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# **Overcoming Barriers in the Development of A Virtual Library Planning Document**

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The University of South Florida (USF) Libraries operate in a collegial, cooperative way yet each operates independently of the other. This arrangement allows the individual missions of each of the USF Libraries to be met while ensuring collaboration and cooperation between the libraries located at the two regional campuses and the three libraries located on the Tampa campus. Initiatives within and among the USF Libraries depend upon a reliable and advanced networked infrastructure and on staff, facility and financial decisions focussed on true programmatic cooperation. Collaborative initiatives have evolved which require stable interinstitutional technical standards and services. In order to enhance information access and services for users of the USF Libraries, it was important that the libraries transcend the barriers based on territoriality. The USF Virtual Libraries Planning Committee first convened in September, 1995. At that meeting, the committee was charged with the task of preparing a proposal for a university-wide virtual library. This paper deals with the interaction between the USF Libraries in defining and realising institutional commitment to the virtual libraries plan.

In order to improve the process of developing the plan, a number of factors were taken into consideration. The first was the commitment to recognise problems involved in the process and to undertake actions to either prevent them or address them. There was a long history of wariness among the libraries. The committee was aware of these legacies but all had a strong commitment to the project. Project outcome is shown to depend upon the behaviour and resources available during the development process, which in turn depend upon the level of commitment. Additional problems that were identified included the possibility of budgetary constraints and top-management's technological non-sophistication. Studies on the topic of systems implementation discuss barriers to effective implementation. These barriers include hesitation in accepting a system, lack of standard formats, and unrealistic priorities and expectations from the parties involved.

As the process of developing the plan began, the Virtual Library Planning Committee (VLPC) distributed four assignments. The first was a shared literature review. The literature review was an on-going process throughout the ten-month project. In addition to the literature review, each member of the committee searched for relevant workshops or conferences and monitored a variety of listservs. Much of literature described was technical in nature. Little of the library literature addressed the social or organisational ramifications for library staff and administration.

The second was the design of a survey instrument. The survey examined specific details on electronic collections and services, the status of cataloguing electronic resources, hardware available, staffing, and fiscal support. The group worked via electronic mail on the design of the survey.

The third assignment was the use of focus groups to determine the variety of users' needs of an ethnically diverse, urban population. User groups surveyed included academic faculty and staff and libraries' faculty and staff. The separate breakout of the USF Libraries' faculty and staff was one tactic for building commitment to the project in its design phases. Seeking employee input and participation is believed to aid in commitment to projects since it instills a sense of ownership of the goals and objectives being pursued.

The fourth assignment was a formal presentation to the Library Directors' group. It included institutional support for attendance at conferences, an allotment for the purchase of pertinent works, and a stipend for a consultant. It is a well documented fact that commitment influences the behaviour of individuals and their interaction within a team. Without commitment from administration, the belief of the individual and/or the team in the relevance of the project wavers or they become indifferent to the project. In fact, a organisational commitment to the project and a commitment to change are key factors in determining the success of a project.

The VLPC was convinced that, as the USF libraries respond to rapid changes in the information environment, organisational change must occur to adapt to those changes. There is an integral link between successful leadership, human resources, and organisational structure. If there is a weakness in any one component, it will negatively impact the other two. A key component to success is the ability to show flexibility and rapid response to change. This is mirrored in the qualifications necessary for staff to work effectively in a rapidly changing environment. It quickly became apparent that the traditional computing community is rich with ideas, analysis and skills that will be important to electronic library goals. The literature also points to two key components in creating an effective organisational structure: the flattening of the structure and developing committee structures across departmental lines. Nothing makes it clearer that a library is an organization, rather than a building or a collection, than the requirement for a long-term institutional commitment for and to electronic information.

At each institution that has successfully implemented a virtual library program, work groups and task forces were developed to review work flow, policies and procedures, overlap, and to create implementation plans to effect organisational change and major projects driven by the new technologies. In several emerging digital [*sic* virtual] libraries, multi-disciplinary teams across academic disciplines and support services have been created to implement their plans. Other successful plans have been comprised of large groups, with phased plans covering a number of years. The USF libraries have an added layer of complexity to contend with its multiple campuses, each of which serves a unique clientele, ranging from the main research library, two regional campus libraries ( one undergraduate/graduate, the other New College), an academic health sciences library, and a mental health research facility library.

It soon became apparent to the VLPC that the successful implementation of a virtual library at the University of South Florida would be based upon the commitment of each of the libraries, its administration, faculty and staff, as well as the commitment of the University to this project. During the discussions within the USF group, each of the institutions was looked at with a critical eye by the committee. Strengths, weakness, ideologies, and strategic staff were identified and examined.

The following problems were identified: 1) the geographic locations of the USF Libraries, 2) the lack of parity in equipment and technologies among the libraries, 3) budget issues, 4) ownership by staff across all the USF Libraries, 5) difficulty in selling this as a USF Libraries project, not just as one library's project, 6) unrealistic expectations by management and staff, and 7) resistance to change. Problems which were identified as undesirable situations but impossible to correct were noted but not much time was spent on them. The group was more interested in devising answers or actions to potentially correctable problems.

To promote ownership of the virtual library plan among the libraries' administration, faculty, and staff, the VLPC devised "actions" for each of the areas under design within the virtual library. Each of the eight teams determined essential for the USF Virtual Library were to have representation from each of the USF Libraries and a member of the VLPC on the team. In addition, the VLPC would remain as an oversight committee for the teams.

The VLPC also dealt with the coming culture shift and the organisational change within each of the libraries. There will be a culture shift within the next two to five years, much like the change from paper to automation. Library faculty and staff need to be assured of their importance and value within the new organizational structure. A strong, well defined and equitably funded staff development program needs to be put in place. Staffing levels must be reviewed to accommodate changing work functions . This process needs to be proactive rather than reactive which will avoid unnecessary stress and morale problems.

The VLPC wanted to acknowledge that the process of change would also impact the operations of a complex library system. It is inevitable that the implementation of the virtual library would cause significant changes within each department across the libraries and campuses. However, the VLPC felt that real ownership would come about only with a commitment from management to 1) educate and train staff in the new technologies and procedures, and 2) manage the change process as openly and honestly as possible, and 3) disseminate information as openly and widely as possible. The coming of the virtual library will significantly impact the culture of libraries, especially among the staff. Cultural models are as

much an issue in libraries as in corporations and academia. The cultural constructs by which the various types of librarians and staff view the worlds of work and patron had to be considered in the redesign of the current environment. Very little is known about the working conditions or institutional and organizational practices that will make digital libraries most usable by library faculty and staff. Most of the emphasis on users has been on the library patron. Models which make explicit connections between a focal technology (such as a digital library) and its immediate users should be used to review the ecology of social relationships with other social groups and organizations in which the technology is developed, adopted and used.

The VLPC also wanted to ensure that the recommended actions be a long-term commitment by the libraries' administrations to their staff. This is seen as a primary commitment for upper and middle level administration. Interinstitutional collaboration is difficult to define and implement, and even more difficult to implement well. When successful, it has the ability to transform significant elements of the way academia conducts its activities. The VLPC postulated that the transformations within the USF Libraries which have occurred to date indicate the beginning successes of the multicampus collaboration. However, to ensure the continued success of this collaborative arrangement requires additional infrastructure elements. These additional elements involve planning, process, people, and administrative issues. As with any large, multicampus system, the USF library directors are faced with increased initiative and decision-making responsibilities. The most single important factor for the success of such a system is a vision that is meaningful to the directors, their faculty, and staff. This vision must be one that is shared by the directors and strenuously advocated within their individual institutional settings.

The VLPC tried to place the implementation of the virtual library within the larger context of the University of South Florida. The role of the USF libraries is not to lead the development of new information technologies but to establish an atmosphere and a process that will promote the integration of these new technologies with each other and with the mission and core values of the University and its campuses. The key to this scholarly environment is the development of organisational, instructional, and informational infrastructures which capitalise on the technology and reinforce the values and the identities of the institution.

The Virtual Libraries Committee also identified three additional issues of importance which are especially relevant to libraries and their user communities - content, access, and support. A quick look at trends in higher education indicates that traditional funding sources are flat or decreasing; public and state mandates call for more accountability in the spending of state dollars; and consumer expectations demand more sophisticated services and greater access to data. It is critical to the success of the Virtual Library Project that the USF Libraries develop mechanisms that will transcend the efforts of the individual USF libraries that participate at any given time. A new breed of partnership must be developed that begins within the USF Libraries.

The real revolution in information technology is about communication, not computation. The essential catalyst for change must be in how our cooperative efforts are communicated both internally and externally. The VLPC was an example of a community-in-practice. This type of work group evolves from three characteristics: 1) valuation of work roles, 2) the degree of participation in "peripheral" learning permitted under working conditions such as conferences, workshops, and networking opportunities, and 3) opportunities for participation in innovative implementations.

All participants of the group were professional librarians, each with different areas of expertise, years of

experience, and levels of knowledge. All participants had pride in their work experience and skills. All were learning, not only abstract knowledge from the extensive reading required, but how to be a member of the "community", i.e., a group, that had, in the past, been wary and territorial. Learners, according to Brown and Duguid, occur through practice. "The central issue in learning is *becoming* a practitioner not learning about *practice*."

In addition, learners must have access to the peripheries of communication, hence the emphasis on the ability to travel to conferences. At these conferences, the workshop participants hear the travails and successes of others in the design and/or implementation of a virtual library. They learn the language of the larger virtual library community, what are acceptable practices, new and emerging technologies and standards, and how to communicate needs and knowledge to a larger group as well as to members of their work environment.

Last, they were all participants in an innovative "community-of-practice." The workgroup practices were fluid and ignored many of the traditional assumptions about librarianship, librarians, and libraries. Teleconferencing was used extensively as was e-mail and editing through the use of a common HTML page. There was an intentional sharing of information and educating the members of the group to facilitate discussion. This allowed them to work, learn, and innovate together.

This paper has tried to show the importance of commitment of a group in the design of a virtual library plan to a multi-library, multi-campus environment. The committee members from each of the USF Libraries established a good working relationship with each other. They were united by their strong desire to make the virtual library plan a viable, and implementable one. The members of the committee discussed issues more openly as the group progressed toward the writing of the document and the analysis of the focus groups. Such candidness promoted a high level of cooperation between all the committee members, despite disagreements, and helped maintain the level of commitment to the group and the project development.

Currently, the VLPC is marketing the virtual library to the libraries' staff and to the University. It is also setting up the eight project teams. Each of the original VLPC members remain committed to the idea of the USF Virtual Library and are determined to work through whatever issues arise to reach that goal.

References available upon request from the author, as is a fuller version of this paper.