

Productive to the core: Core competencies and the productive librarian

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Dale, J. & Kellam, L. M. (2013). Productive to the core: Core competencies and the productive librarian. In L. Fraser, J. Kuhl, & C. Smallwood (Eds.), *Time and project management strategies for librarians* (pp. 33-40). Scarecrow Press.

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Abstract:

In the face of shrinking budgets and resource cuts of all kinds, "do more with less" has become an almost constant refrain in libraries across the United States. Unfortunately, doing more with less is a problematic and ultimately unsustainable model if we hope to continue providing high-quality services and resources for our users. There is only so much "more" that we can do with "less" before employees become stretched too thin and burn out quickly. These employees are unlikely to be able to provide the level of service that users expect, leading to a dissatisfied customer base. In addition, larger workloads may lead to increased turnover. Although "doing more with less" has become a common mantra, we could be doing a disservice to both our patrons and our institutions.

Keywords: core competencies | academic librarians | time management

Article:

Before you start this chapter, we have an exercise for you. List three of your own personal core competencies. It does not matter if you have no idea what this term means. Just interpret it however you like and jot down the top three that come to mind.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Now that you have that short list, take another few moments to write down the three things you spend *most* of your time doing at work.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Do your competencies and daily work match up? When I did this exercise, the following competencies came to mind:

1. Teaching
2. Building relationships with campus partners outside of the library
3. Design

I spend most of my time at work on these three things:

1. Teaching
2. Going to meetings
3. Working with campus partners

The fact that my perceived competencies and work match up fairly well is a sign that I am in a position that is a good fit for me. Although this is not a very scientific method for identifying core competencies, self-perception is an important part of this process. Keep these short lists at hand while you read this chapter. Do your ideas about your own core competencies change as we delve more deeply into this concept?

In the face of shrinking budgets and resource cuts of all kinds, "do more with less" has become an almost constant refrain in libraries across the United States. Unfortunately, doing more with less is a problematic and ultimately unsustainable model if we hope to continue providing high-quality services and resources for our users. There is only so much "more" that we can do with "less" before employees become stretched too thin and burn out quickly. These employees are unlikely to be able to provide the level of service that users expect, leading to a dissatisfied customer base. In addition, larger workloads may lead to increased turnover. Although "doing more with less" has become a common mantra, we could be doing a disservice to both our patrons and our institutions.

This chapter offers an alternative to this model, one that makes the best use of human resources in libraries. We discuss the concept of *core competencies*, an idea with strong roots in the business world, and discuss how you and your organization can leverage your core competencies to keep productivity high even in times of economic crisis.

CORE COMPETENCIES 101

In 1990, two academics, C. K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel, introduced the world to their concept of core competence in a *Harvard Business Review* article, "The Core Competence of the Corporation." The authors identified three defining factors of core competencies: a competence 1) can be applied widely to provide access to various markets, 2) "should make a significant contribution to the perceived customer benefits of the end product," and 3) "should be difficult for competitors to imitate" (Prahalad and Hamel 1990, 83-84). Prahalad and Hamel provided numerous examples of companies that were effectively leveraging these competencies at the time of their writing. One of the examples was from a company whose success is still based on investment in a core competence: 3M. According to the authors, 3M's success with products ranging from Post-It notes to photographic film is based on a single competence in sticky tape (Prahalad and Hamel 1990, 82).

Prahalad and Hamel linked core competencies closely to competitive advantage, claiming that "in the long run, competitiveness derives from an ability to build, at lower cost and more speedily than competitors, the core competencies that spawn unanticipated products" (1990, 81). In other words, corporations that focused more on developing core competencies that could be broadly applied were more successful than those that focused resources on developing very specific skills and technologies. The first group was able to take those competencies and innovate in new markets, whereas the second group was tied more exclusively to the specific products they developed. A contemporary example that comes to mind is Apple, a company that has built a competence in user-centered design that has led to an expansion beyond the personal computing market into mobile computing and digital media markets.

Throughout the authors' exploration of core competencies, there is a clear message that they are critical for innovation. According to Prahalad and Hamel, "The skills that together constitute core competence must coalesce around individuals whose efforts are not so narrowly focused that they cannot recognize the opportunities for blending their functional expertise with those of others in new and interesting ways" (1990, 82). This is at the heart of the distinction between competencies and the basic skills required to do a particular task and can also be a stumbling block for large corporations. Using GTE as a business example, the authors described a corporation that devoted resources to identifying important technologies, but "senior line managers continued to act as if they were managing independent business units. Decentralization made it difficult to focus on core competencies" (Prahalad and Hamel 1990, 81). True investment in and support of developing core competencies makes good business sense for these large corporations, because, as the authors pointed out, "Unlike physical assets, which do deteriorate over time, competencies are enhanced as they are applied and shared" (Prahalad and Hamel 1990, 82). Core competencies appreciate in value.

Our introduction to core competencies was not the most traditional. We first learned about this business world concept in a book about time management. In *168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think*, Laura Vanderkam takes the concept and applies it at the personal level. She argues that "people, like companies, can have core competencies too. The same Hamel-Prahalad three-part definition can still apply. An individual's core competencies are best thought of as abilities that can be leveraged across multiple spheres. They should be important and meaningful. And they should be things we do best and that others cannot do nearly as well" (2010, ch. 2, location 557). This concept is really at the heart of Vanderkam's approach to managing time, and she shares a number of examples of core competencies. Many of these examples are in the form of case studies or profiles of various individuals, like Roald Hoffman, a remarkable man who has "leveraged his core competency of patient observation" as both a chemist and a poet (Vanderkam 2010, ch. 2, location 562).

"THE CORE COMPETENCE OF THE LIBRARIAN"

The previous section was a quick overview of a complex concept that has been sparking conversations in the business world and beyond for decades. There is no shortage of literature about core competencies that explores various applications of the theory, and if we had more room, we could look at those applications in more detail. The point of this chapter, though, is to apply core competencies to the library world.

One could take the title of Prahalad and Hamel's article and substitute any number of things for the word "corporation." In the library profession, the application of core competencies exists at two levels: the organizational and the individual. Theoretically, we might expect libraries as organizations to be able to develop competencies in a similar manner to corporations. But most libraries are not corporations. They are knowledge organizations that serve a specific community. Our library, for example, is focused on serving the educational mission of our university and providing quality resources to students, faculty, and staff on our campus. As a state institution, we serve the public as well, but our main "customer" base is comprised of these campus constituents. Because this is the case, library resources and services are necessarily duplicative. We have many of the same books as a library down the road, for example, but our students can't always easily access those materials. We run a popular chat reference service, and so do many other libraries in our university system. That doesn't mean we should give up our chat and direct users to those other services; they are looking for a customized experience.

Still, libraries as organizations can identify and support core competencies. Some academic libraries have invested significant resources in becoming technology leaders, developing innovative technology solutions that can then be shared with other libraries. In our local area, North Carolina State University is known for technology innovation. They have a thriving Digital Library Initiatives Department (<http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/dli/projects/>) that produces projects as varied as citation builders (<http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/dli/projects/citationbuilder/>), historical walking tour apps for mobile devices (<http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/dli/projects/wolfwalk/>), and data visualization (<http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/dli/projects/dataviz/>). Other libraries have focused more on providing innovative customer service experiences, like Yale's Personal Librarian Program (<http://www.library.yale.edu/pl/index.html>) and Stanford University's Library Concierge Project (<http://lib.stanford.edu/sulair-news/concierge-project-training>). Still others have developed in the area of technical services. But at least in the case of academic libraries, technology, customer service, and technical services are all functional requirements, so it is not possible to outsource one of these divisions of your library to another organization. Focusing on an area of strength, however, can help libraries strategically allocate resources throughout the organization. One example of this is the trend in academic libraries to move away from staffing reference desks with only professional librarians. Staff members and students often can help fill in desk hours, freeing up reference librarians to develop other core competencies in teaching and outreach. We see significant opportunities for libraries to leverage the idea of core competencies, even if they are not able to divest themselves of particular functions. But that is a topic for another discussion.

Individual core competencies are what initially got us interested in this idea, and in these competencies we see significant potential for librarians to work smarter rather than harder or longer. Vanderkam states this idea best in her pithy explanation of individual core competencies: these are abilities that are not limited to a single sphere, that are meaningful to you, and that you do better than most people could (Vanderkam 2010, ch. 2, location 556). We use our own experiences in this chapter to illustrate what we mean. Jenny's primary role is to be a first-year instruction librarian, and she has spent her career honing a core competence of teaching. Though this competence is critical in her day-to-day work teaching first-year students, it isn't limited to

that sphere. She also leverages her competence in teaching to create online learning objects, teach users in a more individual setting at the reference desk, and train colleagues.

Lynda's primary job as the data services and government information librarian requires that she spend a large amount of time in consultations with individual students and faculty. She has developed a core competence in one-on-one public service by developing strong relationships with her students and faculty, which has helped her become more embedded in their daily lives. She also has a core competence in project management and often serves in that capacity on committees.

APPLYING CORE COMPETENCIES TO YOUR WORK LIFE

You may identify one or two of your core competencies without much thought, but you likely have more than you realize. Vanderkam takes a holistic approach to determining core competencies. She suggests starting with a detailed time log and analyzing the results of that log to break time into rough categories. After looking at those categories and estimating the time spent, Vanderkam suggests asking yourself two questions: "What do I do best that other people cannot do nearly as well?" and "What things do I spend time on that other people could do, or could do better?" (Vanderkam 2010, ch. 2, location 773). Having gone through this activity ourselves, we can attest that it is critical to keep an open mind when looking at your core competencies. Jenny, for example, is a classic introvert. It initially seemed strange to her to look at the work that she was doing, and that she did best, and to realize that it all had to do with performing in front of or interfacing with people. When you look at the work that you do, try to let go of preconceived notions about your own personality or even your job responsibilities. Often our work evolves over time, so the reality of your day-to-day work may not match up directly with your position description. One way to avoid approaching this process with preconceived notions is to work through it with a partner. You can share your time log with that person and have him or her categorize your activities from a different perspective.

Determining your core competencies is a reflective process, but it must lead to action if you want to leverage these competencies to change your work life. According to Vanderkam, there are three choices for divesting yourself of all the work that does not align with your core competencies: ignore it, minimize it, or outsource it (2010, ch. 2, location 410). This may be a good time to note that Vanderkam, at least at the time of this writing, is a self-employed freelance writer. Those of us who work in organizations may have a harder time simply ignoring non-core-competency work. If a liaison librarian with collection development responsibilities realizes that selecting materials is not one of her core competencies, she cannot simply ignore it. (She can, but there would likely be negative consequences.)

As librarians, our best bet is to hone in on core-competency-related work and to either minimize or outsource the rest if possible. There will always be tasks that must be completed that are not our favorite ones, or that are not core competencies, but it is possible to sharpen focus on those tasks that we do best so that the "right" people are doing the "right" jobs. In the example in the previous paragraph, the librarian who lacks the competency associated with collection development could work within her organization to find someone else who *does* have that competency. In our own department, for example, we have an unofficial collection development

guru. Something in her wiring makes her much better than either of us at collection development. If our goal is to maximize efficiency, it makes sense for us to "outsource" these responsibilities to her. At the crux of this issue is managing time and effort: this guru could almost definitely do a better job ordering books for some liaison areas, and in less time than it takes the current liaison. In turn, another liaison who has a core competency in teaching might take over some of the guru's teaching responsibilities. Brokering these types of deals is, of course, not always as easy as it sounds on paper. But we do think that it can be done, and done well.

As the example above indicates, simply looking over your time and identifying some competencies doesn't mean that you can sit back, relax, and enjoy increased productivity. Pinpointing your competencies is always a useful undertaking, but to really make changes to your work, this process cannot happen in a vacuum. You have to be able to communicate with your colleagues, and especially your supervisor, about how these competencies fit together. Such open conversations can lead to real change within an organization, or even a department or unit. For the exchange in the scenario above to happen, you would need support not only from your colleague (the collections guru), but also from your supervisor(s). To get such support, it is important to approach colleagues and supervisors with a solid plan for changing responsibilities. Telling your supervisor that you do not like collection development is not a good way to leverage your core competencies; explaining that it is not an area you consider a core competence and that it takes a significant amount of time away from the work you do best might be.

Another reason that supervisor or administrator buy-in is important is that core competencies can be developed. If a library has a goal of providing excellent customer service, it makes sense to invest time and resources in training staff to do so. In addition, some employees are better suited for frontline public service, whereas others may do better behind the scenes. The contributions of both groups are still valuable, but to best use employees we should enable them to be in positions where they can provide the best service.

A problem that can occur when core competencies come into play is that sometimes we might take on work in a core competence area that is outside the scope of our position descriptions. When Jenny began working as the first-year instruction coordinator, she inherited coordination responsibilities for a library game night, a successful outreach event started by the librarian previously in that position. This type of event happens to align with her core competencies of relationship building and outreach beyond the library, but that might not be the case for the next person in this position. We recommend that, especially in the current economic climate, organizations build some flexibility into professional positions. Perhaps some responsibilities are best matched with *competencies* of an individual who fits well within an organization rather than *positions* that the organization has designed in advance. Often the overlap will be significant, but there will always be additional responsibilities, those "other duties as assigned," that librarians take on based on interest and competence rather than position.

CONCLUSION

Though we find the idea of core competencies intriguing and have found that this helps us organize our work into areas to emphasize and areas to minimize, we are keenly aware that it is not a magic bullet. So much of the success of an undertaking like this one lies in the individual

and the organization. If you are considering the core competency approach to managing your workload and your time, here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What are your core competencies?
- Have they changed over time and between positions?
- How do they fit into your organization?
- Are there ways you can leverage these core competencies to save yourself and your colleagues time and energy? Are there activities you can outsource? Are there activities you can stop?
- Will your supervisor be supportive of these changes?

As mentioned, this isn't a magic bullet. There will always be tasks to complete that do not align with your core competencies. If your library abandoned shelving books because no one claimed it as a core competency, your library and its users would suffer. Instead, consider core competencies a strategic approach to thinking through how you spend your time and where your time is best spent. In a world where we are often asked to do more with less, librarians need to be strategic about how and when we use our time so that we can work smarter and continue to provide high-quality services and resources for our users.

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