

Consortium benchmarking between information services of municipal libraries

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Communities of practice, comprising representatives of different libraries, applied informal consortium benchmarking in their development and evaluation project. Sharing knowledge and practices were considered very important by the participants, and even small units could contribute to the development. This paper describes the practices of sharing knowledge concerning information service in public libraries. The study is based on information gathered by interviews and questionnaires from the participants, and project documentation, the contents of which have been studied qualitatively.*

Introduction

Sharing knowledge is a crucial part of innovation and development, not only in connection to industrial innovation, but also in a public sector of any field and in numerous different tasks.

In the evaluation and development project of 15 Northern Finnish libraries, the aim was to develop qualitative evaluation methods: to find methods to describe library work in its full diversity, to conduct evaluation in a practical manner not requiring too much extra work, which will always be excluded from primary library work, and to strengthen regional library work

through joint development and evaluation. This paper describes how benchmarking was utilised in the project. More evaluation methods and work practices have been earlier described elsewhere (Kortelainen, 2002a and 2002b). New knowledge most often is created through cooperation, socialization of knowledge, its externalization, combination with earlier knowledge structures, and through internalization (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In knowledge management literature, cases usually come from big organizations. However, development is also needed in small units. In the following, bench-

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marking and communities of practice are viewed especially from the point of information transfer and sharing among municipal libraries.

Evaluation was to be conducted jointly and, therefore, cross-library teams were created to develop evaluation methods and to perform the evaluation task (Rasinkangas, 2001). The teamwork included elements of benchmarking, but also elements of communities of practice. The following research questions were posed:

1. How was benchmarking conducted by the cross-library teams?

2. How were information and knowledge shared in the cooperation of the library units?

The following chapter describes the characteristics of benchmarking and communities of practice.

1. The benchmarking process

Benchmarking is a tool for improvement, achieved through comparison with other organisations recognised as the best within the area (Cross & Iqbal, 1995, 4) or through comparison with a relative or local optimum (Kouzmin & al., 1999). In order to achieve a positive change, it has been applied in the industrial (Dattakumar & Jagadeesh, 2003) and public sectors, in the library field, both in public (e.g., Favret, 2000) and academic libraries (e.g., Laeven & Smith, 2003; Deutsche & Silcox, 2003; Charbonneau, 2005). Both in industry and in libraries, participants are usually big units, and very often quantitative indicators are used.

Benchmarking may be focused on performance, processes or strategies, and the comparison can be internal, competitive, functional, generic (Andersen and Pettersen, 1996), or it may be conducted by a consortium (DeVito & Morrison, 2000). Performance benchmarking means a comparison of financial or operational

performance measures, process benchmarking is a comparison of the methods and practices of performing business processes, to learn from the best actors, whereas strategic benchmarking means a comparison of the strategic choices aimed at improving one's strategic planning. Internal benchmarking is a comparison among departments or units within the same organisation, competitive benchmarking means a comparison of one's own performance against the best competitor. Functional benchmarking is a comparison of processes or functions against non-competitor companies within the same technological area or industry, and generic benchmarking is a comparison of one's processes against the best processes around, regardless of industry (Andersen and Pettersen, 1996). Formal benchmarking is defined as the use of a disciplined and structured methodology, whereas informal is defined as a "common sense" comparison (Cross & Iqbal, 1995, 5–6).

In consortium benchmarking, as described by De Vito & Morrison (2000), several partners focus on a target the benchmarking of which would most benefit all participants, but in which nobody would be exceptionally poor or outstandingly excellent. The participants gradually learn to work as a team, the object of which is to provide an opportunity to learn from one another and to share practices in order to improve their own processes. Information is changed among the participant organizations in documents, but this is followed by an informal exchange of information on how each participant does the process. Data from each participant's measures are submitted to the benchmarking facilitator who compiles and blinds the data to preserve confidentiality, if needed. After the best practices have been verified and documented by the team, each participant adapts and implements the practices best suited to improve his / her

organization's process. Informal benchmarking has had a synergetic benefit. The approach has strengthened continual improvement and teamwork and built a foundation for continued benchmarking to achieve excellence. In the authors' opinion, consortium benchmarking suits both public and private organizations (De Vito & Morrison, 2000).

In the literature, benchmarking is divided into at least five phases (Andersen and Pettersen, 1996; Cross & Iqbal, 1995):

1. Planning: Select the process for benchmarking, document the process, and develop performance measures.
2. Searching: Find a benchmarking partner.
3. Observation or data collecting: Understand and document the partner's process, both performance and practice.
4. Analysis: Identify gaps in performance and find the root causes for the performance gaps.
5. Adapting, integrating or changing: Choose the best practice, adapt to the company's conditions and implement changes.

Some authors combine phases 1 and 2. Other authors combine phases 3 and 4 and label them jointly as analysis. After the adaptation phase, recycling, verification or maturity phases have been mentioned (Fernandez & McCarty & Rakotobe-Joel, 2001).

This paper is focused on the methods of sharing information among representatives of different library units. In Chapter 3, sharing of information in the project is studied in three phases of the project: **planning**, **analysis** and **adaptation**.

2. Materials and methods

This study is based on the documents describing the proceeding of the project and the pro-

cedures implemented during it. The material consists of records of the meetings, evaluative documents, feedback information and participants' opinions, questionnaires and interviews. In addition to this, the project's reports have been utilised (Rasinkangas, 2001; Heikkinen, 2002; Kronqvist, 2003; Kortelainen, 2003). The general picture of the processes is based on the contents of the records that have been analysed qualitatively.

3. Informal consortium benchmarking in practice

This paper is focused on the work done by an information service team which consisted of representatives from five public libraries of the Oulu region, Finland. The task of the teams was to evaluate each information service unit and to create qualitative evaluation tools for this purpose. The participation was voluntary. The team can be characterised as a community of practice, which consists of people responsible for the same task in different departments of the same organisation (Ståhle & Grönroos, 1999). A community of practice should not be too big, preferably less than ten persons. Their purpose is to share expertise, information and best practices, and to create common practices. The meetings consist of discussions in small groups. Although in the literature, participants of a community of practice usually come from different parts of the same large organisation, in this case, however, they represented different, mostly small public libraries, where the participants were responsible for the same tasks. In the following, the communities of practice are also called teams, a term used by the participants themselves. The community of practice can be regarded as consortium in the meaning of DeVito and Morrison (2000), and the follow-

ing chapters describe how informal benchmarking was utilised by it.

3.1. Planning

The planning phase included selection of the process to be benchmarked and development of performance measures. It did not, however, literally include the finding of a benchmarking partner, because the partners came through the project.

The team decided about the special targets of its development work, as well as methods. To be able to evaluate an information service unit, it seemed unavoidable to specify the composition of the information service in a public library. To some degree, it varies from unit to unit due to both the resources and the requirements of the surrounding community. To take all this into account, the team produced a form describing the elements, resources as well as the competences that may be necessary in an information service unit in a municipal library. The team also decided to visit each participant unit to be able to learn its resources and work.

The documenting of the information service work process was combined with establishing standards for it. The members of the team, together, described the fields of expertise necessary in the information service of a public library, such as competence to use both domestic and international databases and web services, as well as printed sources of information. All the fields of competence mentioned in the list (see Appendix) may not be needed in every information service. On the other hand, a broader repertoire of the components can provoke ideas for development. Compiling such a tool entailed a lot of discussions about information service and its preconditions. This was perceived a good way to work:

“I think that this kind of activity will only enhance collaboration, because there are several people from different libraries with new ideas coming along about ways to do things.”

3.2 Analysis

The description of the expertise necessary in information service can be regarded as a qualitative measure of competence. It was used as a reference of comparison in the evaluation of resources and competences of the information service units. It helped the librarians to document their competences and the resources enabling their use while demonstrating what other possible competences or information resources were needed elsewhere, suggesting possible needs for development. Filling the qualitative measure form of information service, even reading it, was felt like developing one's own work. The form also served as a tool for informal, qualitative benchmarking.

The team visited each of the five participating information service units. The hosting librarian introduced to the visitors her unit, its resources, work practices, problems and successful solutions. The team learned from the good practices and provided its expertise to solve possible problems or further develop the information service. A record of each meeting was drawn up by the hosting librarian (Rasinkangas, 2001). This cooperation provided a possibility to compare the resources, working practices and results of their units in relation to others of about the same size. For this purpose, each participant library compiled statistics about its performance and resources.

Oral transfer of information was noted as less stressful when compared to written information. Information transfer in communities of practice is oral, concerns relevant topics, is current, comprehensible, often unique, and its contents

has been tested in surroundings resembling the unit where the information is needed.

Also other tools were used. A portfolio was used for evaluation purposes. It comprised a library philosophy and targets of the work, a short history, description of resources and performance, feedback from various sources and plans for future (see Kortelainen, 2002a).

In the feedback of the project, the major benefits were learning good practices from other participants, new zest and courage given by the team for actually starting new working methods that had not been carried out earlier. However, also their own contribution to the teams was experienced as important.

“Teamwork gave me courage for my own work.”

“It was nice to be able to contribute to the team, not only to be a receiving partner.”

The task of the team – to develop qualitative evaluation tools – was complicated and the competence and knowing of every participant was urgently needed. Fulfilling the project’s complicated tasks familiarised the team members with each other and made it possible not only to share information and expertise but also to admit the lack of it. Cooperation generated trust, which is necessary for the participants to take into consideration also the problems of the work.

In addition to this, it was informative to compare resources, their allocation, performance and the possible enablers of library work, such as libraries’ partners in and outside the municipality. Even with equal resources, several functions can be organized differently. Sharing such information helped the participants to “place” themselves in their work and environment.

3.3 Adaptation

After the end of the project it is possible to see which evaluation methods have become part

of the library work in the region. Benchmarking should not be a one-time event but a continuous process for improving the company’s performance. This includes recycling the benchmarking process into new areas and the experiences and lessons learned in it (Andersen & Pettersen, 1996, 19).

A concrete and important result of the project was the “discovery” of local expertise, which now is better known also in neighbouring municipalities. Collegial support also encouraged the librarians to trust in their own ideas and competence. The community of practice has found its function in support and development of work and sharing best practices. Cross-library cooperation involves currently more libraries than at the beginning and concerns also other fields than information service, e.g., children’s library work. Also the qualitative form describing the components of information service has been adapted to the needs of the libraries of the whole region for the purpose of a regional evaluation of both competences and needs for education.

3.4 Experiences of the participants

A general theme in the feedback was the importance of professional discussions and mutual learning stimulated by the team work. Discussion in a general meeting does not equal that in communities of practice where the participants are responsible for the same area of work and the group is small enough. The strength of this approach is that the information that is shared comes mostly from units of the same size, from libraries with approximately equal resources, clientèles and problems. Another strength is that meetings in neighbouring municipalities are more accessible than those at a national or international level, due to limitations in both time

and monetary budgets. This also corresponds to the target of the project, which was regional cooperation.

One of the major difficulties in the project was the lack of time. The project caused extra work and every participant was responsible for her information service, while also participating in the evaluation project. Finding time for joint meetings of the team was not easy, because the participants came from small units where there are no deputies for an absent employee. However, evaluation is necessary also in the small units, independent on whether you do it in a project or not.

Conclusions

Functional benchmarking is defined as learning from your closest (Andersen and Pettersen 1996). According to Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995), the condition of sharing and creating knowledge is the abundance of information, even its chaotic availability. Consortium benchmarking enabled discussions and col-

laboration which are necessary in turning tacit information explicit and in the agreement about the contents of different concepts. A discussion group in itself may not reach the results of a team trying to solve a complicated task that sets off utilization of everyone's knowledge. A clear task is needed not only to start the work, but also as a focus for allocation of time of the team members. Simultaneously it creates trust necessary in sharing knowledge. Time is a necessary resource in any development work.

The project took three years, and now, two years after its termination, it is possible to see that some new practices have been adopted into the work of the libraries. Evaluation forms are used as tools for regional evaluation by the regional central library. Some teams continue their work and include more libraries than during the project. Benchmarking and communities of practice have usually been studied in big organisations. They are, however, worth considering and utilising even in small units, especially in mutual cooperation.

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Appendix

Qualitative description of skills necessary in an information service

Evaluation of expertise in information service:

5 = excellent expertise (all current and potential clients can be served and all the colleagues can be trained to advanced use of the tool or service).

4 =

3 = adequate expertise (all patrons can be either served locally or directed to a more adequate source. Colleagues can be advised in the use of the tool or service).

2 =

1 = minor expertise (there is a need for improvement in the expertise. Clients cannot be sufficiently served. External training is needed).

Description of the state of urgency of improvement needed:

3 = urgent need for improvement.

2 = a need for improvement has been noted.

1 = no current need for improvement.

Expertise necessary in information service
1. Basics
1.1. Knowledge of the theoretical basics of information service (education and following the development of the field)
1.2. Utilising one's own and others' experience
2. Tools of information service
2.1. Knowledge of manual or traditional tools: card catalogues, printed sources
2.2. Knowledge of the contents or scope of databases and search languages and electronic sources
2.2.1. Library's own database
2.2.2. Fennica (Finnish national catalogue)

Continue table

Expertise necessary in information service
2.2.3. Aleksis (Finnish article catalogue) 2.2.4. EBSCO 2.2.5. Finnish law CD 2.2.6. Internet searching 2.2.6.1. Finlex database 2.3. Knowledge of classification system
3. Collections / contents
3.1. Knowledge of non-fiction 3.1.1. Maps 3.1.2. Statistics 3.1.3. Official publications (blue book) 3.1.4. Others 3.2. Knowledge of fiction 3.2.1. Fiction 3.2.1.1. Domestic fiction 3.2.1.2. Foreign fiction 3.2.2. Poetry 3.3. Knowledge of description of the contents of different materials 3.4. Identification of relevant material
4. Expertise in searching
4.1. Analysing the subject of information search and choosing different searching methods 4.2. Knowledge of the sources that should be searched
5. Teaching library use and information retrieval
5.1. Teaching library use and information retrieval for groups 5.1.1. Knowing the above mentioned skills well enough to be able to teach them 5.1.2. Presenting the subject according to the needs of different groups 5.1.3. Ability as a public performer 5.2. Personal training of library use and information retrieval 5.3. Producing material for user education 5.3.1. In Finnish 5.3.2. In Swedish 5.3.3. In English
6. Language proficiency
6.1. Swedish 6.2. English 6.3. German 6.4. User's education can be provided in the following languages 6.4.1. Swedish 6.4.2. English 6.4.3. German

Continue table

Expertise necessary in information service
7. IT skills
7.1. Basic skills in Windows and management of the personal computer 7.1.1. Word processing
7.2. Using e-mail
7.3. Use of the Internet
7.4. Solving minor problems of IT equipment or printing
7.5. Advising the use of the IT for patrons
7.5.1. Advising the use of the Internet
7.5.2. Advising the use of word processing

Qualitative part of evaluation

The skills of information service also include important abilities, e.g., meeting the patron.

Consider these items without a numeral evaluation.

The information needs of the patron

- Knowing or anticipating the patron's information needs
- Ability to help the patron in focusing the information needs
- Ability to define the rate of reception of the patron
- Advising the patron in evaluating the sources of information
- Recommending journals or books according to the patron's needs.

Utilising the network of experts

- Courage to ask a colleague for advise
- Courage and possibility to contact other libraries
- Delimiting the scope of the service: advising the patron to a place of service

Skills in customer service.

- Patience, easy friendliness, situational sensitivity
- Speed of service
- Tolerance of disparity.

SAVIVALDYBIŲ BIBLIOTEKŲ INFORMACIJOS PASLAUGŲ TYRIMAS LYGINAMUOJU METODU

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariamas Šiaurės Suomijos bibliotekose vykdytas projektas. Projektas išsiskyrė tuo, jog jį įgyvendino praktikos bendruomenės, kurios buvo sudarytos iš skirtingų savivaldybių bibliotekų atstovų. Straipsnyje pateikiami vienos iš bendruomenių, kuri buvo atsakinga už informacijos paslaugų vertinimo priemonių kūrimą, rezultatai. Bendruomenė iš pradžių išsiaiškino, kas tai yra informacijos paslaugos, kokia jų sudėtis, kokių išteklių būtina turėti norint teikti tokias

paslaugas, kokie vartotojų poreikiai, kokia kompetencija reikalinga informacinėms paslaugoms teikti. Vėliau bendruomenės nariai lankė kiekvieno projekto dalyvio biblioteką, domėjosi jos filosofija, planais, istorija, ištekliais, darbo praktika, sėkminga patirtimi, partneriais. Gautus duomenis komandos nariai lygino tarpusavyje, nes net ir to paties tipo bibliotekos su tais pačiais ištekliais gali pasiekti visiškai skirtingus rezultatus. Sukurta informacinių paslaugų kokybės

vertinimo anketa buvo pripažinta ir imta taikyti ne tik vietiniu, bet ir regioniniu mastu.

Daugiausia dėmesio straipsnyje skiriama praktikos bendruomenės ir lyginamojo metodo pranašumams, kurie paprastai naudojami didelėse organizacijose, tačiau projektas parodė, kad šis metodas vertingas ir mažose organizacijose, susijungusiose į konsorciumus.

Praktikos bendruomenės savo darbe taikė lyginamąjį metodą, nes būtent lyginamasis metodas sudaro galimybes diskutuoti, bendradarbiauti, leidžia pasimokyti iš kitų. Pabrėžiama pasitikėjimo atmosferos reikšmė ir viena iš priemonių jam sukurti – aiškus tikslas, laiko ribos ir narių atsakomybė. Vienas iš praktikos bendruomenių pranašumų tas, kad žiniomis jose keičiamasi žodiniu būdu, kuris kelia mažiau streso negu rašytinis, be to, problemos gvildenamos tiesiogiai ir esamuoju laiku, o sprendimai esti unikalūs. Pastebėta, kad ši patirtis įkvėpė ir padarė bendruomenės na-

rius taikyti naujus darbo metodus, jie ėmė labiau pasitikėti savo idėjomis ir kompetencija. Kaip praktikos bendruomenių pranašumą nariai įvardijo galimybę daryti įtaką komandai, o ne būti tik pasyviais klausytojais. Darbas bendruomenėse sudaro sąlygas ne tik dalytis žiniomis, bet ir išsiaiškinti jų stygių.

Pastebėta, kad praktikos bendruomenės gali reikšmingai prisidėti prie organizacijos raidos. Dar vienas šio projekto pranašumas tas, kad praktikos bendruomenės nariai, norėdami palyginti savo bibliotekas su kitomis to paties tipo bibliotekomis, galėjo tai padaryti neišvykdami iš šalies, šitaip neeikvodami laiko ir pinigų, nes didžiausia projekto problema buvo būtent laiko stygius. Kiekvienas praktikos bendruomenės narys buvo atsakingas ne tik už projektą, bet ir už įprastai atliekamą savo darbą. Be to, bendruomenės narių susitikimus sunkindavo tai, kad ne visi darbuotojai galėdavo palikti darbo vietas, nes dažnai tiesiog nebūdavo kam jų pavaduoti.

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