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Human resourcing in academic libraries: the 'lady librarian', the call for flexible staff and the need to be counted

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Abstract

This paper reports on a recent set of research findings into human resource (HR) deployment in academic, college and national libraries in the UK and Ireland by selectively summarising these findings. The recommendations are that libraries should make available for comparison by others not only their library service provision, i.e. opening hours, but also staff provision, i.e. staffing numbers and demographics and staff deployment, with a view to benchmarking levels of flexibility. This work highlights the lack of existing benchmarking facilities in UK universities and colleges of higher education, relating to HR deployment in libraries, and recommends that Sconul extends the existing data collection in its Annual Statistical return to include this HR area.

Keywords- Sconul human resource management libraries
employee deployment staff flexibility gender
stereotypes

Librarians have, for many a long year, worried about their image. In contrast to the positive image of other professions, we perceive our own to be unsatisfactory: at best the librarian is a harmless and well meaning sort; at worst a controlling individual in flight from the challenges of the real world. In fact, the reality is more complex: the earliest image is not that bad, with the librarian portrayed as monk or member of the clergy, fulfilling the role of guard, literally holding the keys to that collection (Knight, 2004). Subsequently, through time, this perception has evolved: during the period of World War 1, the primary role for libraries shifted from education to recreation, with the role of librarian shifting from keeper to assister of access. And at this point the profession had become strongly dominated by women.

Simultaneously, literature started to portray librarians in terms of stereotypes, with female professionals portrayed as "the timid, plain-looking middle-aged female" and as "drab spinsters peering over the rim of their glasses ready to 'shush' a library patron for the offence of talking too loud" (Arant & Benefiel, 2002, p97). By contrast, men in the profession - rather than being viewed as professional or as businessmen - were ascribed passive feminine traits and were viewed through images of the "bibliophile, a pale undernourished man who lived only for his books" (ibid., p98) , or as "intellectual eunuchs who care for books" (ibid., p21). Apparently "a librarian's evenings should, by choice, be spent in reading" (ibid., p10)!

By the 1960s librarians, male and female, were seen as non-professionals, prim, and proper, glaring at anyone who made too much noise in the library. They stacked shelves or issue and stamped books. Perhaps because of this negative image of the profession, the expression and concept of 'Information Science' arose in the 1960s, as an attempt to disassociate from the word 'Librarian' (ibid.). The 1990s saw an increase in students attending library schools and librarianship

developed a more professional image, with a preference for the label 'Information Professional' or 'Knowledge Manager' (IFLA, 1995; IFLA, 1994). The Information Age has helped make the image of the profession more positive, emphasising its role in both making Information and Communication Technology (ICT) accessible and in teaching users how to use electronic sources of information. The stereotypical image of the spinster librarian is being replaced by an image of efficient information professionals (Arant & Benefiel, 2002; Knight; IFLA, 1995; IFLA, 1994).

Why should we think about such issues of perception and standing?

Firstly, because we know that lack of esteem for the profession has bad consequences: it results in lower pay for library post-holders, less resourcing for libraries as institutions, and an undervaluing of the role of information services in society at large. However, a secondary effect may be on the profession's own perception of itself, whereby we unconsciously begin to perceive ourselves as others see us and thus manage staff in libraries in ways that are less than ideal. So the question is, do we as a profession manage our libraries according to stereotypes of the librarian that, in all other contexts, we would reject?

Recent research findings relating to gender and flexible employment patterns in UK academic libraries (MacLean, 2005; Maclean, 2006) throw some light on this second concern. This research (whose methodology is summarised in Appendix A) shows that initial impressions appear to uphold the belief that nowadays librarians are indeed 'lady librarians' - because the majority of librarians are female. However, look deeper and the truth is more likely to be that the majority of clerical staff are female, and, in particular there are more female than male staff working part-time in job-share partnerships (Appendix B). However, the majority of people at the top are, by a small margin, male: for example the majority of Directors of Library Services are male.

And while the majority of senior managers (e.g. Heads of Divisions or middle managers) are female, such female managers are mainly to be found in one particular area, the University sector. Does this evidence about staff management patterns in libraries show that library managers run their libraries in accordance with received images that the profession itself does not recognise? Is this evidence of the profession managing according to stereotype, rather than on the grounds of objective merit?

Brewerton wrote in the context of College, National and University Libraries, "Why is it that (invariably) our staffing does not reflect – or come anywhere near reflecting - the social and ethnic diversity of our customer base?" (Brewerton, 2002, p5). This raises a further question, "how can a diverse workforce be attracted to apply for a job?" This is an enormously complex question which cannot be answered in full here.

But we can say that, however the workforce is made up, human resources are considered to be the most valued asset and "People hold the key to more productive and efficient organisations. The way in which people are managed and developed at work has major effects upon quality, customer service, organisational flexibility and costs" (Taylor, 2002, p vii). Strategic human resource management is about making the most of those resources or assets. The call is for more flexible staff.

Flexibility means using staff with no preconceptions or stereotypes about how they should be deployed. This is a financial issue, as much as an issue of equality and fairness: the Follet Report concluded that value for money should be obtained with regard to library resources, given that spending on staff accounts for over half the total spend in libraries (University of Edinburgh, 1993). This strategic

move towards more open deployment of staff can be mutually beneficial; employers can use staff flexibly for operational reasons, and employees who embrace the new technologies raising their competence will be up-skilled (Baker, 1994). However, creative thinking skills are required if organisations are to be flexible, adaptable and agile in the context of frequent and on-going changes in the business environment (McKenna & Beech, 1995; Arant & Benefiel, 2002).

Functional flexibility comes through less rigid job descriptions and a broader range of duties, and through less restrictive and more diverse activities at work (Taylor, 2002). Adaptive organisations need adaptive employees who can be flexible about the what, how, when and why of performing work in order that activity can be managerially directed towards the achievement of organisational objectives (Corbridge and Pilbeam, 1998).

With these broader considerations in mind, other parts of this recent research also examined non-gender-related aspects of flexibility amongst staff deployment in UK libraries (MacLean, op. cit.). This is a point on which there is a broad consensus of opinion: beyond gender-based issues, we would all agree that, when a gap appears in service provision, if staff in general are able to turn their hand to anything, staffing arrangements have to be such that the movement of staff to provide cover is possible. Tasks have then to be either prioritised or re-allocated thus rebalancing the existing workload of colleagues. Similarly, the ability to integrate staff into other work area requires perhaps dormant skills to be kept up-to-date, so as to be able to respond as and when required.

If staff specialise narrowly in one area of work, when gaps appear, there is no adequate way of temporarily filling the gap and maintaining service provision. The advantage of flexible deployment would appear to benefit both employee and employer: staff acquire a wider range of abilities, and more variety in their work. The employer gets a workforce with higher morale, which in turn can help to reduce staff turnover.

This primary research showed that, in some specific areas of flexible working, libraries are doing well, e.g. they are offering extended opening hours into the evenings and over the weekends, and are providing a staffed service during these times. As a result, staff are being deployed in more than one capacity, rather than in one specific role (see Appendix C, Tables 5 and 6).

However, in spite of the fact that there is a need for flexibility in structures to assist with the flexible deployment of human resources, these investigations show that, by and large, libraries have not extensively adopted this 'best practice'. The majority of libraries surveyed still favour traditional structures which can inhibit the 'rapid response' of human resources as and when required – they are hierarchical not flat structures, whose own estimate of their flexible staff deployment is quite honest: they are either 'slightly' or 'fairly' flexible in this regard, but no better than that. (see Appendix C, Tables 7 and 8 – of course, for a fuller exploration of these issues and the complete dataset, please see the original research (MacLean, op. cit.).

So, to sum up, in order to address these issues effectively in the future, we should be able, on a year by year basis, to answer the question "How well are we all doing on gender and flexibility?" Thus, it would be useful for practitioners in similar areas across the profession to be able to compare staffing levels, degrees of flexibility and staffing profiles on a regular and consistent basis. To this end, the Follet Report recommended, in strategic planning, the use of a generic set of performance indicators for libraries (University of Edinburgh, 1993), the ability to benchmark, that is, the need to be counted and to be able to compare one institution against another.

Sconul, the Society of College, National and University libraries, promotes excellence in library services in higher education and national libraries across the UK and Ireland. Their aim is to promote the sharing and development of good practice, to influence policy makers and encourage debate and to raise the profile of higher education and national libraries. Their annual statistical work has long been part of their approach to measuring quality of service, and their data provide firm information for strategic planners (Sconul, 2004). They provide performance indicators within the higher education sector and “many library directors in UK universities and colleges of higher education regularly use the statistics to compare their service with the provision of service in other institutions” (ibid. p ii).

It would not take much adjustment to amend the current paperwork to cover issues of flexible staff deployment. The annual Sconul Statistical Return, could be adjusted to include a section covering (a) staffing numbers (b) a breakdown by demographics e.g. age, gender, background, and these variables by staffing categories, i.e. manual, clerical or professional, and (c) an indication of how staff work within the library, the extent of flexible deployment.

In conclusion, it should be acknowledged that this paper has only explored some of the issues covered in the recent research referred to in this brief paper (MacLean, op. cit.). The three areas skimmed over here, gender, flexibility and comparability are each huge and diverse. There are no easy answers, and so long as libraries continue to employ staff, these issues will remain. However, certain tools (such as benchmarking statistics) are available to us, which can help us analyse and change the situation in our libraries with regard to staff deployment. Looking to the future, we should use these tools to best effect, as has been outlined above.

Appendices:

Appendix A: Research Methodology

Research aim

The aim of the research was to evaluate human resource deployment in the library services in universities and colleges of higher education across the UK and Ireland, in terms of gender balance, approaches to human resource management (HRM) and flexibility in human resource planning (HRP).

Participating respondents

The population comprised College, National and University libraries across the UK and Ireland, with the sample or subset being the Society of College, National and University Libraries (Sconul) member institutions.

The number of participants in the sample was determined by combining two lists: the 166 institutions which were contacted to participate in the Sconul Statistical return (Sconul, 2004) with the list of Sconul member institutions on the web site (Sconul, a) which identifies a further 16 institutions. This resulted in 182 libraries. (MacLean, 2005, p57).

Methodology

Given the scattered geographical locations of participants, data collection was by self completion, postal questionnaires which was deemed to be the most cost effective and time efficient means of data collection (Bryman, 2001, p128). 182 self administered postal questionnaires were issued, with 70 returned, resulting in a 38.5% response rate. The likely response for postal questionnaires is variable and 30% is 'reasonable' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003, Table 10.1, p284). Of these 70, none were totally completed, so all 70 were incomplete responses.

The following table (MacLean, 2005, Table 5, p68) shows the respondents by Library sector

	Number	% of total
University Library	44	63
College of Higher Education Library	20	29
National Library	4	6
Other	2	3
Total	70	100

The percentage of the total population broadly matches the make-up of Sconul member institutions and is therefore representative of the total sample. The response rate was 38.5%, 'reasonable' for a postal questionnaire (MacLean, 2005, p60).

The data was then analyzed using Excel packages.

The limitations of the research include a single method of data collection, the length of the questionnaire and the potentially sensitive issue of the subject of gender balance in the workforce. Despite these limitations the research design supports the research aim and objectives.

Appendix B: Research findings on Gender:

Table 1: Gender balance by staff category by all respondents

Staff Category	Majority findings	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
Professional	More female than male	40, n=70	57.14	6, n=70	8.57
Clerical	More female than male	40, n=70	57.14	12, n=70	17.14
Manual	More male than female	8, n=70	11.42	55, n=70	78.57
Technical	All male	8, n=70	11.42	47, n=70	67.14

Table 2: Gender of senior or middle managers, Heads of Divisions by sector

	Majority findings	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
University	More female than male	12, n=44	27.27	15, n=44	37.5
College	Equal gender balance	3, n=20	15	17, n=20	85
National	More male than female	2, n=4	50	2, n=4	50
Other	Missing data	0	0	2, n=2	100

Table 3: Gender of most senior staff, Directors of Library Services

	Response rate	Response rate %
Male	35, n=70	50
Female	33, n=70	47
Missing data	2, n=70	3

Table 4: Gender balance in part-time job-share work by sector

	Majority findings	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
University	More female than male	21, n=44	47.72	19, n=44	43.18
College	All female	3, n=20	15	17, n=20	85
National	All female	2, n=4	50	2, n=4	50
Other	Missing data	0	0	2, n=2	100

Appendix C: Other research findings on flexibility and use of staff:

Table 5: Number of libraries open after 17.00, Monday to Friday

	Response rate	Response rate %
Yes	70, n=70	100
No	0, n=70	0

Table 6: Number of Libraries open over the weekend

	Response rate	Response rate %
Yes	64	91.5
No	5	7
Missing data	1	1.5

Table 7: Library structure by sector

	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
University: hierarchical	31, n=44	70.45	0	0
Flatter	13, n=44	29.54	0	0
College: hierarchical	3, n=20	15	0	0
Flatter	17, n=20	5	0	0
National: hierarchical	2, n=4	50	0	0
Flatter	2, n=4	50	0	0
Other: hierarchical	1, n=2	50	0	0
Flatter	1, n=2	50	0	0

Table 8: The extent of flexible deployment of staff by size of staff complement

	finding	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
Small	Fairly	12, n=27	44.44	4, n=27	14.81
Medium	Slightly	14, n=31	45.16	1, n=31	3.22
Large	Fairly	7, n=12	58.12	2, n=12	16.66

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