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The value of people

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A review and framework for human capital assessment in academic and research libraries

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to reflect on advances in the understanding and practice of people evaluation in libraries. The paper is conceptual and offers a framework for human capital evaluation.

Design/methodology/approach – The research approach has been to employ a mixed method research strategy (multi-methodology), combining desk research exploring quantitative capital assessment methods from other industries, sectors and libraries; phenomenological observation of existing data collection and development concepts; and survey data from staff in case studies of the author's own and other organizations.

Findings – The synthesis suggests the measures required to populate the library capital dimension of the value scorecard, thereby providing an estimation of the value of a library's human capital.

Originality/value – The paper fills a gap through a broad survey of advances in people assessment in libraries, and provides a unique framework for human capital measurement in libraries.

Keywords Performance measurement, Library management, Human capital, ClimateQUAL +, Human relations, Staff surveys

Paper type Conceptual paper

Background and research approach

The aim of this paper is to reflect on advances in the understanding and practical application of staff evaluation in academic and research libraries. In particular, it presents a conceptual framework aimed at library leaders who seek an organized approach to measuring the value of their human capital and who might wish to use this data for library advocacy by correlating it with other library impact data and broader institutional objectives and values.

The importance of the contribution of people in libraries towards achieving the changes and innovations required for a successful future may seem self-evident to librarians, but other stakeholders may need more solid proofs. It is hard to see another source for the energy and creativity required to evolve libraries to fit the rapidly changing social, financial and technological context. Understanding our people at a deeper level goes hand in hand with the continuing effort to understand our changing users better.

This paper is based on a presentation made to the 4th Library Assessment Conference (Town *et al.*, 2013) but has been extensively updated with additional material from more recent research, publications and cases. This is one of a series of explorations on value measurement commencing with a presentation made at the 8th Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services on the foundations of value measurement for libraries from both a metaphysical and a pragmatic point of view (Town, 2009), followed by a keynote at the 3rd Library Assessment Conference on the transcendent value of libraries (Town, 2011), and concluding with the creation of a values scorecard for libraries (Town and Kyrrillidou, 2012). The scorecard supplements quality oriented measurement frameworks with a view



to demonstrating higher-order (transcendent) value and worth, particularly for advocacy. The components of the values scorecard are:

- relational capital (relationship value and assets);
- library capital (both tangible and intangible assets);
- library virtue (including impact measurements and proofs); and
- library momentum (rate of progress and innovation).

This paper presents a more detailed synthesis of the measures required to populate part of the Library capital dimension of that scorecard: the value of a library's human capital.

The approach throughout the development of these ideas has been to draw on theory and practice from the broad field of management and investigate actual and potential applications in libraries. Some comments on the research approach follow, but the end product of this work is intended to be the development of practical frameworks and tools for use in real world measurement and management. The framework provides a synthesis by combining theory and practice in a way that will guide and assist other libraries to measure and develop their human capital.

The research approach has been to employ a mixed method research strategy (multi-methodology), combining desk research exploring quantitative capital assessment methods from other industries, sectors and libraries; phenomenological observation of existing data collection and development concepts; and survey data from staff in case studies of the author's own and other organizations.

A gap analysis was used to identify potential missing elements in current library people assessment methods, and thus to develop a full conceptual framework for library people related measurement, and the evaluation of human capital and its development and growth.

This study reveals that advances are now taking place in staff related measurement that may be of benefit to libraries in any sector. However, these measures and tools will also need to be compelling and convincing to all institutional stakeholders. One way of achieving that, and a key conclusion drawn, is that these measures also require combination with other data to demonstrate correlation between our people and the quality and value of the services they provide.

There is little shared data and open access to results in the field of library people measurement. Staff surveys are often provided by organizations that do not share (for commercial reasons) the exact methods by which they move from data collected to their dimension related conclusions. Libraries are rightly sensitive to the ethical, confidentiality, managerial and reputational issues around people related data. This means that survey results are often only shared on a controlled and reciprocal basis between those using the same instrument in a confidential grouping. This hampers research generally and particularly insight into the benefits and outcomes of interventions arising from these surveys.

Because this is an attempt to create a framework and consensus around staff measurement in libraries, and because relatively little has been written in this area before, consideration has been given to a broad range of options for the conceptual approach chosen. Learning from other sectors has therefore been used, with the inherent difficulties of transferability, particularly when moving from profit to non-profit contexts in which staff motivation may be fundamentally different.

There is a question about what exactly we are measuring through these various instruments and tools. A spectrum of terminology is used in this field ranging from

“culture”, through “engagement” and “climate”, to individual “affect” in discussions of staff experience measurement. The chosen terms are usually defined by those providing the tools, but without always fully revealing the paradigmatic assumptions about why this element has been chosen as the primary attribute worth measuring. The relationship between these various aspects is also not always well defined. Data from the lived experience also often appears to demolish theoretical pretensions to absolute objectivity or assumptions about the longevity of climates or cultures.

Libraries in academic and research contexts may be created as much by interaction and social construction as they are by leadership and management intent and control. The paradigm of an objective basis for people measurement based on the latter assumption may therefore be questionable. This investigation has tried not to take a strong position: the intent is to be both regulatory (in the sense of describing what is happening) and radical (in the sense of seeking to prescribe what should happen). The author here is also a representative of the hegemonic structure of his organization, which may affect the conclusions drawn.

Some broader issues within library organizations that may have a bearing on the findings have not been fully explored here. The first of these is gender. Libraries historically and presently have a skewed gender make up in their staff complement. In the UK there has been a profound and welcome change over the last 20 years in the gender balance in academic library leadership to one more representative of the workforce, but this has passed almost without comment or analysis in library management literature.

A second unexplored issue is the professional/nonprofessional boundary that still exists in most academic libraries. Surveys can and do reveal distinctions of the experience between staff at these different levels, and the Association of Research Library’s ClimateQUAL+ tool measures an overall climate for rank diversity (Association of Research Libraries, 2013). This is also not deeply explored here, but is worthy of further study.

Finally, the approach throughout has been pragmatic and oriented towards practical solutions and developments for the author’s library, which will be described elsewhere as a case study. The author has a formal institutional role in which there is an expectation of performativity (in a non-perjorative sense). This requires the improvement of the organization’s performance by building the capital resource of its staff and directing them towards excellence from a service perspective, and through continuous improvement and the achievement of a strategic plan to achieve better organizational fit with the environment (and thus competitiveness). The author recognizes that the lived experience of the people creating and delivering the service will be an important feature of achieving this command intent. Whilst there may occasionally be perceived conflict between intent and experience, part of management responsibility is to minimize this friction.

Rationale

One of the key questions for library leaders is what kind of staff experience is linked to an effective library? A link is widely assumed, but has not necessarily been proven by data, between a positive staff experience or culture, and the quality of service that a library provides. Some libraries appear to have independent verification of this link through the achievement of recognized standards, for example:

“The Customer Service Excellence assessor commented, ‘The University of Manchester Library has undoubtedly created a culture of openness, trust and empowerment which

facilitates a customer focused approach. Staff morale and job satisfaction appear to be excellent and help people to buy into the customer first ethos” (The University of Manchester Library, 2012).

However, Hall’s attempt to establish a relationship between UK National Student Survey library satisfaction scores and staff culture as measured in four academic libraries (including this author’s library) was unable to demonstrate such a correlation (Hall, 2013), so this may not be as simple to demonstrate as received wisdom suggests.

Academic libraries encompass a complex mix of history, people, and change in which information developments and a repositioning of role create cross pressures and potential instability of existing structures and concepts. This situation is more than sufficient justification for attempts to advance data and measurement of the people dimension of our activity by using any potentially valid and reliable methods. Even if there is a failure ultimately to correlate and connect improved performance with a positive lived experience, then improving the latter may be taken to be a public good in its own right.

Concepts and constructs of human capital evaluation, and library applications

This section provides a brief and selective review of human capital and related measurement concepts. The aim here is to assess their potential relevance for application to the measurement and evaluation of people working in libraries.

A key idea here is that “human capital consists of the intangible resources that workers provide for their employers” (Baron and Armstrong, 2007), and that long-term survival of the organization depends on the motivation of its people to learn, innovate and create (Bontis *et al.*, 1999). In short, people are assets, but different to and more complex than other assets; they are not owned by their organizations. Human capital is frequently quoted (but without source) to “walk out the door each evening”. Added value is achieved through people, and therefore it is reasonable to assess this value through measurement and assessment. Data that relates to this will be about finding, keeping, developing and making the best use of this asset (Baron and Armstrong, 2007). The link to be established here is between human resources (HRs) and their impact on organizational performance (Scarborough and Elias, 2002), and one of the aims of this paper is to encourage more work to establish these links in academic and research libraries. This idea is often reinforced towards a search for proof of causation; “Human capital measurement is about finding links [...] and, ideally, causation between different sets of data” (IDS, 2004).

No perfect answer to human capital measurement has yet been established; there is “no convincing method of attaching financial values to human resources” and “the use of quality people data is the key to good human capital management [...] human capital [provides] a challenge to identify relevant measures [...]” (Davenport, 1999).

But the outcome measure is suggested to be that “sustainable competitive advantage is achieved when the firm has an HR pool that cannot be imitated or substituted by its rivals” (Barney, 1991). There is a caution expressed that “Measuring is not a good in itself. [...] without rationale it will achieve little [...] its prime uses are to evaluate cost and to test the effectiveness of strategy, pointing the way to further improvement” (Donkin, 2005). Thus the link to broader strategic measurement frameworks will be of importance. It is clear from the literature that a limited quantitative data set is unlikely to deliver a full answer to people value measurement.

In spite of the difficulty and complexity in people measurement expressed above, there are measurement methods embedded in frameworks within business organizations on

which libraries might draw. The importance of people to performance and strategy is a given, and it is widely quoted (without reference) that “the most valuable resource of any organization is its staff”.

Model examples are available (see, e.g. the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) framework in Baron and Armstrong, 2007, p. 39). The central HR departments in the parent institutions of most academic and research libraries are likely to have either an implicit or explicit conceptual framework for the successful elements and measures of people-related management and strategy, drawing on this type of model.

The RBS framework encompasses an employee proposition that recognizes the effects of:

- work-life balance;
- physical environment;
- leadership;
- performance and development;
- relationships;
- work itself;
- product brands and reputations;
- total rewards; and
- recognition.

The data inputs that the company might draw on include:

- global people data;
- joiner survey;
- leaver survey;
- pulse (presumably a frequent feelgood) survey; and
- employee opinion survey.

When this data is combined with business metrics, this provides a planned framework for delivering information that supports predictive decision-making and therefore informed business decisions on:

- leadership;
- incentive design and strategy;
- engagement;
- attraction; and
- business programmes, including value and services.

In this paper we will see similar lists arise from both the theory and practice of people management and measurement in libraries. There is little evidence to suggest this level, depth and coherence of human capital measurement exists in many academic libraries yet, but as we shall see there is a growing appreciation of how data might be used to inform good people practice in future.

Kostaglios provides a list of metrics which might be used to evaluate human capital in libraries (Kostaglios and Asonitis, 2009):

- percentage of employees with HE degrees;
- IT literacy;
- hours/training of employees per year;
- average duration of employment;
- hours spent in debriefing;
- hours spent by higher ranking staff for explaining strategy and actions to other staff members;
- leadership index;
- motivation index;
- savings from implementing employee suggestions;
- new actions implemented through suggestions;
- background variety index (individual and group level); and
- company diversification index.

Kostaglios also provides a breakdown of the possible contribution of human capital (totalling 30 per cent) to the overall capital value of a digital library:

- staff educational levels 15 per cent;
- staff experience 5 per cent;
- teamwork capacity 5 per cent; and
- staff creativity 5 per cent.

Whilst these figures may be arbitrary and arguable, the recognition of the strands of measurement needed to evaluate human capital in libraries appears valid.

The types of data collected for internal reporting of human capital in commercial contexts might include (from Baron and Armstrong, 2007, pp. 51-52):

- size, composition and profile of staff complement;
- attraction and retention;
- absence;
- motivation;
- skills and competencies;
- learning and development activities;
- remuneration and fair employment practices;
- leadership and succession planning; and
- outcomes of opinion or job satisfaction surveys.

The final point reflects that there has been a growing emphasis in recent years on moving beyond the basic HR data towards an analysis of “the actual experience of

employees” within organizations (CIPD, 2004). As we turn to libraries in the next section this aspect will be more fully explored.

CIPD suggest a spectrum of weak to powerful measurement of human capital (Mercer, 2004) for self-diagnosis of maturity in this area. The first four elements of measurement are present in at least some academic libraries:

- anecdotes;
- reactive checks;
- ongoing reports; and
- benchmarks.

However, moving from observation to the next steps in more powerful use of the data is not yet evident in our sector:

- correlations;
- causality; and
- simulations and forecasting.

A reflection on the view from other sectors is that we might need to improve the provision of data that will demonstrate what our people contribute, and then move to forming more strategic measures that are linked to organizational objectives and which identify those key people-related drivers of success.

Library people measurement activity and frameworks

UK and Irish academic libraries spend 48 per cent of their annual revenue resource total on staffing. For the larger research libraries in membership of the RLUK group the mean expenditure on people is 46 per cent with a range of 36-54 per cent (SCONUL, 2012). Thus in many academic and research library contexts people form the single largest single category of expenditure.

This can be contrasted with the degree of apparent measurement and assessment attention conferred on this element. At the 3rd Library Assessment Conference in 2010 (Hiller *et al.*, 2011) only five out of 68 papers (7 per cent) focused on people measurement or value, and at the 9th Northumbria Conference in 2011 (Hall *et al.*, 2012) only three out of 65 papers (5 per cent).

It is fair to say of course that very many papers at these conferences were focused on the outcomes of what people do, and that there is a developing attention to organizational effectiveness in these and other library conferences. However, the awkward fact remains that there is very little literature on the coherent measurement of this major component of the expenditure of academic and research libraries, and few specific methods and examples published of the way libraries define, develop and measure their human capital. This is surprising given the prevalence of people related assessment components required within conceptual measurement frameworks for excellence such as the Balanced Scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1992), the EFQM (EFQM, 2014), and the UK Customer Service Excellence (CSE, 2014) and Investors in People (Investors in People, 2013) standards. More than 20 UK academic libraries have achieved this last standard, and others employ these approaches, so there must be much unreported work of value and relevance within the sector.

A brief survey of people measurement activities in research libraries for this paper used the ARL-ASSESS list to seek specific staff measures used within measurement

frameworks (particularly the Balanced Scorecard). This yielded quite limited results, and the following is sample of responses:

- knowledgeable employees (LibQUAL + item) (LibQUAL + , 2014);
- percentage of staff with current training plan;
- scores from ClimateQUAL + relating to learning and growth dimension (several respondents);
- number of professional development activities accomplished;
- events that encourage organization-wide professional development efforts;
- number of staff expressing satisfaction/agreement in the Performance Management System; and
- time to fill open positions.

Specifying the Balanced Scorecard might have limited the range of responses, which do tend to be focused on the learning and growth dimension of that tool. This frequently leads to measures of training and development involvement. The lived experience of people is also frequently measured through surveys. The use of Investors in People award is common in UK higher education institutions, and this provides a ready-made framework for human capital assessment, including requirements for a people management strategy and evaluation.

More recent follow up with individual institutions using the Balanced Scorecard shows a range of measures linked to strategic objectives designed to actively maintain a skilled workforce and a positive culture for innovation (Dowd, 2013).

For example these include strategic objectives such as:

- recruit, develop and sustain a highly skilled, flexible and competent workforce;
- maintain an environment which encourages innovation and action; and
- maintain personal development processes that enhance careers and job satisfaction.

These generate measures and targets such as:

- at least five staff to have received additional rewards;
- at least 60 per cent of staff to have taken part in one or more training events annually;
- expenditure on training and development to be at least 1 per cent of salary expenditure; and
- staff perception survey results at 80 per cent positive.

One initial response did provide a fully populated framework for people measurement, with the following elements:

- attainment of core competencies;
- on the job competency development;
- leadership performance;
- staff satisfaction; and
- skills deployment.

Some of this data came from a staff climate survey which is benchmarked across other organizations. This response was followed up with that Australian institution, revealing a coherent approach to staff management and measurement, and structural interventions to reflect institutional developments that accompanies that library's long-term commitment to quality (see Jantti and Greenhalgh, 2012; Daly and McIntosh, 2013).

A concluding assessment against the broader sectoral review above might be that academic libraries are active on the spectrum of human capital measurement, but that demonstrating correlation between staff measures with other positive outcomes to prove causation and to provide strategic simulation and forecasting is not yet in place.

A framework for human capital evaluation in libraries

The preceding section provides a range of experience in human capital value measurement, but the intent of this paper is to move beyond a collection of lists of measures from which managers can select opportunistically. Complete coherent systems of measurement do not yet appear to be the norm. The rationale for attempting a synthesis of this experience is to provide library leaders and others with a conceptual framework on which to base specific measurement initiatives. The collection of data in a systematic way will allow future management interventions to be tested against this data, and thus to become more evidence based. The summation of all the measures will also provide a full picture of a library's human capital.

The proposed framework for human capital evaluation is based on four dimensions that together are considered to be necessary and sufficient to measure the value of our people. The sum of value added through these four should provide an indication that library staff overall have the breadth, depth and application to provide quality services and contribute to a library's transcendent value. These dimensions are:

- capacity;
- capability;
- climate of affect; and
- culture of momentum.

Specific measures and indicators will be required for each dimension. The proof that these dimensions are delivering value will come from linking the basic data associated with each of these dimensions with data on the related outcomes of these elements. This is explained further in the following section. Some comments on specific measures for each dimension follow here.

The measurement elements proposed above will not on their own deliver proof of beneficial outcomes. The data sets produced need to be combined with other institutional or library data to demonstrate positive outcomes. Direct cause and effect will be difficult to prove, but correlation between staff data and outcome results does need to be established, so that conclusions about the positive effect of staff changes and interventions (e.g. in restructuring) can be drawn.

Capacity

Capacity means the human capital volume that a library holds, and consequently a surrogate for the work that it can generate or produce. It should be noted that capacity is not simply staff numbers; it is the ability to ensure the maximum possible deployment of these numbers. Thus a capacity measure should also encompass diminution or loss through absence of any kind; for example sickness, turnover and

other causes. This may begin to provide proof or otherwise of the received wisdoms of HR theory or library management discourse around, for example, optimal levels of staff turnover.

Capacity data needs to be combined with market data to demonstrate a fit with the existing market. Capacity may be measured in simple numerical capital terms, but only has real meaning in relation to a judgement about the correct capacity for service delivery or activity within a specific institutional context. The sustainability of this asset is also relevant. Librarians often discuss what level of staff turnover is good or bad, but without linking this to any other measure which might provide the answer. Beyond service delivery achieved through raw staff capacity is the question of the higher order effects of this asset. Both capacity and capability need to be linked to market-related impact data to demonstrate the specific value of the library's people assets to the organization and beyond.

Capability

Capability is the ability of the library to perform or achieve. This second major element of capital value is the existence of relevant capability within the staff volume defined by capacity measures. Many academic libraries already reflect the capability of their staff through, for example, their annual reports, in which staff lists provide the evidence for the raw intellectual power of their people in terms of qualifications, professional contributions, and published work. There does not appear to be an agreed systematic method for scoring numerically the combined capability of an individual library's people. Further work could establish such a scoring, as this would then provide a basis for measuring the growth of this asset over time, and so confirming the benefits of a library's staff development program. This in turn begins to quantify the growing capital value of the library's staff alongside the growth of its other assets. Growth of library content tends to be assumed as an unequivocal good; growth of library staff numbers is not always seen by stakeholders in the same way, so proof of a developing capital value through enhanced capability may be a useful measure to deploy for library advocacy.

It is also worthwhile considering this element of value from a group perspective as well as simply from that of the individual staff member. The concept of critical mass of staff in order to deliver a specific capability is a factor which requires consideration in planning for innovation, especially in smaller research libraries. Further work is required here to demonstrate the value of the development of a specific team to deliver a discreet capital outcome; for example, the delivery of a digital library development.

These first two elements of staff value are obvious dimensions to include. However, the deployment of numerous and capable staff to create library value requires more than just raw numbers and the presence of relevant skills. Culture is critical to success, and therefore two further measurement dimensions are suggested which will demonstrate that a library has a positive culture in which all staff contribute, and that this culture produces a pace of competitive innovation.

Capability data in a similar way needs to be linked to strategy and strategic achievement to prove its worth. Staff capability is only beneficial if it generates either quality improvement in service or innovation and new product development. Therefore there is probably a narrative story to tell here about that link, as it is not easy to conceive of simple numerical benefit measures which will provide compelling proof. This story will also unfold over longer periods than more traditional data collection as better fit of people to strategic intent is built up.

Climate of affect

How people feel about work itself and the work environment is the lubricant of efficient and effective work because of the link between emotion and behaviour. The terms for this dimension are carefully chosen to reflect that climate assessment is about quantifying the culture of the library, and a component of culture is people's emotional response to work. What is sought here is positive affect; that is, people have positive feelings about work characterized by emotions of enjoyment and interest. Engagement with organizational shared values is also important, and links this element back to the fact that value itself arises from and is defined by these values.

Many universities now attempt the measurement of staff experience through survey methods. This data is essential for libraries to demonstrate effective management and provide an indication that strategic progress can be achieved through the library's culture. The key measurement areas related to value in this dimension are that staff empowerment and total involvement must both be strong for maximum efficiency of value creation, and that a high people engagement index with services, strategies and values is also critical. Many of the dimensions of, for example, ClimateQUAL + are important to a systematic and coherent people proposition, but the key measures here will be those climates or cultural attributes related to whether people can contribute to their full potential, without the inhibition of limiting structures, policies and beliefs.

Affect climate data on its own provides some basis for a "happiness" or "feelgood" index of the library, and consequently a source of either celebration or concern for library directors. In people asset value terms this needs combining with other measures to prove real benefit. This will demonstrate that the library is not simply either a contented but complacent country club or a highly productive sweat shop (Cameron *et al.*, 2006). There is proof needed here to justify the received wisdom that people with positive affect deliver more and better; consequently affect data needs to be combined with data on productivity (for process tasks) or creativity (for innovative development) to provide real proof. The other potential link to explore here is that between the data sets generated by ClimateQUAL + and by LibQUAL + surveys in the same institution. Can these begin to demonstrate a link between staff affect and user satisfaction?

Culture of momentum

The words for this dimension are also carefully chosen. A key shared value for almost any academic and research library in the present age is responsiveness to change, and this implies the need for a fundamental cultural assumption in libraries that change is both positive and essential, and needs to be achieved at a competitive pace. Staff may be numerous, capable and largely content, but they only deliver competitive value when the pace of library innovation exceeds that of the competition. It is therefore essential to make some measurement or assessment of the library's ability to maintain a high momentum of change. Momentum is the product of mass and velocity, so the measures here will be the mass of innovation approximately equal to the volume of projects and improvements achieved, and this related to the speed at which they are achieved (in comparison to competitors). This may need a compelling narrative to link these data elements together.

Supporting factors to assess in this dimension include program and project management capability. The library's management maturity is also critical here, so use of a meta-level measurement of quality capability, such as the tool proposed by the author with Wilson (Wilson and Town, 2006) is suggested. This will help demonstrate that a mature culture of rational change exists in the library.

Data showing a momentum culture can demonstrate the effective working of the people asset, but the link of this measure to prove real benefit is that to competitive impact. Innovation for its own sake at high pace might be destructive to the overall people asset, unless there is a proof that the institution is deriving real benefit. The generation of new services with a proven link to enhanced library or institutional reputation, and thus a competitive impact is what is sought here.

Conclusions and further work

The conclusions to be drawn from this paper are that some academic and research libraries are collecting data and evidence on and from their people. This has been extending from simple numerical data towards opinion and satisfaction measures collected through survey instruments. The Balanced Scorecard, ClimateQUAL + and other quality and excellence frameworks used by libraries have driven some further consideration of staff evaluation.

There is an opportunity for libraries to use the conceptual framework provided here to organize their performance measurement efforts in a coherent way to assess the full value of their human capital.

The gap to be closed by further work and development is to correlate the state of human capital within libraries to the outcomes of their work, and to the transcendent value and contribution which these libraries provide to their parent institutions and to broader societal benefit.

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