Validating library strategies by assuming the user perspective

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Abstract
Strategies determine the long-term direction of organizations and institutions and they are historically formulated by top management. In an increasingly interconnected world, more and more stakeholders are expecting to contribute to both the development and the implementation of strategies. Strategies must therefore be understandable by all stakeholders and clear to implement. The first step is to determine what objectives are to be achieved and individual strategies are developed in this context, then, how these goals can be achieved. Thus, strategies define paths to the goal.

But what exactly is a “goal”? A lot of problems arise because goals’ and ‘objectives’ are not clearly defined and can mean many different things to different stakeholders. As a consequence, the word "goal" is not effective but can be more precisely differentiated into “Results”, “Uses” and “Benefits”.

There is a method developed in New Zealand for validating your strategy, i.e. to see what needs to be done; (is it logical?); to make the strategy more successful; (is there compelling Evidence that the strategy will definitely produce the desired outcomes) and to looks at the costs compared to the benefits (is it ‘worth it’). It is done by adding or integrating the user’s perspective to the planning and validating process.

The first step in validating a library project, program or strategy is to define it rigorously using the following general sequence: There are (Library) Projects which will produce Results which customers will Use to create Benefits.

This logical sequence is called PRUB. PRUB describes the processes in the relationship between the library and the users. To validate each library project, program or strategy it must be described as a Sub-Strategy which contains all the linked Projects, Results and Uses which are both necessary and sufficient to generate the desired Benefits.

The Projects and Results are within the control of library management whereas the Uses and Benefits are on the user side. This shows that strategy development should start with value to customers (i.e. Benefits), so all strategies can be user-orientated at last. The paper will show the new method using a practical example from the library environment.
Strategies in Libraries

The word "strategy" originates from military context and meant the art of leadership of armed forces during the war (Raps, 2009, 9). Today the word strategy is used in very different settings and often relating to economics or finance, although it emerged only in the sixties as a field of study and practice in business administration (Kiechel, 2010, xii). In these days strategy was defined by “the determination of the basic long-term goals of an enterprise, and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out these goals.” (Chandler, 1962, 13). In the eighties Porter introduced the aspects of competition and of learning organization in his definition of strategy and another twenty years later Henry Mintzberg differentiated the term into five different definitions: plan, pattern, position, ploy, perspective. (Mintzberg, 1998, 9) In the last years the aspects of competition and sustainability seem to become more important.

So it's hard to decide for one single definition, especially in the light of the fact that libraries are not private enterprises but public sector organizations or authorities, whose (financial) framework is very different from those of corporations. On the other hand all those definitions have some common characteristics that are valid in general for different kinds of organizations. Strategies are:

- forward-looking,
- long-term,
- include plans and actions,
- aim to ensure success,
- act at different levels.

To put it in a nutshell, strategy closes the gap between the current state of an organization and the state that the organization wants to reach in the future; it is the planned path to future success. As defined concisely by Freek Vermeulen (2010, 22) a strategy is ‘an action plan and a rationale’.

But what is success in a public organization? Unlike in corporations, it is not sales and revenue-generation that is of most interest in the public sector but the stakeholder value, and this means meeting the expectations of the stakeholders, especially the Users. Emphasizing these aspects two newer definitions of strategy can be applied very well to public sector organization respective libraries:

“Strategy describes the long-term orientation of the tasks of an organization, which obtains competitive advantages in a changing environment by using resources and competences with the aim of meeting the expectations of the stakeholders.” (Johnson et.al.; 2011, 8)

„Highly individual system performance, which depends on the overall framework“ (Nagel / Wimmer, 2009, 26)

Having identified the meaning of strategy for libraries the issue of necessity can be raised. Why are strategies important for libraries?

- A strategy is an instrument that can be used in order to compete for resources, which can be money, personnel or stakeholder awareness within the organization (e.g. the university)
- In a dynamic environment, a library’s strategy help to legitimize actions and to show performance or even impact. Here, that means impact on students or scientists (i.e. User-stakeholders)
- Strategies can be used for positioning within the (host) organization
- Strategies can be used for positioning within the library environment e.g. when looking for cooperation. This is especially important in the context of EU projects, where usually partners from two or three different countries are needed to receive EU funding or sponsorship.
- Strategies can be used as an instrument for communication and marketing, i.e. it is crucial for internal and external communication. Internal aspect: Everyone who should contribute to the success of the strategy must also know and understand it. External aspect: Whether and how the strategy should be communicated publicly depends on the individual case, but letting people know where you want to go is always a sign of transparency and openness.

- Strategies can be used as an instrument for organizational and human resource development. By knowing the strengths of the library, further developments can be managed appropriately. In strategy development, the environment, such as competition, target groups and changes must be kept firmly in sight.

The last aspect is very important since a strategy can never be developed alone. At this point the strategy model of Pillkahn comes in (Pilkahn, 2008, 85). It sees every institution in the context of closer surroundings (library sector) and larger environment. This view is already known by the concept of the learning organization, but in this model, the external worlds has a strong influence on the design of the internal organization, which explains why the own future-oriented planning can never be done in isolation from the external environment. Unable to be successful by operating in isolation, institutions are forced by the dynamic changes of their own sector and environment to adapt their strategic responses to new conditions. According to Pilkahn this is the macro level e.g. the general public funding of universities or the demographic change.

As in many industries, the library sector – at the micro level - is strongly influenced by the development of IT. This means that products and services are being replaced by new ones or changed in ever shorter intervals. In addition, the media reception of our target group (students) changed significantly by the digital natives’ generations. Therefore, it is important to monitor changes and to anticipate developments in order to establish a sustainable strategy. At the micro level, the institution directly interacts with its environment, i.e. this is about the communication with customers, suppliers and competitors.

Fig 1.: Adapted Version of the Strategy model according to Pilkahn, 2008. S.85
The next level in Pilkahns model is the inner strategic level of the institution. With respect to libraries this is not the direct library level but the level of the funding or host organization. Therefore the model contains a new, second inner circle. The success of every library depends significantly on its contact with its funding institution and primarily on the way it can contribute to achieving that institution's strategic objectives. To be long term successful it needs a strong emphasis on the relationship with the funding body. The latter logically has an expressed interest in measuring performance for the organization itself as well as for the primary user group (the stakeholders), essentially by verifying exactly how the funds were used and how this expenditure enabled users to create their desired Benefits.

The internal target planning and strategy discussion requires direct and indirect customer communications. General trends can be identified from studies, but determining exactly what library users want to do and hence what products and services customers really prefer or wish for in the future, can only be determined by listening to customers i.e. to conduct end-user (and other stakeholder) market-research through documented interviews and discussions with the various stakeholders. In this way, the library with its various stakeholders (not only with the customer!) can determine what services will be offered and in what form. This feedback as to the intended objectives of both the sponsoring organization as well as the library’s users is important. It is essential to be informed results of both direct and indirect customer communications. This includes for example the analysis of usage statistics Electronic Publications - Keyword COUNTER - which give a rough indication of the population trends. Similarly, the analysis of log files or web beacons on the library homepage and the search function in the overall program or the OPAC search can give hints as to user behavior and search requests.

The target groups for higher education and research libraries are clearly defined in the form of university members. From the standpoint of strategic planning it can therefore not be just about the primary user group as a target group, but the identification of specific target groups and stakeholders. This is connected with the question of which groups must be present in a strategic repositioning. This could include, for example particularly intensive users; certain faculties or research focuses; or people are in management positions.

What is needed is a stakeholder analysis within the institution that answers the questions: What do our Users want to do (Uses) and why (Benefits) so what do they need from libraries (Results) and therefore what do we need to do (Projects) to create these Results (library products, services, infrastructure)?

The OpenStrategies Approach

There is a strategy development and validating approach tool coming from New Zealand, already used in Great Britain - especially in the public sector – that integrates the users’ or stakeholders’ view in a very specific way. It integrates the actual Uses and Benefits from customers, community, and other stakeholders into the strategy. Only if a service or product is used by the customers, is the strategy successful.

The general idea of the approach is that Libraries (Organizations) manage Projects to produce Results which customers and citizens Use to create Benefits or Outcomes for themselves or for others. These four central concepts are called PRUB. The concept is in contrast to traditional strategy development processes, which mostly start by creating a Vision and a Mission, i.e. they start at the top. It is helpful to have a vision and mission, but the OpenStrategies approach goes further than
this. Because it “integrates the users’ perspective, which defines success or failure of a strategy”. [Driver, 2014, 9f]

The figure shows the fundamental (OpenStrategies) concept:

Fig 2.: PRUB Process (Driver, 2014, 23)

The core function of all organizations is 'to create assets (products / services) and enable people to use them to create benefits’. Effective strategies must necessarily focus on and improve this core function.

Important to notice is the specific wording of the approach. Since the word "goal" is very fuzzy it is not used in the OpenStrategies' system. The actions or activities undertaken by organizations are called “Projects” which have specific Results in terms of infrastructure, products or services. That is also quite different form usual approaches. OpenStrategies differentiates between three different levels:

- Aspirational strategies
- Guidance strategies
- Operational strategies

Aspirational strategies are highest level strategies and describe what stakeholders aspire to.

Guidance strategies are often called action plans and are more specific although they still remain insufficiently specific to be implementable

Operational strategies define exactly what needs to be done and why and they are the only strategies that can be directly implemented. Very often SubStrategies precisely encapsulate what need to be done addressing a single theme. They are the smallest unit of strategy and building blocks for larger SubStrategies or OpenStrategies. [Driver, 2014, 23f]

Creating OpenStrategies

To give an example of the way OpenStrategies are established, the NMC Horizon Report: 2014 Library Edition and his key findings is used. This Report examines key trends, significant challenges, and emerging technologies for their potential impact on academic and research libraries worldwide.” (NMC Horizon Report, 2014, 32ff). As key trends in Technology for Academic and Research Libraries the following aspects have been identified

1. Electronic Publishing
2. Mobile Apps
3. Bibliometrics and Citation Technologies
4. Open Content
5. The Internet of Things
6. Semantic Web and Linked Data

The first four aspects and two additional ones (research data and google scholar integration) are defined in aspirational OpenStrategies, i.e. high level statements which cannot be implemented directly. It is important to notice that establishing an OpenStrategy means first; understanding what libraries’ users actually do (i.e. Uses) and why (Benefits) and secondly determining what libraries need to create (i.e. Results) to enable these Uses and Benefits.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projects</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Uses</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collect research data</td>
<td>Research data readily available to researchers, students and professors in spreadsheets and tables</td>
<td>Other researchers, students and professors use the original research data to extend their own research and development work to create better data, products and services (Reichweite)</td>
<td>Better data, information, products and services are available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish electronic publishing services, populate them with relevant information and make them readily discoverable and accessible to end users</td>
<td>Content is readily available in electronic media / stock (local generated publications) Everyone has access – there is no digital divide so there is “access to all” (barrierefrei)</td>
<td>User access / read and absorb the content at home, in libraries or elsewhere on different devices (responsive design)</td>
<td>Users have the information they need at lost cost (because it was easy to access)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop mobile apps for more easily accessing library information on a wider range of devices</td>
<td>Library app is readily available for searching and retrieving information and media and services</td>
<td>Using mobile apps, Users more frequently, easily and effectively find the information they need, extend borrowing times of media as well as any other information-management actions they wish to take</td>
<td>Students have more of the information they need when and where they need it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projects</td>
<td>Results</td>
<td>Uses</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Set up / <strong>Develop bibliometric processes</strong>, indicators and standards</td>
<td>Set of processes, indicators and standards are available for assessing the impact of publication and research</td>
<td>Own organisation / researchers use performance processes, indicators and standards to guide improvements in the quality of their work</td>
<td>Organisations/researchers have a better understanding of the quality / rank / popularity / quality of their research in relation to other researchers in their fields (high impact factors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libraries establish the role of an liaison librarian whose job it is to act on the details of stakeholders information needs</td>
<td>A skilled liaison librarian is in place in each library</td>
<td></td>
<td>Customers/Users have better and more relevant information from the library because it was targeted to their needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish <strong>User information needs profiles</strong> that meet the specific needs of each user</td>
<td>The liaison librarian knows the User information needs profiles that meet the specific needs of each User</td>
<td>Users work with the librarian to obtain the information they need (guided by their User profile) as well as update their own projects / papers / info needs</td>
<td>Customers/Users are happier because they enjoyed using the library due to having received being better customer / customized services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library collects and coordinates <strong>Open Content</strong> to populate / fill the repository</td>
<td>Open Content Information is available (e.g. via repositories)</td>
<td>Researchers use information in the repository (allows them to use more information in a specific way at no cost)</td>
<td>Students have more money because they had to spend less to access free content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libraries <strong>Integrate their catalogue data in Google Scholar</strong></td>
<td>Catalogue data is readily available in Google scholar</td>
<td>Users find information from a wider range of sources</td>
<td>Customers/Users are happier because they enjoyed using the library due to having received lower cost services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the topic “collection and coordination of Open Content” the aspirational SubStrategies above has been refined by SubStrategy for that single theme.
Fig 3: SubStrategy for the Topic “Open Content”

Understanding the users’ needs

As well as being used to establish implementable strategy statements, OpenStrategies ut can be used to plan from the user’s perspective by reversing the PRUB logic to BURP as shown in the figure.

Fig 4: Implementing and Planning OpenStrategies (Driver, 2014, 23)
That means the starting point for strategic thinking is not the library (and its Projects and Results) but the customer, and the first step is identifying and describing what the customers want to do (i.e. Uses) and how their Uses will create their desired outcomes or Benefits. The process of identifying user needs is strongly connected to research of user (search) behaviour. Only by understanding what users want to do in their library can the library management act and establish relevant Projects to produce genuinely Useable Results.

Summary

Strategy should not be created solely in the library or by the library management. It is essential to include the customer needs (their desired Uses and Benefits) on the one hand and also the needs of the host organization on the other hand. A strategy that assumes both perspectives is far more likely to be successful because it meets the expectations of all the stakeholders. The new Open-Strategies approach seems to be an appropriate model to include these ideas.

References


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