Performance measurement in libraries and information services

A report from the second Northumbria International Conference

by Amos Lakos

The second Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services, sponsored by the Department of Information and Library Management at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle and by the British Library, was held at Longhirst Hall, just north of Newcastle upon Tyne, September 7–11, 1997.

This conference focused on the issues of performance measurements in the library field. It was a truly international conference, attracting 141 attendees from 24 countries, including librarians from all branches of librarianship as well as academics. There were six participants from the United States and three from Canada.

This conference followed a highly successful first conference, which took place in 1995.[1] The expressed aims of the 1997 conferences were to provide a venue for discussing various library measurements and assessment issues and activities, to exchange experiences, to increase awareness of current research, and to identify issues for further study and work. Additional goals focused on outcome and impact, and the move from research, definition, and standardization matters to actions and implementation. The papers reflected the emphasis on practical implementation of measurement activities and on questions of how to make measurements aid work processes and management decisions. Problems of comparability of indicators and measurements across different types of libraries and across national jurisdictions were also addressed.

The trend for increased cooperation between libraries across national boundaries was noted, especially the European Union support for cooperation. Theoretical research was also well represented, as well as the growing interest in service level agreements and assessment of library network services.

All told there were 46 papers presented, including five poster sessions. The subjects ranged from comparative measurements, issues of effectiveness, efficiency, management information, service quality assessment initiatives, case studies, performance measurement in an electronic library, the problems of measurement in a networked and Web environment, and many others.

The keynote papers succeeded in touching on most of the central issues affecting assessment and measurement activities in libraries and in the information field. There were five keynote speakers, each one interesting and stimulating.

Are performance measurements effective?

The first keynote paper, "Does Performance Measurement Improve Organizational Effectiveness? A Post-modern analysis," presented by Rowena Cullen from Victoria University in New Zealand, set the tone and the standard

About the author

Amos Lakos is coordinator of management information services at the University of Waterloo Library; e-mail: aalakos@library.uwaterloo.ca

for the conference. She asked the central question of the conference—Do performance measures improve organizational effectiveness in libraries? After all the research, the data-gathering activities, the analysis undertaken and reported, are libraries more effective? She reviewed the more important library research on assessment published during the last five decades, noted the advances and achievements and also the shortcomings, and presented a new model or framework for future performance measurement activities. She noted that recent work done by Altman and Pratt "revealed a dramatic lack of correlation between inputs and outputs, between expenditure and performance."[2] Cullen proposed a new model of organizational effectiveness, based on a typology attributed to Kim Cameron.[3] Cullen's new model of organizational effectiveness used a focus/value/purpose matrix. Using this matrix, some of her conclusions were:

- Performance measurements are political activities, taking place both on a macro and a micro level.

- How institutions act is dependent on their relative internal to external focus, the culture of the organization and the resolve they bring to their activities.

- The profession seems to be reactive—dependent on rewards and incentives.

- Performance measurements are multidimensional in nature and each library will use the measurements that suit its social construct, its environment, and its goals.

- Action, leadership, and initiative are needed.

Service level agreements

Malcolm Smith from the British Library presented another keynote paper titled "The Use of Service Level Agreements at the British Library." Service Level Agreements (SLA) may be defined as a set of agreements between service provider and customer (internal or external), quantifying the minimum acceptable service to the customer. This is a working "contract" that establishes the relationship between the provider of service and its clients. The paper discussed the effort undertaken by the British Library to establish internal SLAs between its various departments as well as with external customers. The paper reviewed the reasons the British Library went in this direction and explored the benefits, the

disadvantages, and the obstacles to implementing SLAs. It concluded that SLAs are valuable tools for the achievement of a number of objectives, such as increasing the accountability of service providers, the creation of a customer oriented institutional culture, development of internal quality chain and development of better relations with customers.

The conference ended with the keynote presentation by F. W. Lancaster, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, entitled "Evaluating the Digital Library." Lancaster described the anticipated digital library, emphasizing the important role librarians have to play in guaranteeing the relevance of the future library environment to the educational process. He focused on identifying a number of concerns, among them the changing clientele, the changing resource base, and the size of on-site collections and diminishing acquisitions. He noted the importance of how access will be delivered in a hybrid environment. Other issues noted were the changing type of assessment activities and difficulties of proving benefits to clients. He raised the issue of change in professional front-line activities, which should be continuously assessed. He introduced the concern that technology forces, as well as enables, users to use less library services. In essence the library may be bypassed as an essential information service provider.

The full conference proceedings were published by Information North for the Department of Information and Library Management at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle.

A more detailed report of the conference is available on the Web at the following URL: http://library.uwaterloo.ca/~aalakos/North97/norsum.html.

Notes

1. *Proceedings of the 1st Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services,* held at Longhirst Hall, Northumberland, England, August 31–September 4, 1995. University of Northumbria at Newcastle: Information North, 1995.

2. A. C Pratt and E. Altman, "Live by numbers, die by the numbers," *Library Journal,* (April 15, 1997), 48–49.

3. K. Cameron, "A Study of Organizational Effectiveness and Its Predictors," *Management Science,* 32 (1986), 87–112. ■