2010; Louhiana-Salmien, 2009; Muriithi, 2013).

This study seeks to examine how the organizational structure of the largest academic library in the Sultanate of Oman ensures and enhances internal communication between its staff at all levels, to enable them to work together to achieve its’ goals. To achieve this main aim, the study will explore the following three issues: first, the design of the structure, to examine the flow of information between staff members; second, communication channels between departments at the operational strategic level and how they help employees to perform their overlapping duties; and finally, the study will investigate the systems of authority and decision making as they are reflected in the structure and strategy of the library.

2. Background

The main library of Sultan Qaboos University is one of eight libraries serving the university community. It was opened concurrently with the university in 1986. In February 2009 the library moved to its new 7 story building, which is a part of the University Cultural Centre, and also includes a huge multi-purpose hall, and center for Omani studies. By the end of 2013 the library’s collections comprised 346,228 books, 2,953 periodicals, 37 specialized databases, 8,435 audiovisual materials, and a large number of electronic resources. In 2013 the library served 457,257 users from inside and outside the university, borrowing 43,800 items. Statistics of the library indicate intensive usage of the library’s collections of electronic resources. More
than half a million searches were made through various English and Arabic databases, resulting in downloads of 471,144 scientific papers. There were 73,893 visits to electronic books, and the theses and dissertations database was utilized 13,384 times. The library also provides Interlibrary loan services to patrons seeking information resources that are not available in the library’s traditional and digital collections. In 2013, 850 items were provided for users through this service.

The current Organizational Structure of the library was approved in 2014 (Figure 1). It consists of 13 departments, working under the supervision of two deputy directors, and the library administrator. The library director reports to The Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Community Services.

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Deputy Vice chancellor for Academic Affairs & Community services

Library Administrative committee

Library Director

Follow up & coordinating Department

Deputy Director for Technical Services

Director of Administration

Deputy director for Information services

Assistant Administration Director

Collection Management Department

Serials Department

Cataloguing Department

Preparation & Conservation Department

Automated System Department

References services Department

Electronic Information Resources Department

Information Marketing Department

Career Development & Continuing Education Department

Circulation Department

Special Collections Department

Multimedia Department
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Figure 1 Organizational Structure of the Main Library

3. Procedures

Gathering data for this research passed through three stages: the first stage entailed reviewing the relevant literature to identify the areas of discussion in the study field, and to design the research approach; the second step involved analyzing the library organizational chart, strategy, and policies in order to find answers for the first research objective of the study; and the last stage was collecting data from the study population to explore the opinions and beliefs of staff on internal communication in the library. A questionnaire was developed to collect data on the following four themes: participants’ attributes and qualifications, the flow of information between staff at different management levels, overlap of duties caused by the Organizational Structure, and the connection between the library’s strategy and decision making channels. Respondents were asked to answer the survey questions according to a
five-point Likert scale (1 = extremely disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = extremely agree).

The researchers sent all 82 library employees either an electronic copy of the questionnaire through their university email or a hard copy, of which 51 copies, constituting 62%, were completed and returned.

4. Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was utilized for gathering and grouping data derived from different kinds of documents found in the library, relating to organizational structure, policies, reports, strategy, and job descriptions. Information received from this process enabled us to understand various aspects of the library environment, and their impact on internal communication. However, the statistical data collected by questionnaire were analyzed through SPSS software.

5. Findings

5.1 Structural organization of the library

As shown above in the Figure 1 chart, the Main Library of Sultan Qaboos University is organized hierarchically. The chart shows that the director of the library works under direct supervision of the university’s deputy vice chancellor for academic affairs and community services, who also supervises colleges and community services at the university. This reflects the relationship between the main library and these colleges and centers, and the integration of horizontal communication between the library director, deans of colleges and directors of services centers.

The director of the main library also chairs the university libraries’ administrative committee, which consists of deputy directors and the administrator of the main library, heads of university libraries, and a representative of the procurement directorate of the university. This committee is responsible for: developing and reviewing library policies for the various library resources and services; recommending establishment of new departments in the main library, and new specialized libraries in the university; and reviewing the libraries’ budgets. This committee is an important body not only for internal communication between librarians at different management levels, but also for external communication through its inclusion of members representing library users.

The chart shows that there are separate divisions for Information and Technical Services, each of which is headed by a deputy director who reports to the library director. Information services are split into seven departments: Reference Services; Electronic Information Services; Information Marketing; Professional Development and Continuous Education; Circulation; Special Collections; and Multimedia. Technical services, meanwhile, comprise four departments: Collection Development; Periodicals; Cataloguing; Preparation and Conservation; and Automated Systems. Finally, the Follow up and Coordinating Department also reports to the library director and is responsible for coordination of library administration communications, internally with various library departments and employees, and externally with university units. All of these departments have separate heads.

The library administrator, who, as shown in Figure 1, also reports to the director, is responsible for managing financial and human resources of the library, through full
coordination with the director. The administrator requires final approval from the director for decisions on requests from the different departments.

### 5.2. General Information

The survey of library staff produced responses from almost equal numbers of females and males (see Table 1). There were 52 respondents to the questionnaire: 27 females and 24 males. More than 80% of the respondents have academic degrees, mostly in information studies and computer science. The majority (26%) have Bachelor degrees, two (4%) have PhDs, six (12%) have Master degrees, whilst eight (16%) completed a two year Diploma after gaining a high school certificate. Among the library employee respondents, almost three-quarters have working experience exceeding 5 years, with 31 percent having served the library for more than 16 years, 22 percent for 11-15 years, and 20 percent for a period of 6-10 years.

Table 1: Employees’ qualifications and experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Diploma</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two year Diploma</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

51 100

5.3 Organizational structure and the information flow

Table 2 lists 7 statements that sought to explore respondents’ opinions on the information flow through the OS of the library. The table reflects that these employees have positive impressions of the role of OS in internal communication in the library.

Table 2: OS and the information flow

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Responses (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS identifies vertical communication between the library units</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS identifies horizontal communication between the library units</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS identifies communication channels between library staff</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS identifies the relationship between library employees and their colleagues in other departments</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS identifies the connection between library management and committees</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS identifies the connection channels between decision makers and supporting units in the library</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In general, information flow channels are clearly identified in the OS of the library</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
More than 70 percent consider that vertical and horizontal communication are supported by the OS, and almost 60 percent believe that channels of communication between library staff are clearly identified. However, although the structure clearly designates connection between the library director and the library’s administrative committee, only 37 percent of respondents think that OS supports connection between library management and committees. Finally, 39 percent believe that a connection exists between decision makers and supporting units in the library.

5.4 OS and overlap of duties

One of this study’s objectives is to examine how the OS facilitates and supports staff in fulfilling their responsibilities and to what extent duties are seen to overlap between library departments. To achieve this, the questionnaire included six statements aimed to discover respondents’ opinions on the role of the OS in clarifying aspects of different jobs in the library. Results indicate that more than 60 percent of respondents agree that different specializations of the library, and duties and responsibilities of all library departments are clarified by the OS. Meanwhile, 51 percent indicate that OS provides efficient steps for performing library duties, and 52 percent consider that a job description is available for each position in the OS. As we indicated earlier, the library is divided into two main departments: Technical and Information Services. According to 37 percent of respondents, the OS supports the sequence of functions between the two.

Table 3: OS and overlap of duties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Responses (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OS clarifies the different specializations of the library</td>
<td>2 8 20 45 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS clarifies connections of duties and responsibilities among library departments</td>
<td>2 16 22 53 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a job description for each position in the OS</td>
<td>2 20 24 43 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS provides effective steps for performing library duties</td>
<td>0 22 24 41 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS supports connection of duties between technical and public services departments in library</td>
<td>4 16 41 27 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In general, OS guides users seeking different kinds of information services to the appropriate departments.</td>
<td>6 10 41 37 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.6 Consistency between library OS and strategy

The previous strategy of the library was devised for the five year period from 2009-2013, and it was considered to be consistent with the university’s vision to: enhance the role of support services deanships and centers in order to enhance teaching, research, and administration; develop the infrastructure and human resources of support services deanships, and centers; and enhance communication between support services deanships and centers and other University units. In March 2014, the library director reported to the university’s administration on the library’s achievements and failures regarding this strategy. According to the report, the library succeeded in transforming 70 percent of serials subscriptions to electronic format and in developing human resources capability by recruiting more staff members and executing training programs. However, the library faced challenges in digitizing library collections of multimedia materials.
The previous strategy for the library does not cover the current period, since it expired at the end of 2013. The new strategy is expected to cover the period from 2016-2020. One of this study’s objectives is to examine the extent to which the strategy is consistent with the OS of the library. In comparison to the strategy that ended in 2013, a lack of connection was found between the strategy and the OS. For example, considering management levels in the strategy, these include 14 tasks, none of which is connected to a measurement process, or entrusted to any staff member to implement.

On the other hand, answers of respondents regarding consistency between OS and the strategy contradicted the results of the documentary analysis. The questionnaire included 6 statements aimed to explore respondents’ views on the relationship between the decision making process and channels, as defined in the OS, and the strategy. Seventy five percent indicated that management levels in the OS are consistent with the strategy, and 63 percent said that both clearly define decision making positions. In addition, more than half of the participants (53%) consider that lines of responsibility are consistent between OS and strategy. However, and despite our indication earlier that the strategy did not include any measurement procedures, results from the survey indicate that 45 percent of respondents believe there is consistency between the OS and the strategy in the evaluation process, and 49 percent consider that policies and executive units in the library are consistent.

Table 4: Decision making levels in OS and Strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management levels in OS are consistent with the strategy levels</td>
<td>0 10 12 61 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making positions are clear in both OS and strategy</td>
<td>2 6 27 51 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities for strategy implementation are consistent with the OS hierarchy</td>
<td>2 14 29 47 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy procedures for evaluation are consistent with OS levels</td>
<td>2 14 39 39 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS reflects consistency between policies and executive units in the library</td>
<td>4 12 35 41 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In general, OS clarifies to whom library staff report.</td>
<td>6 10 27 41 16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Conclusion

This study explored the impact of organizational structure on internal communication at Sultan Qaboos University Main Library. A mixed methods approach was utilized to gather and analyze relevant data: content analysis of reports, strategy, organizational structure and library job descriptions; and a structured questionnaire aimed at exploring opinions of library employees.

The library has been in operation for more than 28 years and serves nine colleges, nine research centers, and seven support centers. The investigation by the study was based on an organizational structure for the library that was approved last year. The structure includes 5 technical and 7 information services departments, in addition to a separate department for follow up and coordination. The library is managed by a director with the assistance of two deputy directors, and the library administrator.

The study concluded that most library employees have positive impressions of the OS and its implications for internal communication in the library. Seventy percent
believe that it supports internal communication at both vertical and horizontal level, and 60 percent consider that communication channels at different levels are clearly identified. Moreover, 52 percent indicated that all positions in the OS have appropriate job descriptions.

Meanwhile, the investigation on consistency between the OS and strategy for the library revealed a mismatch in management levels between the OS and strategy initiatives and processes. However, many respondents (45%) indicated consistency between the OS and the strategy in the measurement process.

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