

Approaches to Measuring the Efficiency of the Bulgarian Libraries

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Abstract: The challenge of evaluating library activities is crucial when introducing new technologies in the library field. Long underestimated in terms of intensive adaptation of the Bulgarian libraries to the challenges of new technologies and the need to respond to the needs of the patrons, this process is becoming crucial to their survival. Its importance is growing in the process of intensive digitization of library stock. The need to construct relevant to consumer demand libraries, as well as the introduction of the system of quality management of library work (TQM) highlights in the library practice the issues of library efficiency.

The text presents the specifics of the application of qualitative and quantitative methods to study the efficiency of the Bulgarian libraries, and in particular, the relation of the success of the library PR and the marketing activities to such studies. The emphasis is on the process of linking the introduction of innovative approaches with the impact of current trends of global library practices. Highlighted is the role of measurement of library efficiency in terms of library management and strategic planning in libraries.

The challenges that arise throughout the study of the efficiency of different types of libraries are also brought to the fore, as well as the pitfalls in adapting the foreign experience that has been borrowed. Some of the difficulties associated with measuring library efficiency have been pointed out. The presented findings and conclusions are based on research of the practices in various types of libraries – public, university and specialized research ones.

Keywords: library efficiency, evaluating library, measuring the efficiency, PR and marketing activities, library management, analyzing user needs, efficiency of digitisation.

1. Efficiency and libraries

The issue of library efficiency became part of the agenda of the Bulgarian Library Circles at the beginning of the 1980s. Until then, it had appeared sporadically on the pages of the library press.

There are several factors that give rise to the issue of efficiency.

Project work, which has become the main form of activation of library activity, highlights the need to take library work into account, from its assessment, from

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clarifying its viability. Intensive contacts with foreign library concepts, theories and practices from the beginning of the XXI century, the acquaintance with some leading trends in library sciences from Germany, England, USA and Russia put back on the agenda the question of efficiency.

What is essential, however, is the situation in the Bulgarian library area on the border between the first and second decade of the century. On the one hand, this situation is characterized by crisis trends, weak funding of libraries and their place outside the priorities of state and local governments, reducing the readership, lack of orientations for the future, with the understatement of planning. On the other hand, a definite activity is observed in relation to the events intended for wider public environments such as “week of the book” and “Reading Marathon” festivals, competitions for the best reader, and an intensive process of digitizing literary collections as well as efforts to transform libraries into public information centers, etc. This situation requires a new organization of activities, a need for accountability of labor and financial resources and planning. The increasing competition among other providers of information and other institutions requires analyzing the possibilities of libraries, the services they offer, as well as the attitude towards libraries among different social environments. It attaches particular relevance of the questions to measuring the quality and efficiency of library activities.

The current situation demands the accumulation of relevant to the demands of patron’s library collections.

2. Performance and Fundraising

The fierce competition in which libraries find themselves and scarce funding require increasing the quality of work, respectively introducing a system for reporting on the quality of the library processes. This situation necessitates the evaluation of library activities that can be presented through quantitative indicators. Practice shows that performance reporting is mandatory in the process of adapting the libraries to the changing environment and being able to prove their usefulness to their superior institutions. However, the evaluation of in-house library activities is needed when introducing innovation and development of library management and professional status of staff.

The performance reporting is key to understanding the concepts, applications and consumer attitudes towards the library, their quality assessment. Observations on the operation of various types of Bulgarian libraries - of universities, regional and local shows a close link between the introduction of a system of quality assessment and reporting on the efficiency of library activities. Quality becomes the measure / factor in achieving effective governance. Among the library managers resides the understanding that the library efficiency is based on measurement of quality in three areas: quality of library activities, quality associated with the optimal use of cash flow, quality of innovation implementation

3. Problems to be solved

Measuring library efficiency in Bulgarian conditions demands the solving of the following three tasks:

- i. Development of criteria and indicators for reporting efficiency (compiling a catalog of activities / operations that are monitored and whose dynamics is subject to quantitative measurement);
- ii. Introducing the respective methodologies (with relevant technological requirements) to conduct the process of measuring performance;
- iii. Consideration of efficiency as the process of comparing and evaluation.

The main problem that all types of libraries face is what to measure and what relevant metrics to be used. In the Bulgarian conditions the following areas of library efficiency are debated:

- i. Efficiency of services;
- ii. Effectiveness of access to information;
- iii. Effectiveness of implemented innovations – new equipment, systems for inventory, reporting, control of borrowed books, etc.;
- iv. Efficiency of librarian's labor – distribution of work in time and calculating how to make good use of time.

Emphasis is placed on various indicators to measure the efficiency by:

- i. the number of patrons – maintain / increase;
- ii. number of refusals;
- iii. the number of approved projects;
- iv. amount of attracted additional funds;
- v. the scope of digitized objects.

4. Discussion

Studying the efficiency of library work is in one of the above-mentioned directions. At the same time it depends on the methods used to study as well as the methods applied. Of the three types of efficiency that Bulgarian library studies consider (social, economic and technological) so far only technology has made various measurements. When looking for an assessment of the efficiency of library work one resorts to gathering information through questionnaires, surveys, expert estimates. Library records are analyzed – statistical information about the movement of library collections, visits and borrowings, the number of refusals, an interest in additional services, electronic catalog visits in a digital library, on a library site, etc. information from various sociological studies and current statistics is gathered and published. The study of the efficiency is inseparable from the use of other research approaches such as the SWOT analysis, which is gaining popularity.

Efficiency is measured based on the comparison between demand – supply, requested - received. Attention is paid to consumers' opinions and observations of staff. Staff work is reported based on existing standards for work.

Still poorly developed is the issue of assessing user satisfaction of library services. The lack of overall experience in introducing the system of measuring the quality and efficiency leads to underestimation of the issue of the image of the library as well as the expectations and perceptions of consumers, the media and umbrella organizations.

The lack of resources and trained specialists prevents widespread adoption of quantitative methods for assessing and measuring the economic efficiency. These negative conditions require cooperative efforts of individual libraries in introducing measurements of efficiency.

The lack of specialists and unfavorable conditions for approbation of individual approaches hampers the choice of methodologies and standards when studying the efficiency and quality (e.g. DEA or BSC).

My observations on the specific Bulgarian practice show that the introduction of the measurement of efficiency as an approach to the management of libraries allows:

- i. to make librarians more disciplined;
- ii. to turn control of operations (work) into a constant activity;
- iii. to change the way of work towards combining qualitative and quantitative assessment methods. This achieves a better vision on library work, and this allows us to take into account both achievements and “bottlenecks” (weaknesses!).
- iv. to reduce the possible speculation in work reporting.
- v. to create an environment that requires the introduction of continuous reporting on results and feedback.

Applied to activities such as PR and Marketing, performance reporting allows the amelioration of widespread practice activities (PR was only limited to writing press releases and marketing became fantasized and irrelevant to programs with no long-term aims). Conducting PR and marketing campaigns without their assessment (with no regard to their efficiency and quality of work) significantly reduces their importance.

5. Conclusions

The observed Bulgarian practice shows that the success of the introduction of efficiency as a specific organizational approach is in direct proportion to the extent efficiency is seen/known – it is a value that is measured and compared, but that requires good organization and yet, like PR and marketing activities does not immediately give results. It is impossible to determine in advance whether an approach, an activity or an event is effective. Efficiency is a result that is measured after carrying out some activities. In some cases the answer

how far any measures, introduced approaches or technologies are effective is obtained after a long time. In this sense, the so-called effective forms of work with audiences may be considered truthful only if there are comparable and quantifiable (quantitative and / or qualitative) results.

Experience shows that no method or approach technology as innovative they might be, automatically lead to efficiency. Efficiency is achieved by compliance with a technological discipline through working with concrete indicators, in uniformity of the indicators that are reported.

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