

In Sharing, We Lead, In Leading We Share : USM Libraries Competencies and Development

Habsah Abdul Rahman and Siti Fatimah Hashim
Perpustakaan Hamzah Sendut, Universiti Sains Malaysia
Pulau Pinang
Emel : habsah@usm.my; sitifati@notes.usm.my.

Abstract

Established in 1969, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) is the second oldest university in the country. As a whole, the university has gone through numerous development plans and strategies over the years which is not without challenges. The libraries in the network are no exception as they have had numerous challenges in adapting to various formats, systems and human resource training issues. The authors of this paper therefore wish to provide a retrospective overview and window to current initiatives as an approach to prospective possibilities in training and development. This paper wish to share with others the approaches that USM had since 2000 “embarked on a series of initiatives to become socially responsible as it develops.”¹It is hoped that our best practices would be benchmarked by other organizations and institutions for their benefit and betterment in addressing local issues. These best practices may probably have the potential to address similar issues that other nations may face. The paper also wish to stress that competition is not the game but rather association with others so as to build together a stronger network of talents in the various aspects of services rendered. In the concentration of nurturing talents, the USM libraries have adopted various Quality approaches, the Blue Ocean Strategy and at the same time focusing on Succession Plans. Besides the ideas, approaches, and strategic plans undertaken, what have been presented in this paper is the sharing of memorable experiences of competent librarians in the making.

Keywords: Best Practices; Competencies; Development

¹Razak, D. A., & Mohamed, R. (Eds.). (2008). *Transforming higher education for a sustainable tomorrow*. Pulau Pinang: Universiti Sains Malaysia.

BACKGROUND

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Libraries is a network of libraries situated on four different campuses. Each campus has its own clusters of specialization which is social sciences, humanities, pure and applied sciences on the Main Campus, health, medical and dental studies in the Health Campus, engineering studies in the Engineering Campus and advanced medical and dental studies on the AMD Campus. With a total of more than 30,000 students and 5,000 staff, the university has a great task in providing, coordinating, and delivering services for a big and diverse clientele.

What is a Benchmark?

“A measured, “best-in-class” achievement; a reference or measurement standard for comparison; this performance level is recognised as the standard of excellence for a specific business process.”² How is it done? It is achieved through “a systematic and continuous process of searching, learning, adapting and implementing the best practices from within your organisation or from other organisations towards attaining superior performance.”³

Benchmarking has been introduced in Malaysia since 1996 under the auspices of the then known National Productivity Corporation (NPC) . When its Act was amended in 2008 with an expanded role, it was named as Malaysian Productivity Corporation (MPC). Amongst the important functions are:-

- To enhance the development of human resource both at the supervisory and management levels in the country.
- To advise on and coordinate the implementation of programmes and activities related to productivity and quality.

In achieving to implement the above mentioned functions, organisations and institutions therefore, would have to look out for success stories that may be models to follow from their good and best of practices.

What is Best Practices?

“Superior performance within a function independent of industry, leadership, management, or operational methods or approaches that lead to exceptional

²Malaysia Benchm, a. from

http://www.mpc.gov.my/home/index.php?cont=ds&item=d2&sstr_lang=en&t=3.

³ Ibid.

performance; best practice is a relative term and usually indicates innovative or interesting business practices which have been identified as contributing to improve performance at leading companies.”⁴

USM Libraries Perspective

Putting all the above criteria of benchmarking and best practices, we can therefore say that USM have in the early years of establishment made efforts in identifying other libraries operations and organization as examples for us to implement likewise, only that we did not refer to it as benchmarking. These efforts included benchmarking academic libraries in Australia, U.S.A. and the U.K. to look at their best practices.

Throughout the development history of libraries generally, they practice a universal or similar approach to collection building, technical processing or client services as well as human resource development. It is no difficulty therefore to replicate best practices of others because of the said similar framework of organization and development.

After the initial establishment of the core areas of process and services, the next stage was to have a greater focus to develop our human resources in line with new technology implementation. This was the early stages of MARC records which was the first attempt in the country to produce machine readable catalogue that later resulted in the local Malaysian MARC records (MALMARC). The MALMARC Project was one of the cooperative programmes involving the National Library of Malaysia and five university libraries. As one of the early library networks, the project started in 1977 and became operational in 1979. As the MALMARC Coordinating Centre then, USM became the leading library to venture into a new approach in processing of records.

When looking West to Australia for guidance in machine readable formats of data processing, the USM library had chartered the first steps towards automation in the country. Such move without doubt must be supported by appropriate training to set the platform for others to uptake new approaches. This is the early beginnings of training in machine readable formats which was followed by training needs of other participants of the MALMARC project. These needs were seen then as a project-based which later developed into specific on-the-job training. In short, these training evolved over time to meet demands for better services and later created more regular workshops as others join the project implementation.

⁴Malaysia Benchm, a. from

http://www.mpc.gov.my/home/index.php?cont=ds&item=d2&sstr_lang=en&t=3.

Under the MALMARC project and as other automation training requirements surfaced, training had to be carried out time and again both at internal and national levels. However all these training involved only librarians who were specifically involved in implementation of new technical requirements then. There were not much involvement with students nor academic staff except for orientation of new methods of searching new catalog formats.

Training of students, academics and researchers only became more substantial during the beginnings of the digital era.

DEVELOPING HUMAN RESOURCES

Teaching Skills among librarians was something uncommon before. However as more and more new information contents surfaced, not only did librarians have to embrace new formats, but usage of those new formats had to be promoted to the clients. To begin with promotion alone would not be effective if not supported by dedicated and time-consuming training of staff. Cost had definitely been the challenge.

When librarians had acquired the skill of utilizing new contents, they now had to

Impart the newly acquired knowledge to their clients so that collections could be optimized. During the age of card and microfiche catalogs, librarians did not feel so much of a challenge because training was a matter of orientation. These catalogs were later followed by computer systems beginning with Dolbis-Libis, Phoenix and finally ILMU PERDANA. Still this was not a great challenge to deal with as greater challenges were yet to come.

Training for Electronic and Digital- related Competencies

Jocelyn Butler's (1992) definition of competencies was cited in SitiRohaida and Noor Hazlina's paper as "knowledge, skills, attributes and behaviour traits required for individual and organizational success"⁵. Looking at the importance of competencies and cited the opinions of Kagaari and Munene (2007) that "staff competency is the most powerful tool which will lead to the betterment of the organisation"⁶.

⁵Zainal, S. R. M., & Ahmad, N. H. (2012). *Identifying the key competencies of the administrative staff in a higher education*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of 3rd International Conference on business and economic research. from http://internationalconference.com.my/proceeding/3rdicber2012_proceeding/145_22_3rdICBER2012_Proceeding_PG2100_2111.pdf.

⁶Ibid.

In September 1995, USM librarians were eager and excited to be exposed to the new world of digital technology. It began with the arrival of Dr. Edna Reid from the United States as our Consultant. As an expert in on-line information and trainer for digital information searching skills Dr. Edna proposed the formulation of an IT strategy with the main aim of providing electronic information resources to the campus community. She proposed for the upgrade of the skills of USM Librarians. This was followed by the proposal for the creation of electronic content for library users.

Our role has thus been expanded technically as we were taught how to design our web-pages, and the various criteria required for a presentable web-page.

Equipped with this new set of knowledge and skills, librarians were then required to develop Virtual Subject Pages which had to be updated from time-to-time. This requirement had indirectly and undoubtedly expanded librarians' subject knowledge of the faculties that each person was responsible for. The search for links had also polished their skills in tracking information. The design of the virtual subject pages was supported by standard templates so that the library could maintain consistency in type of contents.

Workshops and seminars were since conducted and have produced Liaison Librarians who have attained an acceptable level of competence in using the Internet. This was a leading approach in making the best of new technology for the purposes of better teaching and learning. These moves saw the beginnings of integrating text with charts, graphs, photographs, sound, video and other forms of multimedia.

Achievement in our web page designs was not the end of the road with Internet technology. We were suddenly dumb-founded when told that we had to train academics as the next course of action. Protests were the common reaction as we had no confidence at all to face the academics. It was a scary first experience because of the fear of being confronted and bombarded with questions. It then became a period of denial in ability and skills, no confidence, elusive, refusal and many other negative reactions.

“... creating a human resource capability that ensures that institutions remain responsive to their environments and maintain their competitive edge. Human resource competencies need to be identified and developed to increase the competitive advantage.”⁷ Siti Rohaida and Noor Hazlin in their paper cited this

⁷Zainal, S. R. M., & Ahmad, N. H. (2012). *Identifying the key competencies of the administrative staff in a higher education*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of 3rd International Conference on business and economic research. from http://internationalconference.com.my/proceeding/3rdicber2012_proceeding/145_22_3rdICBER2012_Proceeding_PG2100_2111.pdf.

important element as had been urged by Brewster, Carey, Grobler, Holland and Warnich (2008).

The initial stage of workshops with academics were filled with lack of confidence on both sides. However, the moment academics worked “hands-on”, the whole atmosphere changed by the end of the sessions and we had succeeded in gaining their confidence as they experienced the extent of benefits from this new technology and skills acquired. This gave us the confidence that we were more competent and our skills were very much needed. It’s a boost of confidence when we saw their need for guidance and support. The grapevine is always an excellent promotion arena and further created a snow-ball effect upon others who have yet to enroll for our sessions. It was then the beginning of endless requests from many Schools (Faculties). Slowly but surely, the development of librarians competencies and skills in teaching had gained popularity.

Librarians are now playing a vital role in identifying, evaluating and making available quality electronic documents bearing in mind criteria for accuracy, comprehensiveness and authority. We have now become a part of the digital solution in promoting new approaches to teaching, learning and research.

Training of Liaison Librarians for Customer Engagements

What has been achieved with our teaching programmes was an activity of customer engagements. Presenting customers with the functions and importance of this new format and source of information was aimed at presenting to them the functionality of new approaches so that it could be optimized in their information searching and research activities. Workshop updates were also organized from time-to-time further enhance awareness of new interfaces and platforms. Our key concern therefore is not just customer satisfaction but customer retention.

In handling the millineum generation, continuous training through Internet and other assistive technologies and applications have allowed us to play a significant role in facilitating new approaches to information searching that supports teaching and learning that definitely has an impact on outcomes.

Lau’s opinion (as cited in Mohd. Sharif, N. Edzan and Zainab, 2005) highlighted that assessment and evaluation must be done to investigate the outcomes of literacy programmes. Though this has been undertaken by the relevant units within USM libraries, it is not reported in this paper. The continued workshop updates as practiced as and when necessary is a result of the evaluation and assessment undertaken. Having Quality Systems as an approach this exercise is definitely essential in the practice of continuous improvement.

Providing Databases and Supplementary Digital Content

One of the few academic libraries to begin with subscription to digital content was USM libraries. Though it may seem to be having content that many others do not have, it was a situation of mixed-feelings at a later stage. This was due to the “tricks-of –the-trade “ in electronic journal contents offer. As a new approach at that point of time, we became the benchmark for choice of databases and e-journal titles. As many joined the band-wagon of subscription, suppliers were reducing the freebies that were initially given. To make matters worst, there were double standards in their quotations. Other challenges include having much full-text content initially but later ,diminished in amount. More and more titles became inaccessible with many reasons from the suppliers. These were amongst the toughest issue faced as libraries have to be answerable to the academics who were convinced by initial promotion campaigns and have made decisions for purchase. Therefore, competency in procurement were initially missing as it was a new field in the arena of information supply.

QUALITY TOOLS AND INITIATIVES

Quality initiatives using frameworks such as Quality Managements Systems, 5S, Key Performance Indicators and so forth has proven to contribute to continuous improvement of products, processes and services, as well as the development of staff competencies. Beginning in the last decade, we have since 2001 successfully maintained our Quality Management System (QMS) coupled with 5S practices. We were eager and happy to share our approaches with other organisations during the early years of dealing with massive documentation. We realised that one of the best practices for a sustainable documentation was the digitization of S.O.P.'s and most other supportive documents. It has reduced much hassle from excessive paper use, unending meetings to finalise and update documents to a more efficient and effective process of updating and circulation of our QMS documentation. From the perspective of both Internal and External Auditors, this approach had eased them both in the case of Internal and Third Party Audit execution. The success in maintaining our certification was continued training of staff at all levels. An outcome of this success was being benchmarked by various other organizations. The request by others for training was in itself an opening opportunity for our librarians to be Internal Auditors and Trainers.

Annual training for Internal Auditors is a feature that has put us Librarians as a sought after group whenever other Departments need Internal Auditors. This practice is carried out to ensure that all Librarians have the experience of Internal Auditing which indirectly create greater understanding and appreciation of :-

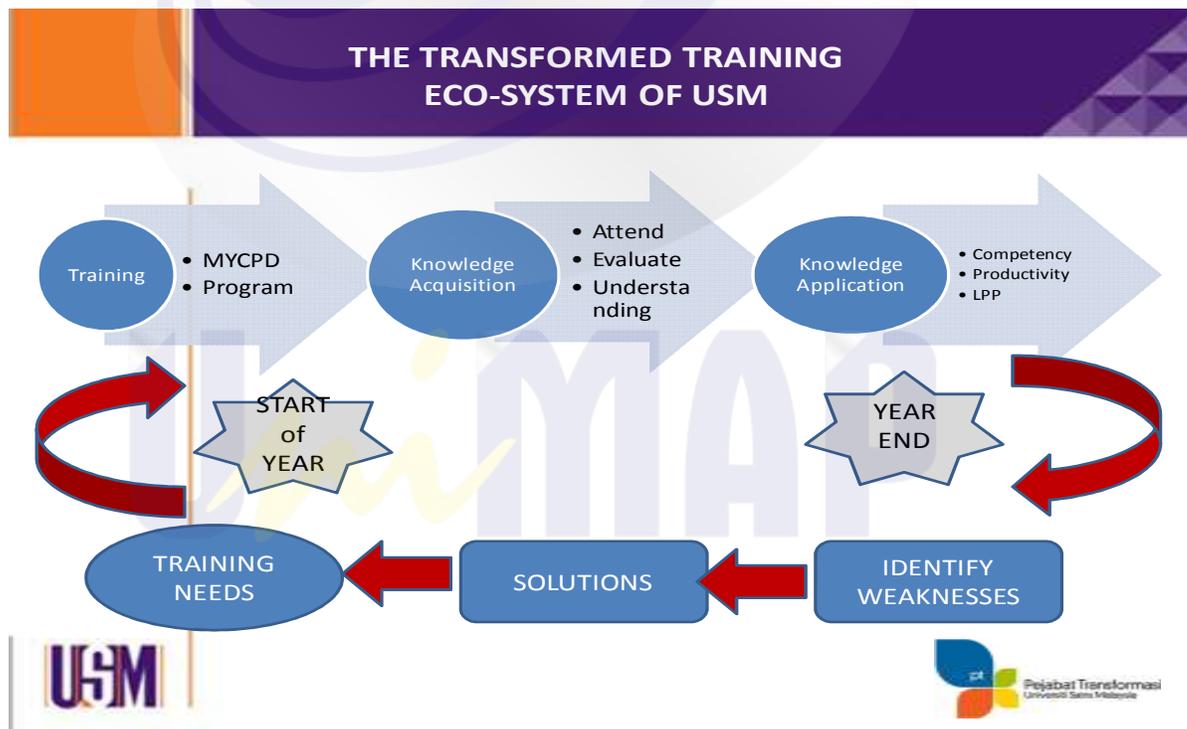
- Quality Standards and Clauses within
- Approaches to Systems Improvements
- Process Flow Approach in Management

Transformation Agenda

When implementing specific projects or work process, it is not mere technical skills that ensure success but the execution must be coupled with the ability to organize and coordinate. That in itself is a necessary competency for satisfactory results. Therefore, in any adoption of new technologies, the Library would organize specific workshops internally or send staff for the specific training where available and appropriate. This had to be planned under the Training Needs Analysis (TNA) which had to be planned at the end of every year.

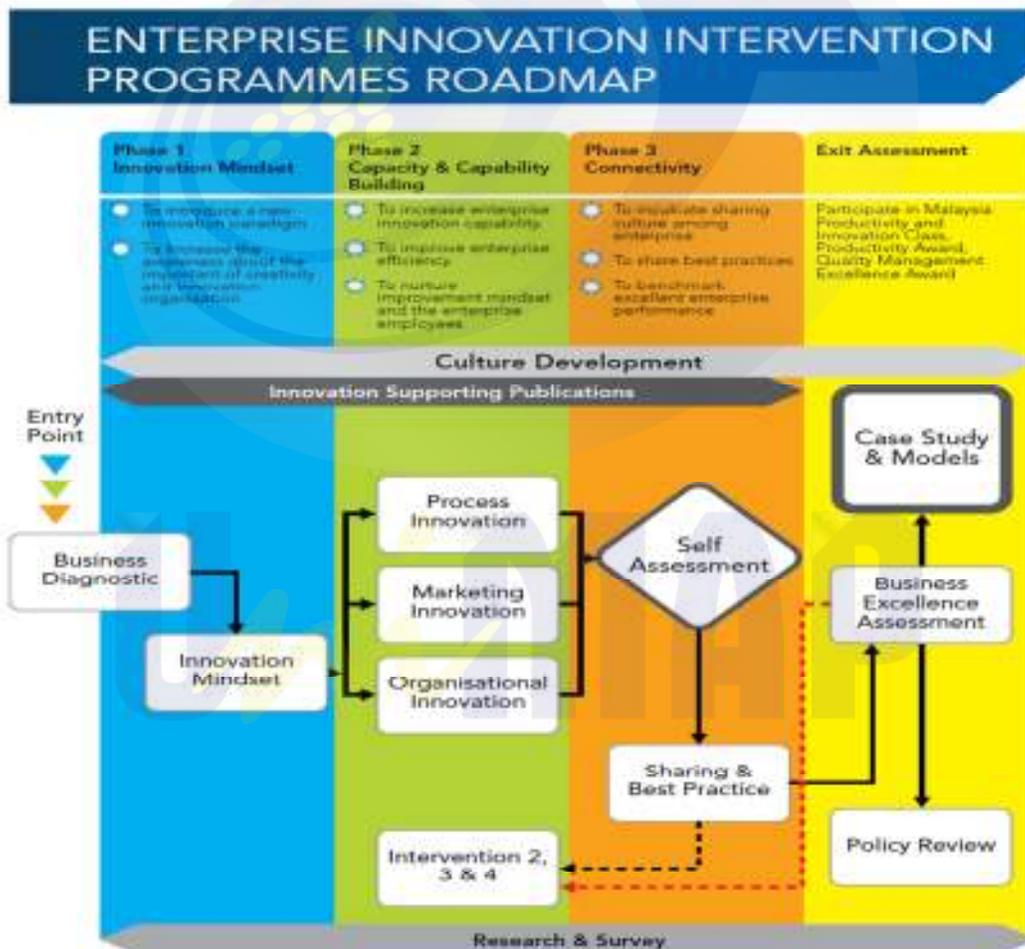
In aspiring to achieve excellence, USM have planned strategies for transformation. In the area of HR development, the university introduced ‘Continuous Professional Development’ as a requirement for all levels of staff. This was to ensure that the necessary minimum is obtained so as to ensure staff perform as expected in their performance of duties and delivery of services. Under the Transformation Department, a transformed training eco-system is being implemented as in fig. below.

Ahmad Farhan’s Training Assessment Brief



This implementation of the above training eco-system is very much in line with the MPC’s framework for building up the innovative competency of an organization that incorporates a holistic approach with mindset change programmes together with networking activities. In adopting such a framework, projects must show innovative capability, have impact in terms of systems and productivity improvement as well as waste reduction. The beneficial expectations of libraries and universities would thus be those related to workforce satisfaction that contributes to process efficiency and service outcomes. It is only when this is developed and achieved, that such undertakings would contribute to customers satisfaction. Therefore the library performs its supportive role of information services which is vital for teaching and learning outcomes for her clientele who are mainly students, academicians and researchers.

MPC’s EIIP Roadmap.



According to MPC a good regulatory framework, can reduce “waste”. Training according to the leadership in MPC “...has always been our traditional core activity. But the way we look at training now is a bit different from our previous approach. We are treating training as a tool now, as part of a bigger picture. There are cases we don’t use training at all and deliver non-training solutions. Last year we have introduced the Enterprise Intervention and Innovation Programme, or EIIP. It’s more of an integrated programme. With this programme, we are able to measure the impact from the initiatives.”⁸

In short an intervention is required as an improvement as clearly stated in MPC’s Intervention Roadmap. It includes 3 phases namely, culture building, capacity and capability building and connectivity.

Although this roadmap is very much a business approach but the authors believe that libraries can adapt these approaches to achieve innovative outcomes. It is the opinion of MPC that they are “not only reaching out to the private sector, but also to leverage the public-private sector linkages through their programme of “Power of Collaborative Innovation”.⁹

As part and parcel of all these innovative initiatives, Blue Ocean Strategy (B.O.S) is very much a related approach toward reducing wastage and achieving sustainability.

All departments in the university have incorporated B.O.S. in its strategies. The USM libraries had been one of the early departments to partake in this training and have benefitted from the strategies implemented.



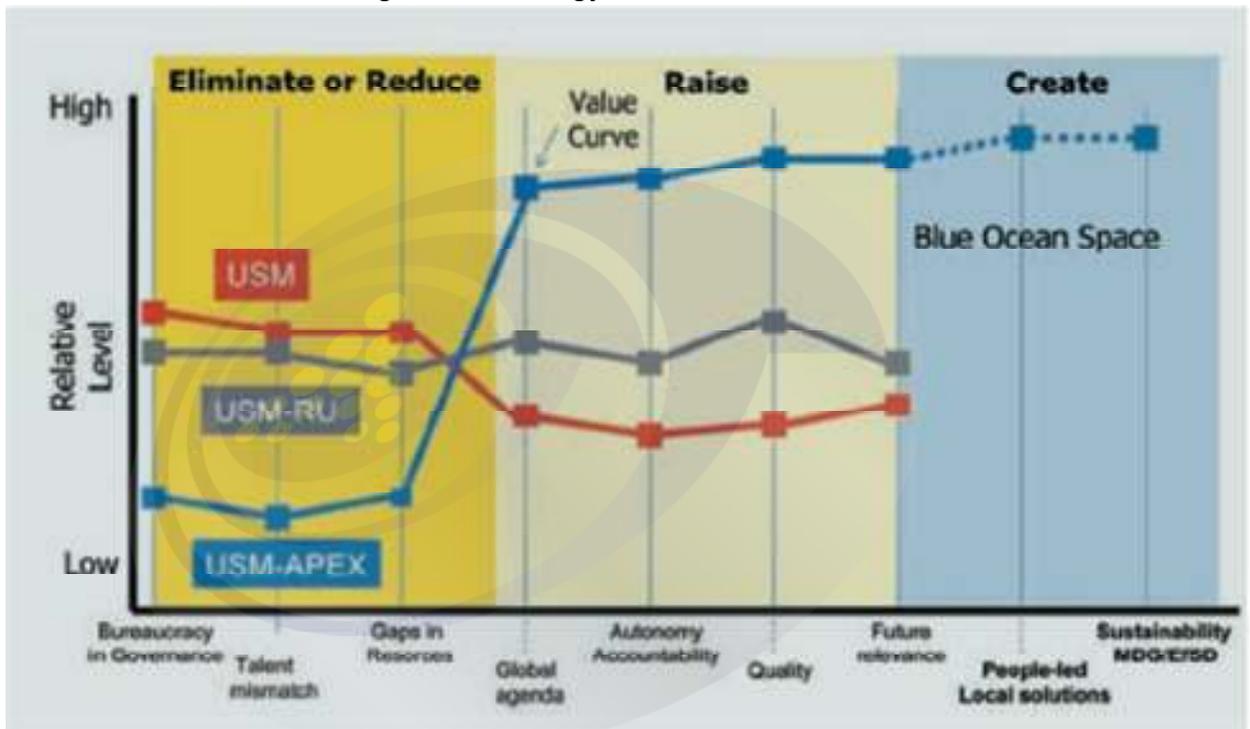
⁸Best practices for productivity in Malaysia. from <http://investvine.com/best-practices-for-productivity-in-malaysia/>.

⁹Ibid.

Blue Ocean Strategy (B.O.S.) for Transformation

Originating from the business world, USM adopted the strategy and produced her own General Strategy Canvas to create new opportunities and entities for growth.

The general strategy canvas for USM



The idea is to achieve value innovation that create value simultaneously for both the customer and the organization. It is the creation of Blue Oceans by attracting new customers instead of competing in the Red Oceans for the same existing customers.

Based on this canvas, the Library likewise proceeded with its own strategy canvas.

The beauty in the B.O.S. model is that it is practical and applicable to any organizational set-up because the core elements are Reduce, Reuse Raise and Create.

Reduce, Reuse Raise, Create

To understand the B.O.S. approach, the authors provide here an example of a very successful project. This was the relocation of specific collections. Printed journals and serial publications which were initially housed with books of the same class were relocated to be placed together under one building. Likewise all books were placed in another building.

The library policy is that journals were for reference purposes only and a usage survey undertaken proved that not many students or other clients use them after 5p.m. As that was the case, the library decided to place such materials under one building. This meant that services in that building only need to be offered till that point of time. Having to maintain 3 buildings till 11.00pm daily and till 4.30pm on weekends (opening hours), is translated into high maintenance costs, be it human resources or utilities. Therefore relocating the less used materials in one building and closing that building at 5p.m. and closing on weekends have proven to show an immense saving on utilities and manpower. This proved to be much more sustainable from all angles.

Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) Agenda

“...USM will set its vision of a sustainable tomorrow while keenly promoting values such as equity, accessibility, availability, affordability and quality as the optimal endpoints.”¹⁰ As the philosophy under the Apex agenda is transforming higher education for a sustainable tomorrow, every move from that point of time must incorporate sustainability. Therefore the question of human resource sustainability is a subject of serious consideration. To achieve that, one of the approaches is for a succession plan.

Leadership Succession Planning

Succession Planning is “is a strategy of workforce planning. It is a process designed to ensure the organization recruits and develops new hires and in-house staff to fill each key role within the organization. Its goal is similar to workforce planning – having “the right people in the right positions at the right time.” The focus of succession planning, however, is on leadership and other positions critical to the mission of the organization at all levels”.¹¹

¹⁰Razak, D. A., & Mohamed, R. (Eds.). (2008). *Transforming higher education for a sustainable tomorrow*. Pulau Pinang: Universiti Sains Malaysia.

¹¹Vermont Department of Human Resources from http://humanresources.vermont.gov/training/workforce_planning/succession_planning

In ensuring the continued performance of Departments within the university, USM has moved towards preparing all departments with a succession plan. This has to be undertaken in order to minimize not only leadership gaps but across the board. This would enable USM to groom talents and support personnel. This exercise is necessary in order to achieve the following objectives:-

1. Build a pool of potential leaders in order to minimise leadership gaps and enables an organisation to groom its top talent
2. To prepare Departments in situations when there is increased retirement especially of high performing workers.
3. To train competent leaders in order to keep pace with organizational / business growth opportunities by having a good depth of leadership.
4. Assess the talents of your workforce through the use of competency models, providing a platform to develop the talent necessary for your future needs.
6. Identify two possible successors for every critical role within the organisation, thus being more certain that one will be ready to take up an expanded role.
7. Link seasoned leaders with junior talent to facilitate the transfer of important on-the-job knowledge, ensuring its retention within the organisation.
8. Use succession planning initiatives to create a positive influence upon employee motivation and retention, by helping them to appreciate the potential of taking on important roles, thus feeling more committed to their job and less inclined to leave the organisation.
9. Create a talent development culture by incorporating strategies for the selection, orientation, coaching, retention, and mentoring of employees.
10. Identify those with leadership potential within a five to seven years range.
11. Identify strengths and weaknesses, and assign a senior manager to work with each individual and to be held accountable for the candidate's progress.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Many organisations have now realized their duty towards society at large. Not only has USM committed herself to CSR activities but each and every Department has to have a programme for the year. It is obvious that the library would use her specialized skills in assisting small libraries to “come-to-live” with

revival activities. Although it may seem insignificant when compared to a large entity, the projects initiated have actually provided opportunities for young librarians to develop and practice their skills in administrative and management duties and responsibilities. It becomes more meaningful when they achieve commending outcomes.

AUNILO and External Networking

USM libraries have been a member of a number of conferences such as CONSAL, IFLA but very much dependent on a voting platform. On a more permanent basis with regular meetings, international partnering between Asean countries began with the university's membership and participation in activities promoted by the ASEAN Universities Network (AUN). Extending from AUN, AUNILO was set up as a partnership and networking initiative in areas of libraries on-line services. Appointed as the first Secretariat to AUNILO in 2005, USM libraries have a challenging task to perform. However, the success in adoption of various approaches have proved to be useful in supporting the library's challenging role as the Secretariat.

This responsibility saw a more concerted international networking effort under the flagship of AUNILO. Beginning with libraries from four nations, i.e. Thailand, Malaysia, Phillipines, Brunei, Singapore, etc. the network initially consisted of many more libraries because this network proved successful in assisting developing libraries. As other libraries in Malaysia saw the prospective cooperative efforts under this flagship, extended to additional academic libraries under AUN. Quarterly meetings were programmed for different destinations. A most beneficial arrangement is the annual training programme which has benefitted all members especially when there were "Gurus" from member countries to lead training. This was found to be most beneficial especially when training was provided gratis.

With the addition of our other Malaysian counterparts, starting with the Universiti Malaya Library and later joined by other libraries from the Research Universities, the union of additional membership has enriched the sharing of ideas and experiences. The AUNILO platform is in itself providing an opportunity for members to showcase and share achievements for the betterment of other colleagues. This in itself is a sharing of Best Practices between member countries. The activities and achievements is very much similar to the ACAUL initiatives. This online libraries network have brought about much benefit to member countries, by :-

- Broadening the base for peer networking
- Identifying best practices for training purposes.
- Establishing of a portal with updates of completed and forthcoming meetings, projects and training.

- Professional gatherings that discuss further developments and performance indicators

The above mentioned benefits are just some highlights which also a part and parcel of corporate social responsibility (CSR) of the more developed ASEAN nations toward the other developing nations.

CONCLUSION

Continuous improvement is a never ending story as there are many more practices that we are unaware of. It may be some specific practices, approaches, and platforms that each and every library have applied in their course of achieving great outcomes. As the case of Best practices within Australian academic libraries, the publication of 'Guidelines for the Application of Best Practice in Australian University Libraries: Intranational and International Benchmarks' and a parallel 'Best Practice Handbook for Australian University Libraries' is a reflection of excellent cooperation and sharing efforts.

The Malaysian library scenario have yet to come up with such a publication which is specific for libraries. MPC however, have issued a Best Practice Regulation Handbook. With the efforts undertaken by PPM to bring together libraries especially in enhancing competencies, many look forward to new ideas which again is brought about by participating libraries and librarians .

We believe that the most recent meeting of Chief and Senior Librarians under the flagship of PERPUN have succeeded in moulding another approach to strategic planning and the thrusts for successful academic libraries in support of the mission and vision of the Ministry of Higher Education.

