Talent Management for Academic Libraries

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TALENT ACQUISITION · ONBOARDING · RECOGNITION & REWARD · SUCCESSION PLANNING · DEVELOPMENT & ENGAGEMENT · PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

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TALENT
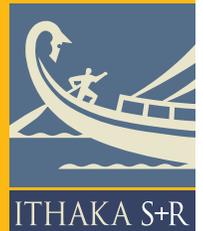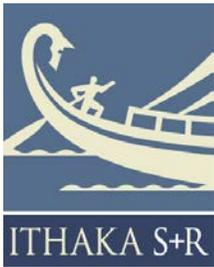
ITHAKA S+R

Ithaka S+R is a strategic consulting and research service provided by ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to helping the academic community use digital technologies to preserve the scholarly record and to advance research and teaching in sustainable ways. Ithaka S+R focuses on the transformation of scholarship and teaching in an online environment, with the goal of identifying the critical issues facing our community and acting as a catalyst for change. JSTOR, a research and learning platform, and Portico, a digital preservation service, are also part of ITHAKA.

When library deans and directors make public statements, they invariably acknowledge staff as the library's most important asset. It seems that this platitude is becoming increasingly relevant as academic and research libraries make the transition from collections-centered to services-centered organizations. The staff line is the largest budget line in most library budgets, and staff will determine the success of the 21st century library. Now is the time to consider the ways in which we think about new and better ways of recruiting, training, and retaining staff.

When I visited a mid-sized private college recently, I saw a sign over a door that read "Office of Talent Management." I was intrigued, especially since this new (to me) term, talent management, has become such a strong focus in my own organization, ITHAKA. We have a relatively new vice president for work, life, and culture, who has helped us all see that talent management, the activities of attracting, developing and retaining employees, is at the center of any strong people-driven organization. We at ITHAKA have been focusing on our own practices regarding finding and keeping the best people we can have in our organization. When I saw that the same term was being used in other places, I began to read more about it, and I have come to believe that this is more than a trendy phrase that has been adopted by Human Resources professionals. It is a way to think about how we manage our organizations today in a way that best meets the needs of staff and allows them to make the greatest contributions.

Libraries in Transition

This preoccupation at ITHAKA with a talent mindset is certainly not unique. Libraries are undergoing dramatic changes, as evidenced by the variety of job descriptions I see coming from these organizations. While there are still plenty of traditional jobs, there are many new roles popping up: Head of Learning and Outreach, Sound Archives Librarian, Associate Director for Data Privacy Management, Geospatial Information Systems Librarian, Open Educational Resources Coordinator, Director of Assessment, and Research Data Specialist, just to name a few. These titles signal that academic and research libraries are focused on developing the support structures and services that are needed not only for research, but also for teaching and learning.

The new positions that will enable these new services also signal the impossibility of simply looking at the latest group of graduates from schools of information and library studies to recruit them. In a recent Issue Brief,[1] I expressed concern that as schools of library and information science strive to broaden the appeal of their curricula, the specialized skills that are needed in research libraries are not offered. Since there are

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[1] Deanna Marcum, "Educating the Research Librarian: Are We Falling Short?" May 7, 2015, http://www.sr.ithaka.org/blog-individual/educating-research-librarian-are-we-falling-short.

many more job opportunities in IT-related fields, the iSchools have emphasized the technological skills that make it possible for their graduates to look in many areas outside libraries to find employment. When academic and research libraries recruit for positions, they have numerous competitors beyond other libraries, whether it is the campus IT division, a scholarly publisher, or potentially even commercial start-ups. Certainly, the shift from library schools to iSchools in many cases has meant that graduates have more varied options. I heard recently of someone who had planned to pursue an LIS degree but was lured by a "data science" certificate that the library school offered, with which he expects to have much better career prospects, in terms of compensation, than would have been available in any type of library.

And at the same time, libraries are looking for individuals with a broader set of information-related skills than those necessarily found in a library school program to begin with, where IT and programming skills are only superficially covered. The young professionals who have a stronger technology focus and come to the academic or research library seeking employment often find that many of their prospective colleagues have more of a humanities-like focus and the jobs that are more technical in nature are siloed in the operational structure of the library.

Talent Management Mindset

The term "talent management" first appeared in *The War for Talent,*[2] a product of the McKinsey consulting company, and it created a stir when it was published in 1997. Acknowledging that the knowledge worker had replaced the industrial worker, McKinsey consultants urged companies to consider how to identify and retain the best available talent, as well as how to disengage from workers who do not meet the new standards for talent in the knowledge era. This book is referred to frequently by the technology start-ups in Silicon Valley, but its usefulness is not limited to that environment. There are many talent management lessons that apply to research libraries as they are rapidly changing from location-based collections to services that link local users with global resources and support for all manner of teaching and research activities.

Libraries are already demonstrating their understanding for the need of more innovative services and the organizational structures that support the new services, but adopting a talent mindset has much broader implications for these organizations as they seek to inspire, grow, and retain the new staff they hire.

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2 *The War for Talent,* by Ed Michaels, Helen Hanfield-Jones, and Beth Axelrod. Harvard Business School Press, 1997.

Recruitment and Selection

While we have, by necessity, become creative in thinking about new types of positions and expanding our horizons in thinking about the types of candidates we will consider, most of the personnel processes in libraries are pretty much the same as they were several decades ago. Academic libraries, because they have been collections-based, have been able to follow hiring practices that mimic the academic departments of the college or university. Selection committees are either responsible for filling professional positions or charged with presenting the names of the top candidates for a position to the director, the management team, or another leader. If librarians have academic status, there are specific rules that govern how positions are filled. If librarians are unionized, there are rules to be followed about announcing and recruiting for positions. Everyone expects this process to take time. In a recent discussion with the university librarian from a major research university, I learned that it takes approximately a year to fill a professional position in her library. In 2003, Gregory Raschke argued that academic libraries "are losing out on top candidates and limiting their ability to become innovative and dynamic organizations" by taking too long to fill positions (and at that time, he calculated the time to fill a position to be five months).[3] These stories from other library directors and deans who are concerned about our process-driven methods of recruiting and selecting candidates for our library positions are all too familiar. And the worst part is reflected in a comment by a university librarian who noted that we are never really sure that the process will lead to the results we hope for.

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Compare this process to the start-up technology-based companies that have enjoyed so much publicity and, sometimes at least, success. Libraries have much in common with them in their need to respond quickly to new environmental conditions. Technology, the ubiquity of the Internet, students who are digital natives, and widespread use of social media have resulted in libraries being compelled to develop services that go far beyond those traditionally offered. Today's students feel quite comfortable being their own librarians. They live in a highly connected, networked, and digital world where

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[3] Gregory K. Raschke, "Hiring and Recruitment: Practices in Academic Libraries: Problems and Solutions," *portal: Libraries and the Academy,* Vol.3, No. 1 (2003), p.53.

information is plentiful. The printed reference books that were so important for my generation are rarely considered necessary. While students who consult librarians generally find them to be incredibly helpful, there is no sense that the reference librarian should be the first stop in writing a research paper, if in fact a research paper is still the assignment. Students are more likely to be asked to create something themselves then they are asked to synthesize what others have learned about a particular topic.

Academic library staff previously composed of public service and technical services staff hardly seem cutting edge, and libraries are truly in competition with digital information sources and easy-to-use tools. Libraries are forced to think about new services that are more in keeping with the requirements of students and faculty today, and many are finding that the traditional ways of managing the Human Resources functions are not all that effective.

In an organization possessed of a talent mindset, managers and colleagues are creative in building candidate pools. They network through the community to identify the best possible candidates, reaching out to them and selling them on the awaiting opportunity. When they see that a vacancy may arise, they may bring potential candidates to campus for a visit or a talk. They participate in the selection process muscularly, rather than passively. They actively engage throughout the hiring process, recognizing that it is among the most important tasks the organization takes on.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that research libraries are not independent agencies. They exist in the context of their universities that have their own personnel processes and procedures. Some have unionized staff, with their negotiated agreements about staff rules. A great many research libraries are fortunate to have staff who have been with the library for a long time, largely out of a sense of dedication to the mission. Turnover is low, but so are the opportunities for newer, younger staff. Procedures for using search committees to fill vacancies are well established, and often, mandatory processes. Within this constrained environment, there are still opportunities to think about talent in a different way.

The War for Talent approach makes every person within an organization responsible for thinking about talent, and does not leave this responsibility exclusively in the hands of Human Resources. All staff are on the constant lookout for excellent additions to their teams, even when there are no specific vacancies to be filled. When vacancies do occur, the library then has a robust list of possible candidates to fill either the existing job or a newly imagined position that adds depth and texture to the library staff.

Retention

One of the most important features of talent management is identifying the most promising members of the staff and transforming them into leaders. This is tricky. No one wants to return to the "good old days" when library directors chose who would advance, lacking any criteria for promotion. Simple rules of fairness dictate that everyone has a chance for new roles and responsibilities. Effective use of a talent management strategy requires the library to first be very clear about what it is trying to accomplish and a common understanding of why that is important. Once the strategy has been established, the next step is determining the ability and the motivation to implement the strategy. Are there people already on the staff who are prepared to take on the new tasks? Are there current staff members who want to progress, but need support to gain additional skills? If staff members have a skill set they are not currently utilizing, can they be drawn on to fill existing gaps? Or, do new people have to be recruited?

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The search committee may think that hiring a new staff member is the end of the process, but for the organization it is just the beginning. These are questions that the organizations should be able to answer for new staff:

» Are performance goals clear? Are they linked to the strategic plan?

» Are the metrics for success in the position clearly articulated? Will the new staff member be able to gauge his/her own progress?

» Is there a staff development plan in place for the new staff member?

To retain the excellent people the library has been able to recruit, the manager needs to understand what the new person most values about the position and the organization to understand what motivates the new person in the first place. The manager needs to monitor those things that ensure that valuable employees are engaged and satisfied: work/life balance, compensation, and an opportunity to contribute to important strategic directions, to name a few.

Building and Maintaining a Pipeline

The component of talent management that I personally find most challenging is thinking about the pipeline constantly. The experts advise that good managers are on the constant lookout for new talent. Thinking about the future, what are the skills and abilities that are likely to be needed? Who are the up-and-coming professionals who already have these skills? What am I doing to get to know these people? Am I talking with them on a regular basis about my organization, our plans, and vision? If I had a vacancy, would I know at least a half-dozen people I could contact about joining ITHAKA?

Building and maintaining a pipeline requires a serious time commitment for talking with individuals inside and outside the field. It requires monitoring the compensation packages new types of expertise commands. It requires moving out of the day-to-day managerial operations for a period of time to meet new people, learn about how they are applying their skills, and thinking about what kinds of new skills will be required in the library over the next several years. These are excellent steps to take also in thinking about how best to reposition the library in terms of new services and overall strategy.

Retraining or Replacing Staff

The talent management principle that is surely hardest for those of us working in the academic library arena is the idea that good managers must take a hard look at the capacities and abilities of current staff and be willing to retrain or let go those staff whose skills are outmoded and, when necessary, replace them with staff who are better prepared to meet the library's challenges.

Nearly every manager bemoans the processes that are in place for removing an employee from the organization. The processes are important in ensuring that an employee has the right to know what the job requirements are, that he or she receives regular feedback on performance, and that training is offered when there are development opportunities or performance problems. The process should be transparent so that the staff member can judge when there are problems to be addressed. As libraries work to be more agile, 21st century organizations, it is also important to recognize that some of the processes currently in place simply reinforce the status quo. But while process may provide limitations, creative managers can also help their staff make transitions before it is too late for the organization. Moreover, in libraries that are serious about becoming different kinds of organization, more in step with today's users' needs, administrators and staff need to work together to define a process for defining performance requirements and developing a process for moving staff into other roles or helping them make a constructive exit.

Keeping the Focus on Talent

The talent mindset is not something to consider only when a new position opens up. A good place to begin is with the organizational strategic plan. When developing an organizational strategic plan, has the library linked the staff positions to the critical directions it is taking? Articulating a future filled with promise for the researchers and students on a campus is just the first step. What kind of staff will be needed to fulfill that promise? How many of those librarians are already working in the library? What kind of new talent will be needed? What is the plan to recruit, train, and retain the new professionals? What are the budget implications? Are there some activities that the library can stop doing in order to make the needed new investments? It is important to demonstrate that the new vision for the library can be realized because the talent is available (or will be available) to make things happen. The successful library organization will demonstrate that the staff is aligned to meet the institutional goals.

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And this is not a job for administrators alone. Perhaps the most important lesson from the literature of talent management is that administrators, managers, and staff are in this endeavor together. We need to look at talent management as a shared and mutually reinforcing priority. Libraries are inherently democratic institutions with a distinctive emphasis on fairness, and these are principles that drew many of us into the profession in the first place. These same principles, however, can inhibit the library's capacity to succeed if the selections committees become overly focused on process, or allow a variety of personal issues to interfere in deliberations and divert attention from the goal to bring on and retain the best possible people for the job. When "fairness" extends to making staffing decisions not based on the skills required for the position but on personal loyalty, length of tenure, or commitment to a process regardless of its outcome, the organization will suffer.

I can hear academic librarians reminding me that there are procedures to follow on a campus, and surely that is the case, but I am urging library faculty in those institutions with faculty status, for heads of unions in libraries with unions, and progressive librarians in all libraries to think with me about how our organizations have changed. We need librarians with a new range of abilities. Even the largest research libraries are now

typically spending upwards of 70% of their collections budget for licensed content. Instead of having staff who know the intricacies of bibliography, we need expert business skills for negotiating licenses. Instead of having an expert command of reference resources, our librarians need to provide technical and professional support for data curation, geospatial research, digital humanities design, to name the immediate needs, and a capacity for keeping up with the latest technologies and research methods that are yet to come. To be successful in fulfilling our mission, we must be able to update our methods of talent management just as much as we need to constantly update our services.