

Task-Based Strategic Planning: Changing Libraries through Workflow Analysis

The logo for R2 consulting, featuring the letters 'R2' in a large, white, sans-serif font on a dark red background, with the word 'consulting' in a smaller, white, sans-serif font to its right.

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Strategic planning often conjures gloomy images for library managers: retreat room walls plastered with flip-chart pages; directors grandly drawing visions of the future or at least their futures; brainstorming the day away as backlogs mount back at the ranch; environmental scans delirious with developments; and, inevitably, a plan so ambitious and divorced from real work that no one actually refers to it again until it's time to repeat the process.

To be fair (if we must), there is also a positive view of such activity. Taking time away from the press of daily business to think about the future and the library's role in it, inspired by creative leaders, can prove essential to helping an organization respond effectively to its environment. In this version, the strategic plan imagines the emerging context of the library, and charts a course from the present to that imagined future. The process energizes staff and management, and renews their commitment. It serves, at its best, as a gyroscope, keeping the organization upright, balanced and on course.

In our work with libraries over the past five years, R2 has identified another aspect of strategic planning that we believe is under-utilized. It's an essential complement to the views from the top and the outside—more of a “bottom up” approach, which we'll call task-based strategic planning. Simply put, library managers can learn a great deal about their future by paying close attention to the work being done day-to-day in the library—and in technical services as much as in public services. Time and again, as we've helped

libraries (and vendors) analyze their work processes, use of automation, and relationships with vendors/agents, we've found lowly tasks bursting with implications for the direction of the organization. We believe it's essential for libraries and the businesses that serve them to take advantage of what's most obvious—the information and clues to strategy available in their own backrooms.

It may help to look at this historically. Think back to the late 1980s, when electronic invoices for serials and monographs were introduced. Instead of a library technician keying individual line items to create an invoice, a batch process enabled automatic creation of the entire invoice in one step. The task of invoice processing changed. With hindsight, the implications of that change are clear. Invoice processing would require less time. Routine keying would decline. New skills would be required, to download the files, operate the software that processed them, to solve problems related to incomplete loads. Broader system access would be needed for Acquisitions and Serials. Increased coordination between operating departments and Systems would be needed. Set-up and coordination with vendors and agents would increase in importance. Reallocation and retraining of staff would be called for. Some form of quality assurance would also be called for, especially as the risk of systemic errors increased—batch processes occasionally create batch errors, after all.

Or set the wayback machine to 1993, when PromptCat first hit the market. Item-by-item search and download

of cataloging records for English-language monographs could be replaced by automated matching (in invoice-sized batches) and electronic delivery of appropriate-level MARC records. If wanted, PromptCat records could also incorporate invoice information, and produce spine labels to be applied before delivery. Library processes for copy cataloging and receiving should have and in many cases did change significantly, combining functions across Acquisitions and Cataloging departments, and in some cases transferring responsibility for copy cataloging to Acquisitions. When tasks change, the organization itself must also change.

It's easy to cite examples from technical services, and we'll return to that area shortly. But the same principle applies to public services. For example, what are the organizational implications of supporting remote access to library resources? What does it mean that Reference staff spend more time tending to printers and troubleshooting desktop applications than to patrons' information needs? How can a library help its patrons learn the myriad electronic resources and interfaces available to them? How does the explosion in ILL demand affect staffing, local availability, and collection development? Who can answer those 2AM Reference questions? By understanding the day-to-day tasks of Reference, library managers can redefine and reassert priorities, and support those with appropriate organizational change.

Libraries have continued to respond to these changing tasks, and on the whole cope well, but at a price: the spiraling stress of those on the front lines, and the nagging sensation of important tasks being left undone. But there is clearly benefit to be gained from quicker recognition of developing problems, and attention to daily tasks that constitute the work of the library can provide an early warning system. Management can intervene sooner and more effectively by anticipating the implications of task-based problems.

Further, the same principle applies to vendors, agents, and publishers – any organization that sells to libraries. In the mid-1990s, to cite another retrospective example, materials vendors began to introduce Web-based selection and ordering tools. Early products were designed to operate directly between library and vendor, without involvement of the ILS. Detailed analysis of the workflow implications of this model quickly revealed that this approach would not do. An order technician first placed the order in the vendor

system, then had to repeat the process in the ILS, first keying a bibliographic record, then creating a PO, encumbering funds, etc. As the vendors came to understand this task-level problem, they adapted their systems to export records, tying their functionality to that of the ILS—and eliminating the redundancy.

But if vendors had looked more closely at the implications of that change, they also could have learned broader lessons. For vendor innovations to succeed, they must be designed consciously to support the library's workflow. Materials and system vendors needed to work together, and share information related to functionality and data mapping. Materials vendors had filled a vacuum created by weak ILS acquisitions modules, and those vendors that built Web systems changed the market. Other materials vendors, bibliographic utilities and ILS vendors had to change their own behavior in response.

This task-based approach to planning is more difficult in the present tense, but can be fruitful nonetheless. The trick is to draw plausible conclusions from current activity—that nexus of tasks, technologies, problems, and innovations that give us both headaches and satisfaction each day—then act on those conclusions to re-position the organization. Consider some examples:

- Licensing activity has burgeoned in recent years. Some of that activity is local, but it can also occur at the consortial or state or even national level. In most institutions, the Counsel's office is also involved. How can the library coordinate all this new activity with so many new partners? How does a contract hold-up in the Counsel's office affect the library's workflow?
- Electronic selection using vendor systems combines the intellectual work of selection and fund assignment with the clerical tasks that support them. What is the impact on the library of pushing this work from hourly staff to professionals who may have faculty status?
- Shelf-ready approval plans do not permit returns; it's therefore tempting not to review the shipments. How can the effectiveness of approval plan profiles be judged without this feedback? What does this mean for library collections? For the integrity of approval profiles?
- System-generated claims for print periodicals are widely viewed as ineffective; the proportion of premature claims can be so high

in some cases that vendors or publishers routinely ignore first claims. Is claiming necessary?

- Check-in of print newspapers, weekly newsmagazines and many other periodicals is done primarily to enable system-generated claiming. When patrons are demanding more access to electronic resources, is this a reasonable use of time?

The list can go on indefinitely. Looking closely at the library's fund structure, use of custom bookplates, gifts policies and processing, shipment and invoice size, renewals procedures—any and all of these can provide food for strategic thought.

By working from the specific to the general, planners can benefit in several ways:

- By starting with an analysis of the current process, the organization shows respect to the staff and their history, validating previous effort and commitment. When staff recognize that managers understand the detail, they are more likely to buy in to proposed changes.
- By working from the bottom up, it's possible to recognize and evaluate the skills people have and use; it's also an opportunity to identify skill sets that are lacking.
- Ideas for improvement can and do originate with frontline staff; they often know very well which tasks are ineffective.
- Placing a workaday problem in a strategic context ties the library's planning to its activity, and its activity to its planning.
- Library staff become more able and willing to see the big picture, and understand the importance of their own role within it.

This analysis can also suggest changes to organizational structure. If change is needed at the task level, it's also likely to be needed at the management level. A decision to focus competent managers on the most critical problems makes it clear to everyone where the library's priorities lie. And in a time when staff flexibility is the order of the day, management flexibility is equally important. It's critical to ensure that the organization is actually structured to correspond with the resulting solutions:

- Strategic tasks can be "organized in" via new departments, job descriptions, hires, reassignments.
- Low-priority tasks can be organized out, eliminating the need for individuals to "control

the urge" to keep doing things the old way. Planning is as much about not doing certain tasks as it is about doing others.

- The most capable and respected hands-on managers can be charged with oversight of the areas that will experience the most change

When strategic plans and organizational redesign are inspired along these lines, they are realistic because they are based in the work itself. The strategy will have a longer shelf life, and also will respond more quickly to further change. The task-based approach needs to be combined with awareness of the library's context and a compelling vision, but concrete tasks offer a better place to start and end the discussion. Focus on tasks more often leads to action, and organizational action should be the goal of any planning process.

In recent months, we've encountered several examples of this approach in action. Two college libraries that share an ILS system are examining all technical services processes to determine whether a single, shared technical services department might serve both campuses more effectively. A large university library has reorganized from a traditional Acquisitions/Serials/Cataloging model into Print Management and Non-Print Management Departments, based on shifts in workload. Subscription agents have redefined their businesses in the context of e-journal management. ILS vendors have invented new products: electronic resource management modules, metasearch and linking tools. Book vendors have begun to integrate eBooks and other digital content into their systems and plans. Publishers have revamped production systems and developed online products of all kinds, and after a period of selling directly to libraries, have begun to rethink this, as libraries reassert the need for vendors and agents—specifically because those partners better support library workflows.

Some of these changes could have occurred earlier and caused less disruption had they been recognized sooner. Close scrutiny of task-based problems, viewed with some imagination and context, can help libraries, vendors, and publishers anticipate new developments and respond sooner and more effectively. But as obvious and practical as it seems, this pre-emptive approach is seldom consciously employed. Why not? It might just bridge the gap so often observed between strategy and the real world, between planning and action.