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Planning a User-centered Process Improvement for Academic Libraries: A Pathway of Satisfying Users' Needs

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to design a user-centered process improvement for academic libraries. The study proposes a theoretical framework to continuously improve the existing library service processes thus improving user satisfaction, loyalty and retention. The paper is based on a review of literature collected through the secondary sources such as books, research reports and journal articles. This paper attempts to gather and review the literatures on relevant topics and give a theoretical analysis as we try to draw up a conceptual foundation of user-centered process improvement methods and techniques for academic libraries. The proposed framework may provide librarians understanding about what their users' needs and wants, identifying how they can best meet these needs, let them to know how to ensure quality across the library functions, strengthen users' satisfaction and loyalty, and thus achieving the library's goal.

1. Introduction and background

Quality management has long been established as an important strategy for achieving competitive advantage. The aim of the businesses may differ, but the importance of customers is a matter of common interest. The ability of the organizations to adapt to customer requirements in a globalized market is of vital importance for long-term success. A vibrant academic library is considered as an inextricable component of any high quality academic institution to serve lecturers, students as well as other researchers (Ababio *et al*., 2012). The effectiveness of a library as how well the library meets the users' needs relative to the library's goals and objectives (Nwalo, 2003). Quality assurance, therefore, demands that, libraries from time to time need to be assessed and evaluated by its users. As H.J. Harrington's said "Measurement is the first step that leads to control and eventually to improvement. If you can't measure something, you can't understand it. If you can't understand it, you can't control it. If you can't control it, you can't improve it (Shapiro, 2017)". This assertion reflects that, the process improvement is a set of easy-to-follow,

proven tool that allow someone to *measure*, *control*, *manage*, and *improve* the business processes, so that one's business becomes more productive.

The user's satisfaction is also considered to be a reliable benchmark for determining library effectiveness. In a study, Fidzani (1998) and Eager and Oppenheim (1996) stated that, users' assessment can provide invaluable information to libraries in re-orienting their collections, services and activities for effectively meeting their information needs. Periodic collection assessment is necessary to determine to what extent library collections are relevant, current and adequate in meeting the information needs of users (Osburn, 1992). In order to attract students, meet their needs and retain them, Nadiri and Mayboudi (2010) state that higher education providers are actively involved in understanding students' expectations and perceptions of service quality. They accordingly claimed that, in today's intensive competition the key to sustainable competitive advantage lies in delivering high quality service that will in turn result in satisfied customers. The current study, however, seeks to plan a user-centered process improvement that will contribute to go beyond the underlined subject matter. This study tries to answer the flowing research questions:

RQ-1: Has employee satisfaction a positive influence on service quality?

RQ-2: Has employee satisfaction a positive influence on customer satisfaction?

RQ-3: Has service quality a positive influence on customer satisfaction?

RQ-4: Has customer satisfaction a positive influence on customer loyalty and library's goal achievement?

2. Literature review

Satisfying users' needs in academic libraries has been the primary objective of libraries and librarians (Kassim, 2009). Every year, new students come to the university with different needs and expectations. According to Hernon and Altman (1996) and White and Abels (1995), university libraries today are faced with challenges on several elements such as mega book stores, online information providers, e-learning and multimedia products, document delivery services, and other competitive sources of information that seem to be threatening the role of academic libraries. As a result, university libraries may have to adopt a more strategic direction in which the creation and delivery of service satisfactions for their users play an important role. Hence, there is a need for university libraries to understand

the users' needs and satisfy their information and research needs, thereby support in an ongoing learning activities.

2.1 Process improvement

A process is no more than the steps and decisions involved in the way work is accomplished. It is a set of logically related tasks performed to achieve a defined outcome. Process improvement means making things better, not just fighting fires or managing crises. It means setting aside the customary practice of blaming people for problems or failures. It is a way of looking at how we can do our work better. When we take a problem-solving approach or simply try to fix what's broken, we may never discover or understand the root cause of the difficulty. Process improvement skills refer to the ability to adopt a systematic approach in order to identify, analyze, and bring about improvement in the existing business processes for the purpose of optimization and meeting new quotas or quality standards [1]. However, when we engage in true process improvement, we seek to learn what causes things to happen in a process and to use this knowledge to reduce variation, remove activities that contribute no value to the product or service produced, and improve customer satisfaction.

2.2 User-centered process improvement

The process improvement techniques help organizations focus on improving their overall throughput, identifying pinch points that are limiting overall performance, and developing strategies that exploit them for significantly improved revenues and profits. It moves attention away from fault-finding or assigning blame and toward working as a team to eliminate wasteful activities and streamline productivity. In a user-centered process the needs, wants, and limitations of end-users of a product or service are given extensive attention at each stage of the process design. The specific steps of a process improvement plan vary according to the industry, but strategic planning and management leadership play key roles in its success. In the past, competitive success was driven by marketing expertise, financial resources, and technology. Today, a competitive advantage results from superior core process design and a workforce committed to delivering outcomes that are valued by the customer. As Phipps (2001) said, listening to the customer's voice leads to a realization that work design, process simplification, and appropriate use of innovative technology are absolute key to meeting customers' expectations. According to him, a successful process

improvement study depends in large part, on: discovering customer expectations, analyzing where and why the process falls short of those expectations, creating and implementing solutions so the process will meet or exceed customer expectations. This discovery process can generate ideas for what might delight the customers or exceed their expectations.

Improvements require ongoing attention. A continual improvement process is an ongoing effort to improve products, services or processes of any organization. Every aspect of the business is continually examined to cut out waste and improve quality and profitability. To improve any system, Wheeler (1993, p. 21) states, one must listen to the voice of the system; then understand how the inputs affect the outputs of the system; and finally, change the inputs in order to achieve the desired results. Libraries, therefore, need to begin utilizing methods that will signify the quality of service performance, pinpoint the problems where the quality is unacceptable or undesirable, discern the root causes of problems, and finally seek out the solutions that actually eliminate the problems. In a study Power (2011) reveals that, "improving customer value continuously is difficult in almost any organization. That's true partly because so many organizations are still organized around functional silos, which are managed to optimize their own performance rather than to deliver value to customers". But, customers' wants and needs have put more importance on service since the 21st century, which require sustained effort, constancy of purpose, and an environment where continual improvement is the operating philosophy. Different organizations may find different approaches to work better. The study used various concepts from many disciplines to explain the concepts related to process improvement frameworks for academic libraries.

2.3 Process oriented service

Davenport (1994, 134) has defined the concept of an organizational process as: "A process is simply a structured set of activities designed to produce a specified output for a particular customer or market. It has a beginning, an end, and clearly identified inputs and outputs. A process is therefore a structure for action, for how work is done". Davenport's conceptualization of process is a good approach to think and re-think about planning and re-designing of an organization's process improvement. It is therefore important that, before an organization undertakes a process mapping exercise it has to understand the basic ideas and values of process orientation in business. This knowledge will make it easier to

formulate what process descriptions need to describe and why. According to Davenport (1993), a process-oriented service approach means that the organization will:

- Link the purpose and objectives of a business process to the goals of the organization;
- Base process maps on the knowledge of people involved in the business operations under scrutiny, but also take account of those people who have expectations of a service and are affected by its delivery (i.e. citizens and businesses);
- Take a holistic, end-to-end view of processes to add significant value to the external customers' experiences and what they get out of a service;
- Assess and describe operations 'horizontally' i.e. from the point at which a customer makes some kind of request, through all the tasks that must be performed in a logical workflow, to the delivery of the service to meet the customer's request;
- Consult with users to identify value-creating tasks (what) and work procedures (how) that will satisfy them and ensure they receives a tangible value (e.g. an effective and useful e-service);
- Identify and describe available resources and enablers (e.g. IT) to meet the agreed service standards for business performance and service delivery;
- Ensure that employees can identify their roles in the process flow and use this understanding to identify further improvements to the business process.

3. Theoretical background of the design

The theoretical discourse of the current study is incorporated from business world which forms the conceptual basis of this study. Traditionally a business process consists of interrelated activities through which customer value is created within an organization (cf. Porter's value chain, 1980, 1985). At the same way the key to a library's success is its ability to effectively and economically deliver services and information that users' value.

Poor quality services point to the errors and omission in the service delivery process, resource constraints and inappropriate environment. This causes customer defection in the long term. However, managing and improving the quality of products, services, and delivery process can be proactively used to reduce the switching and defection behavior of library users. This improvement in user satisfaction can be directly seen in the bottom-line business performance. The continuous improvement in the service delivery functions can be recommended as a way to improve the existing process.

3.1 Planning a user-centered process improvement framework

The central objective of any information service is to act as a bridge between existing information and the users. The proposed user-centered process improvement framework (see Figure-1) is aimed at coordinating and planning the total efforts of the library so as to gain total users' satisfaction by addressing their goals, behaviors, attitudes and aptitudes. It also intends not to ensure users' satisfaction for the first time only, but to keep them, and make them come back to the library.
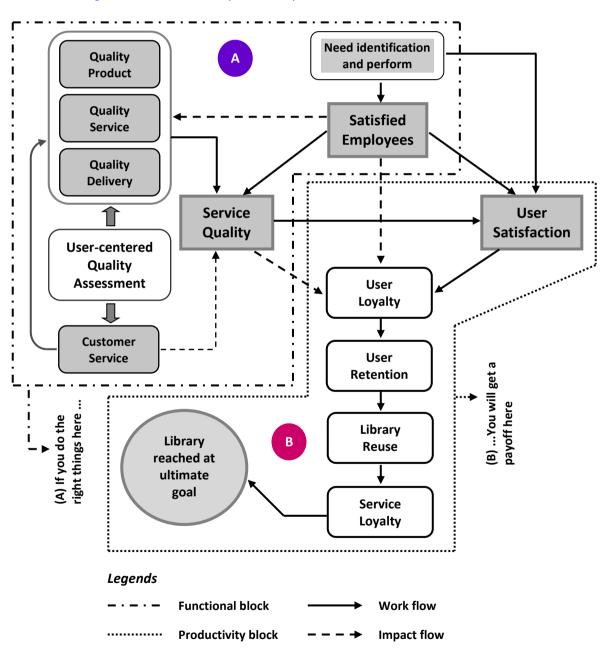
Figure 1: User-centered process improvement for academic libraries

Legends

— · — · —	Functional block	→	Work flow
··············	Productivity block	– – – →	Impact flow

3.1.1 Overview of the framework

The proposed user-centered process improvement framework depicted in Figure-1 has been initially broken up into two blocks. Block "A" indicates the functional or input area, and block "B" indicates the productivity or output area. Operationally the framework has been described into three major functional domains:

a. *Need identification and perform*;

b. *Service delivery*; *and*

c. *Quality assessment*;

Based on these three domains the framework incorporates several viewpoints:

Viewpoint-1*: Performing users' needs are the first imperative to deliver functionalities;*

No libraries can meet the needs of their users without a good understanding of what the users' needs and expectations are. Librarians, therefore, are responsible for understanding their users' needs and desires, and thereby making effort to satisfy those needs and desires. In a prior study, Hung (2007) stated that, the importance of library service is users-oriented and the needs of meeting their demand and expectations. In the proposed framework, the term 'user' doesn't mean only the basic users, e.g., students/faculties/researchers; library staffs and other corporate members are also considered as library users. As Berry's (1981) view, employees have the need like other customers that is supposed to be fulfilled, and they are to be considered as the internal customer of the organization. Accordingly Adams (2009) said, their needs analysis allows libraries to get a strategic overview of the training required to raise the level of service, enhance job satisfaction, and provide more opportunities for staff.

Viewpoint-2: Service quality has been seen as a direct result of the quality of products, services and service delivery that influence user satisfaction and loyalty;

The service encounter failure may occur due to the outcome (what they receive) or the process (how they receive it), and the magnitude of the loss (Smith, Bolton and Wagner, 1999). Peter Drucker said, "quality in a service or product is not what you put into it. It is what the client or customer gets out of it". In service industries, customer satisfaction is always influenced by the quality of interactions between customers and the personnel involved in the contact services (Natalisa and Subroto, 2003). One key goal of all businesses is to achieve a continuous and high level of customer satisfaction in the delivery of services

and/or products. Such satisfaction is believed to be the basis of long term profitability and business growth (Elliott and Smith, 2000). More specifically, a study conducted by Mohindra and Kumar (2015) in Panjab University Library explores that library environment and library services significantly predict the user satisfaction.

Viewpoint-3: User-centered quality assessment ensures service quality and users' satisfaction;
Libraries never stay the same. They either go forward or backward. As a result, service quality must be regularly monitored to assess whether it is improving or disintegrating. The quality service, according to Altman and Hernon (1998), is a competitive necessity for business and service organizations, and assessing service quality is the first step in retaining customers (*users*) in today's competitive environment. In perspective of quality assessment, Hernon and Altman (1996) said, "quality is in the eyes of the beholder… if customers say there is quality service, then there is; if they do not, then there is not; it does not matter what an organization believes about its level of service". Furthermore, Zeithaml *et al*. (1990) proclaimed, the key to delivering high quality service is to continually monitor customer perceptions of service quality, identify causes of service quality shortfalls, and take appropriate actions to improve the quality of service.

Viewpoint-4: Employee satisfaction, service quality, and user satisfaction are likely to be associated to one another in achieving user's loyalty and library's goal;
Business processes are the operational activities that provide, produce and deliver its services. Every service organization wants to develop its business, to improve the performance of its operational works, and the quality of its service delivery. And every organization consists of professional employees who perform business operations, and whose ultimate goal is to maximize customer satisfaction. This comes from the strong belief that high customer satisfaction level leads to high business performance (Morgan, Anderson and Mittal, 2005).

3.1.2 Research questions (RQ)
The above mentioned viewpoint (Viewpoint-4) includes a number of research questions (RQ). The researchers tried to answer the research questions.

RQ-1: Has employee satisfaction a positive influence on service quality?

Employees who are satisfied with their jobs tend to be more involved in their employing organizations, and more dedicated to delivering services with a high level of quality. Yoon and Suh (2003) showed that satisfied employees are more likely to work harder and provide better services via organizational citizenship behaviors. Earlier researches have also suggested that loyal employees are more eager to and more capable of delivering a higher level of service quality (Loveman, 1998; Silvestro and Cross, 2000). Researchers have argued that service quality is influenced by job satisfaction of employees (e.g., Bowen and Schneider, 1985; Hartline and Ferrell, 1996). Wayne *et al*. (1997) and Flynn (2005) also agreed that, when an employer offers favorable working conditions that make its service employees satisfied, the latter will in return tend to be committed to making an extra effort to the organization as a means of reciprocity for their employer, leading to a higher level of service quality.

RQ-2: Has employee satisfaction a positive influence on customer satisfaction?

Internal customer (*employee*) satisfaction is directly linked with external customer (*user*) satisfaction (Piercy, 1994). Caterina (2005) also pointed out that, positive changes in employee attitudes lead to positive changes in customer satisfaction. In perspective of customers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction Zeithaml *et al*'s (2006) stated that, employees like the mirror of an organization are the interface between the organization and the customer, and the satisfaction of the employees enhances employee's productivity and retention, which leads to customer satisfaction. George (1977) expressed also, to have satisfied customers, the firm must have satisfied employees. Because, if the employees are not satisfied with their jobs, achieving customer satisfaction will be difficult (Grönroos, 2001). Moreover, Homburg and Stock (2004) stressed, service employees with a high level of job satisfaction will appear to the customer more balanced and pleased with their environment, leading to positive influence on the level of customer satisfaction. In contrast, dissatisfied service employees are likely to display unpleasant emotions to customers, reducing the level of customer satisfaction through emotional contagion.

RQ-3: Has service quality a positive influence on customer satisfaction?

In service marketing literature it was revealed that service quality and satisfaction are closely related constructs (Babakus *et al*., 2004). A number of writers have also referred to service quality as an antecedent to satisfaction; satisfaction as the antecedent to service quality; or service quality and satisfaction as either interrelated or discrete concepts (Anderson and Fornell, 1994). Several studies showed that service quality may indirectly and directly affect customer satisfaction. For instance, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) said, quality service means resources and services that satisfy the user's expectations. Through conceptual improvement and empirical findings most researchers have agreed that quality judgments cause satisfaction (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). According to Gotlieb *et al*. (1994), if an individual's appraisal of an activity indicates that the person has achieved the planned outcome, then "desire-outcome fulfillment" exists and an affective response follows, leading to satisfaction. In terms of service quality in academic libraries, Hernon and Altman (1996) explored the question of user satisfaction and the part this plays in user perceptions of service quality. In a recent study conducted by Hossain (2019) examined the closer relationship between service quality and satisfaction from users' point of view.

RQ-4: Has customer satisfaction a positive influence on customer loyalty and library's goal achievement?

Customer satisfaction is a significant element in service delivery because understanding and satisfying customer's needs and wants can engender increased market share from repeat purchases (Barsky, 1992; Li, 2013). Goal achievement refers to the loyal users whose intention is to reuse the library, and loyal users are the productivity of library services. If the behavior of the customers is positive to the service holder, then those customers are said as a loyal customer or users (Abdullah, 2012). Customer satisfaction has a long-term financial impact on the business (Nagar and Rajan, 2005). It was also claimed that, highly satisfied customers of a firm are likely to purchase more frequently, in greater volume and buy other goods and services offered by the same service provider (Anderson *et al*., 1994; Gronholdt *et al*., 2000). In operations research and production management, it is common to argue that this relationship is positive. In a services context Reichheld and Sasser (1990) argue that, reducing defects leads to greater loyalty, and increased loyalty leads, in turn, to greater productivity […]. Stank *et al*. (1999) and Verhoef (2003) accordingly stated customer

satisfaction has a positive impact on firm profitability as it enhances customer loyalty and influences customer's futures repurchase intentions and behaviors.

4. Conclusion

Today's academic libraries are changing in response to changes in the learning and research environment and changes in the behavior of library users. This situation causes the libraries to value their development of resources and the application of business marketing to better service. Retaining and increasing membership growth through enhancement of service, therefore, becomes the great concern of library managers. It is therefore, believed that, if we are to meet the needs of our clients, we need to develop a new paradigm for information resources provision. This situation requires for collecting data from the concerned library users, find the appropriate balance, and plan for the future. Libraries, therefore, need data to justify their existence, secure resources, advocate their initiatives, and know what's happening. The proposed framework illustrates that, *service quality* and *user satisfaction* are the direct result of *employee satisfaction*, and these three antecedents are associated to one another in achieving users' loyalty and library's goal.

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