

Strategic positioning for staff realignment

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Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the process and options available to conduct a staff realignment exercise. By approaching financial changes to the organization strategically, staff can be repurposed instead of being made redundant.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper offers several options on how to integrate changes in staffing to meet emerging trends and future anticipation of needs.

Findings – This point of view is based on an unnamed case study that has proven to be successful.

Research limitations/implications – The practices discussed are commonly used in a business environment that undergoes consistence assessment of its operation.

Practical implications – These actions can set a precedent for changing an organizational culture toward self-assessment.

Originality/value – The author played a major part in the case study at his home institution.

Keywords: librarianship | library administration | library management | staff realignment | library finances | organizational culture

Article:

Libraries all across the country are faced with increasingly difficult decisions with regard to reduction of funding sources while trying to maintain a high level of service to the parent institution. Many look internally for opportunities to stretch or repurposing resources. While reallocating materials and equipment purchases is one option, other options might focus on staffing and payroll expenses. Re-purposing human resources is much different than other

expense related decisions as it involves identification of work priorities and trends associated with institutional sustainability, assessment of work performed, individual skill sets and the need to convince people that change is a part of the scenario.

The tough economic times that we have endured for the past two years has created many challenges to most libraries' futures as impacts have been felt in many sectors such as materials budgets, facility renovations, equipment purchasing and upgrades and human resources, which can represent one of the largest fixed expenses for any organization. And the financial downturn has also changed the direction of many strategic planning initiatives as libraries struggle to maintain basic services. A common solution to decreased financial resources is to lay off employees whose current position, role and responsibilities is adversely impacted by declining revenues or budgets and are no longer capable of sustaining a workforce at the same pace. An alternative to massive layoffs is to strategic review the organization for other opportunities in terms of realigning staff to meet different needs.

This paper is based on a case study with a middle sized academic library that produced the data and the process necessary to make re-purposing decisions with regard to staffing and work flow. Specific steps were taken to identify emerging trends and prioritize the ones the library organization wanted to pursue, as well as analyze current staff work activities and skill sets. This resulted in making changes to individual key responsibilities within the guidelines and context of the university's overall human resources formula but provides better leverage to the organization in total.

The goals of this program were to realign library staff into activities and responsibilities that reflects a changing environment for both staff and constituents. The other goal was to avoid layoffs or RIF's by repurposing work activities of employees whose work responsibilities were affected by other changes brought about by budget cuts. As libraries struggle to adjust to lower budgets, there is still the need to recognize a brighter future so positioning the organization strategically in the present is important for the intended impact in the future. Technology, resource expectations and other trends related to how the end users seek and use information is constantly changing and will continue to change even in a poor economy. Libraries must consider how they will pursue these trends with fewer resources so as not to emerge in a brighter overall future behind in their relevance to the larger organization, i.e. campus or community. From a staffing perspective, it is still important to recognize and seek out opportunities for areas of growth or increased demand, explore new services or user needs that need to be supported and have a futuristic point-of-view about where the libraries should be positioned in three to five years.

Trends and emerging concepts

The first consideration in creating a strategy of realignment is to determine what big picture trends will have an impact on your organization and which ones are important to pursue for your stakeholders. Examples of these could be:

- Expected changes in technology especially changes effecting the user such as growth of mobile devices and/or applications that affect access to information.
- Changes to how collections are enhanced both from a format choice and a user demand perspective.
- How users/patrons expectations of physical space changes and is used.
- Diverse skill sets of librarians and other staff and how cross training and flexibility becomes more critical.

Many library organizations still staff traditionally with fixed shifts and work locations as well as focused tasks and responsibilities for each staff member. Looking broadly at desired trends and concepts to pursue helps identify organizational priorities that then needs to be matched with current practices in order to recognize and act on gaps in need versus productivity.

Reviewing current operations

In order to match staff with redefined organizational priorities, it is necessary to determine who is doing what currently. In many businesses, job task analyses are done periodically to assess that staff is utilizing their time on the organizational priorities that are important. These analyses can be done individually or within department groupings to identify routine organizational tasks and modify job descriptions as changes are needed. Library environments faced with severe economic changes should develop a process for measuring the impact that reduced spending has had on individual work performance and departmental outputs.

This is also an opportunity to identify work being done on outdated or lower priority tasks and make decisions on discontinuing that work or service. Other forms of assessment or statistical data are important here to help make those decisions based on usage trends or expanded format options of materials. Also, individual or department work that does not directly impact the department's goals and objectives, such as committee work or community service activities can be reviewed for validation of need.

In conducting a job task analysis there are a few things to keep in mind. The experience can be self-identified or conducted through observational studies depending on how intrusive the activity is perceived to be. Be aware of benchmarking measures which are usually quantitative expectations of tasks performed. This also could include the expected sense of urgency that is placed on any given task and the amount of time it is expected to take under normal circumstances. Also be aware of other factors such as support given, such as from student or

volunteer help, and the expected level of performance which should be assumed to meet the requirements of the task on average.

Aligning staff with priorities

The organizational review will develop goals and objectives based on emerging trends and anticipated needs and must be prioritized to match other financial components in order to know what activities and services are possible to pursue. These trend priorities are then compared to priorities developed from the job task analysis and decisions must be made as to how to direct the energies from continuation of lower priorities into addressing the organization's higher prioritized needs.

In the case study a good example to consider is an acquisition department's slowdown of receiving new materials with the organization's desire to enlarge its digital holdings. Internally, depending on how the organization is structured, it is logical to determine that staff responsibilities can be shifted from a declining activity of receiving new books to a growing activity of creating more digital content. But not so fast, several important factors are important here starting with the skill sets of the individual(s) involved. This process can product much anxiety within staff members throughout the organization and it is important to have a plan for addressing the disparities that will surface from your data gathering.

The component that will make a difference in these pending changes is to have a strong staff development program and a promise to provide the training needed to adjust the skills of those positions being realigned. You have options here in the form of internal or external training, one on one with a subject matter expert or within a larger group such as signing affected staff up for classes. But in any event, it must be part of the decision making process in the beginning.

Another important component to this entire process is to have as a partner the larger institution's human resources department. They will provide the guidance as to what can and cannot be done, in terms of redirecting staff responsibilities and also help blend the impact into the organization's system for employee evaluation and retention/promotion. This means that as people are asked to change roles and responsibilities these new duties should be reflected in their job descriptions and performance plans.

Purposefully following a stated course of action, with the intended results being communicated transparently throughout the process is important for maintaining employee morale and reducing nervousness or anxiety. Figure 1 outlines the basic process that was followed in the case study.

Creating flexible options

Another consideration to make in choosing to make realignment decisions is to recognize that each situation can be different and unique to given circumstances. For this reason it is important to have options available for the actions to be taken and supported by affected staff. Affected

staff is not only staff members who are asked to change departments or perform different duties, but also staff members or whole departments that must compensate for losing or adding additional staff. The way in which changes are made becomes very important to a larger group of people. The following are some model examples considered by the case study (Figure 2).

In this model, based on the emerging trends and plans for future growth, a position is identified as critical or high priority and a selection process is engaged to move an existing staff member. This model also takes into account the loop that can be created if the individual selected to realign is considered critical in their current situation (perhaps wanted a change personally) and the department now follows the same process to replace. However; in departments of declining activity the duties and responsibilities will be absorbed by others (Figure 3).

In this model the circumstances could include overlapping activities between departments or the skill set of the individuals involved. This model calls for dual reporting and a hybrid work environment but it also provides a connection between departments and skills, which could have future considerations (Figure 4).

This model can be used in a project based or time limited situation, in which an important project has been identified as priority but it is not sustainable long term. This provides the organization a model for accepting such projects and having an infrastructure, or at least a process, in place to taking action (Figure 5).

And finally a phased approach that combines shared reporting, time for project completion and ultimately becoming permanent. This model requires the discipline to ensure end goals progress in a timely manner so as to achieve a successful transition at the end.

Conclusion

Our case study identity is not discussed because of concerns and anxieties that did arise in the process. Senior administration goals to realign, instead of losing personnel, in the face of steep budget cuts was risky but at this writing has achieved initial objectives. And while the future is also unclear, this has created precedence for future staffing decisions as the organization continues to meet the challenges of tomorrow. The news has many examples of libraries that pursue layoffs to meet their budgetary obligations and many have no choice. But when circumstances warrant or the ability to realign is possible, this course of actions can help make a strong organization stronger.