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STRUCTURE FOLLOWS STRATEGY: TRANSFORMATION PROCESS AT THE VIENNA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY LIBRARY

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Abstract

To remain a relevant part of the academic experience, a library must be adaptable and focus on offering the proper blend of services in a rapidly changing environment. The library organizational structure is key to this process: It ensures that services are provided efficiently while at the same time reflecting and highlighting the library's strategic approach. When organizational structure is allowed to develop organically over time, it may at some point no longer meet current expectations and require deeper intervention.

This presentation focuses on the organizational transformation initiated by the new library director at the Vienna University of Technology Library. We aimed to increase the library's level of institutional embeddedness and to expand its service portfolio in the areas of publication and research support. The process was launched during the transition to a new library software; there was very little time for employee involvement, so a concise workshop format was used to draw up measures that would allow us to achieve strategic change.

The process provided an opportunity to develop a best-practice model for the benefit of other departments, as it took place against the background of a university-wide reorganization, and it was supported and monitored by the university's Human Resources Development & Health Department. The preliminary outcomes and lessons learned were presented at the conference.

Keywords

reorganization, strategy, institutional embeddedness, change management

1. Background of the library and its transformation

The Vienna University of Technology Library was established in 1815 when the university was founded as Imperial and Royal Polytechnic Institute. The library was located in the main building of the university until 1987 and then moved to a separate new building. This new building was initially designed for about 460 students and has almost 700 workstations today. At the end of 2017, the library will have about 1.5 million items. Both the scope and the nature of library services have changed tremendously. In addition, the complex environment of the library has also become more volatile for staff who have had to adapt to new leadership styles at a higher pace than ever before.

The library has been subordinated to the Vice Rector for Infrastructure since the creation of the position in 2015. Prior to that, the library belonged to the Vice Rectorate for Academic Affairs for about 13 years, and before that to the Austrian Ministry of Education (i.e. not to the university itself). Since all decisions on the financial and staffing resources of the various departments are taken by the rectorate, the library has to compete for resources with other departments. For that reason, it has to act strategically and focus on offering the proper blend of services.

In 2016, the library's organizational structure, which had developed organically for about 20 years, no longer met current expectations nor did it support the library's strategies – it required deeper intervention, which coincided with a university-wide reorganization project that was launched by the rectorate with the aim of introducing a solid governance structure and harmonizing the executive roles and responsibilities in research and administration.

While the university-wide reorganization project was a major reason for transforming the library, it was also a great opportunity to ask for support from other administrative units: Our key partners were executives of the Human Resources Development & Health Department (HR Development Department), the Human Resources Administration Department (HR Administration Department), which is responsible for job advertisements and pay scaling, among other things, and the University Office, which is a kind of legal department and in charge of assigning authorizations and thus also important for developing a new organizational structure.

Another important point to consider was the migration to the new library information system, Alma, which was scheduled for mid-August 2017: We had to redefine the library's workflows for Alma, so shifts in areas of responsibility had to be clarified as soon as possible.

In addition, the staff situation made it necessary to take action quickly: In 2016, one senior head of department retired, two subject librarian positions and two other positions were vacated. All these vacancies had to be filled with a view to the library's new strategic orientation in light of headcount limitations. In this context, it was also necessary to check the pay scale groups the library staff members were assigned to and to apply for higher groups where appropriate.

Last but not least, the Vice Rector's personality played an important role in the reorganization – he expects all his departments to deliver innovative services and to advance change – as he had to approve the new structure.

2. Chronology

While the whole process seems well planned in hindsight, it was not at all in the beginning – the following illustration makes it appear much more coherent than it was at first. It almost goes without saying that the illustration does not show every single step of the way:

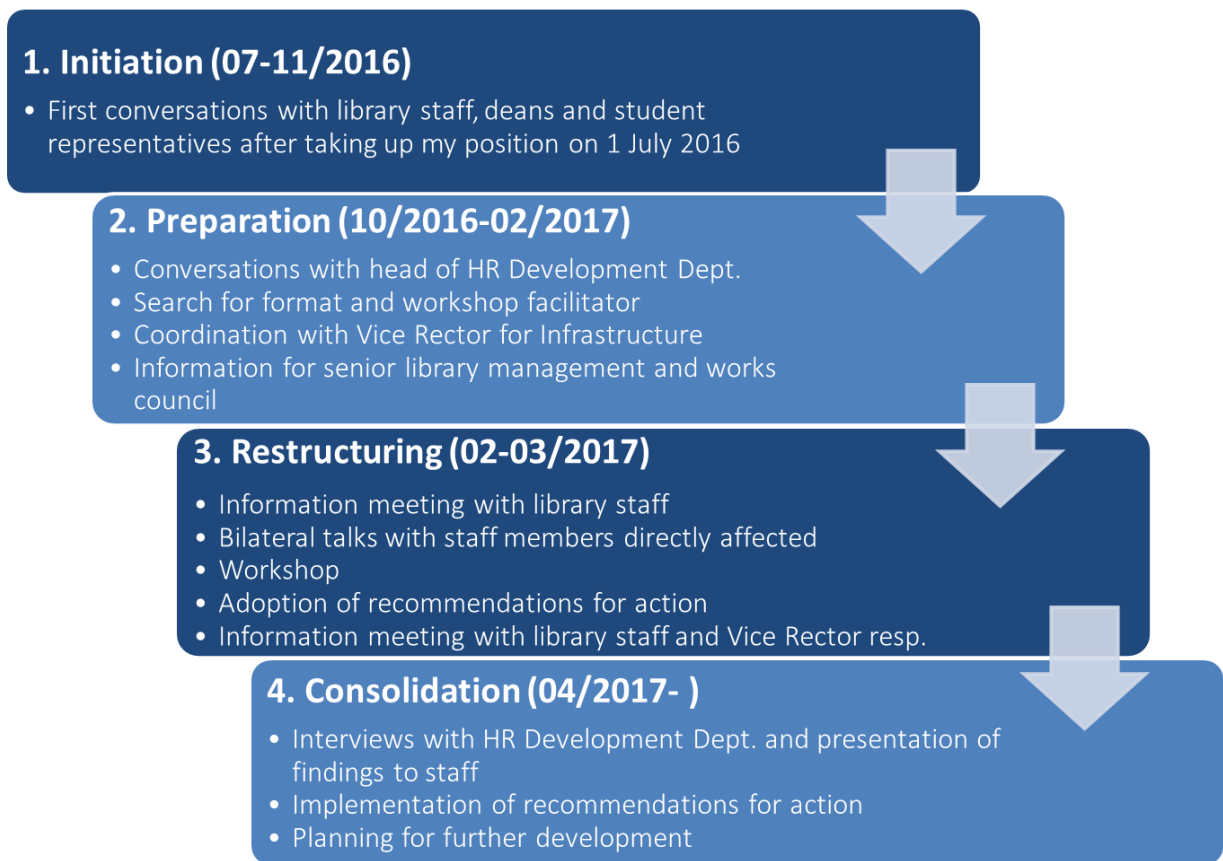


Figure 1: Brief chronology of the transformation process

2.1. Initiation

The initiation period would have happened even without the library reorganization because I was new to the job. To gain an overview of the library organization as soon as possible, I decided for structured conversations with all staff members about leadership, strategic and staff issues as well as partnerships, resources, products and services. I always asked the following four questions:

- What do you want less of?
- What do you want new?
- What do you want more of?
- What can remain as it is?

I held 69 meetings and received almost 700 feedback cards. 64 % were improvement suggestions (without discarding duplicates and overlaps). 25 comments referred to the organizational structure of the library; most of them suggested less hierarchy, more modern structures and more clarity.

To complement the internal perspective, I met with the deans and student representatives to discuss their expectations and level of satisfaction with our service portfolio and cooperation. I also explored opportunities for new partnerships or areas of activity. It turned out that publishing support is what they need most from us, especially in the form of a university press with quality assurance procedures. Bibliometric services are increasingly relevant to both individual researchers and institutes, and the library is valued as a learning and working space for

students. Two faculties are interested in establishing one specialist library for the two of them together.

2.2. Preparation

Even though the process was launched during the transition to a new library software, I wanted to involve as many employees as possible to give them a chance to contribute. I needed a clear framework to help us focus on solutions and specific measures and to ensure that the process was time-saving. Therefore I involved the HR Development Department and applied for financial support and guidance. The head of department recommended three external consultants. After I had gained an impression of them and their approaches, I chose a concise two-day workshop, a format developed by Wolfgang Erharter that is described below in greater detail.

The first draft of the new structure contained a marketing division. Given that divisions have to have five staff members at least and the number of employees was going to remain the same, this draft had to be adapted. Marketing activities now have to be organized in various cross-divisional teams.

After the Vice Rector for Infrastructure had approved the new structure, I informed the head of the HR Administration Department, the works council and the senior library management.

2.3. Restructuring

This period started with an information meeting for the whole staff. I presented the results of our first conversations and the main concepts of the new organizational structure as a conclusion drawn from my analysis. I also invited all staff members to participate in a workshop. The subsequent talks with the staff members directly concerned were very interesting in that most of them were able to correctly identify the division they would belong to. The process of assigning staff members to divisions was completed by the first workshop day.

The workshop in late February 2017 had the following characteristics: The number of participants was limited to 30 people who worked in groups of 15 maximum. Each group had a chair, a secretary, a few critics and a few discussants. After the group work was finished, people presented the results to each other.



Figure 2: Workshop format

Starting with an initial question, which was put forward by the workshop facilitator, the participants had to suggest appropriate topics and promote them. Then they had to agree on six topics and work out specific recommendations for action that were supposed to answer the initial question. The participants recommended e.g. developing a roadmap for the merger of two divisions or setting up a usability team. Other recommendations focused on specifying the number of further training days to be completed per employee, increasing user feedback, and improving the library website and information material.

The arrow below indicates that the process did not stop at this point – a management body had to adopt the recommended measures after the workshop. According to the original plan, decisions would have been made and the suggested measures would have been prioritized in another half-day workshop. When I looked at the suggestions, though, I chose to complete this step with my deputy only before discussing the results with the workshop participants. Then we presented the final results to the entire team and the Vice Rector, respectively.

2.4. Consolidation

As agreed in advance, the HR Development Department conducted interviews with staff members to evaluate the workshop format as well as the reorganization process as a whole. A qualitative method was used for this survey, which is why I cannot present any statistical data. Even though the interviews were held during the work-intensive Alma migration project, 23 interviews were conducted. The individuals interviewed assumed the role of a sounding board.

Since the list of adopted measures also includes clear responsibilities and deadlines, it serves as a monitoring tool that will be used to measure progress once in each quarter; the status of each measure will be documented. At end-2018, the overall success of the reorganization will again be assessed by the HR Development Department in staff interviews during which the implementation of measures will be a key issue.

3. Outcome

3.1. The new organizational structure

By implementing a new structure, we aimed to better respond to the digital transition and to ensure that services are provided efficiently. We also aimed to increase the library's level of institutional embeddedness and to expand its service portfolio in the areas of publication and research support. The structure was intended to reflect and highlight the library's strategic approach for both our staff and the public.

This is the new structure:



Figure 3: The library's new org chart

Two divisions (Books Acquisitions and Cataloging) will be merged after the current head of Cataloging retires in 2018, and the current head of Books Acquisitions will serve as head of the new division. Taking this decision now was important because of the implementation of Alma and the associated change in some workflows. In addition, it gave people more time to get used to the merger. The IT Division was assigned to the Media Department to foster collaboration horizontally and to emphasize the growing importance of metadata management. This way, we ensure that the provision of media items and information is user-friendly and efficient.

All three library sites – the main library, the Chemistry and Mechanical Engineering Library and the Urban Planning Library – are now under one head, which should guarantee a high and uniform level of reader services quality at all locations. The head of this department, my deputy, is also in charge of construction matters (in cooperation with the building department) and long-term stacks planning. In accordance with our strategy to shape attractive learning spaces, we aim to expand our small specialist Urban Planning Library into a medium-size library serving two faculties. The Stacks Management and Circulation Divisions were merged into one single division, which allows us to make better use of our human resources.

The third line highlights the importance of both institutional embeddedness and innovation. We aim to consistently align our services with our customers' needs and improve the level of support we provide to the academic staff. This is why we created a new Publication Services Division and added new staff to the Subject Librarians Division, which had to take on new tasks, e.g. assistance with research data management. If we are successful in implementing a Bibliometric Services Division, it will belong to the Networking & Innovation Department. The reallocation of responsibilities between the senior heads of department allowed us to create a new executive job: The head of this department will be responsible for marketing, fundraising and third-party funding, innovation and service portfolio management as well as user research.

Since we are all aware of the limitations of hierarchical structures, we encourage cross-divisional and cross-departmental teamwork where leadership roles may vary.

3.2. Facts and figures

In April 2017, 22 out of 69 employees got a new supervisor, 11 had to take on new tasks, and 7 were assigned to a higher pay scale group (the process is still ongoing for some people). Due to the merger of two divisions, one employee lost her executive position (without loss of earnings).

The reorganization helped us to retain top performers at the library, to make our job advertisements better comprehensible for staff, and it may even have prevented job cuts.

The workshop was open to all staff members. I expected all executives to participate, but explicitly invited non-managers, too. Figure 4 shows that the volunteers came above all from the IT Division and the Reader Services Department as well as the Subject Librarians and Cataloging Division – all divisions affected by immediate or future changes.

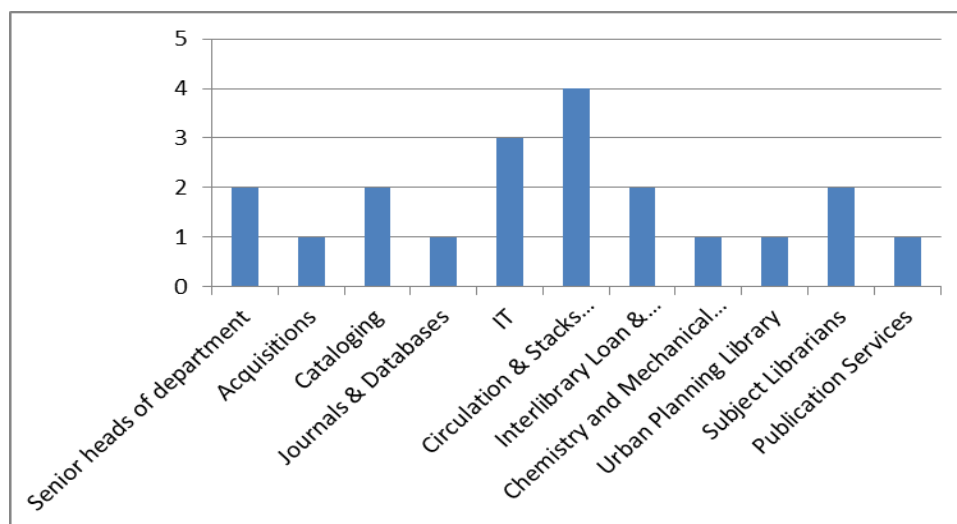


Figure 4: Workshop participants

While some staff members I had not expected at all registered for the workshop (e.g. one of our young apprentices), others I had hoped would attend decided to attend a different workshop. This was the risk I had taken to facilitate broad participation.

The concise format led to 60 recommendations; three of them were set to resubmission, the others were approved by my deputy and me. The fact that the participants did not propose any long-term measures likely has to do with the initial question itself. In our case, it was a long question that probably highlighted too many aspects. Still, one positive outcome is that the workshop enhanced the community spirit.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the process was an opportunity for us to develop a best-practice model for the benefit of other university departments. With some modifications, the workshop can be seen as best practice. For administrative personnel, the first 10-hour workshop day was too long, and the psychological barriers to registering for the workshop will probably be lower if the initial question and the overall workshop approach are presented beforehand.

As a consequence of the close cooperation with the HR Development Department, I was asked to join the steering group of the university-wide reorganization project. Besides, we were granted funding for further team workshops, and it was highly recommended to open future workshops to new participants.

Even if we have entered a kind of consolidation period at this stage, we still have to keep the process going. I believe we need to hold additional workshops to develop a mission statement, create a common understanding of leadership and enhance strategic thinking overall at the library.