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Public library planning: a routine practice?

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Purpose

This article studies whether organisations, in this case libraries, continue to plan after having done so at least once, and whether they conduct planning on a routine basis.

Design/methodology/approach

The websites of 71 libraries that in 2006 had a strategic or long-term plan were analysed to determine whether in 2016 they had a new plan in place. Where there was none or where the name of the plan had changed, emails were sent to the head librarian to ascertain the reasons.

Findings

A total of 71.83 % of the libraries in the sample had a new plan underway in October 2016, i.e., ten years later. A significant rise (+8.03 %) in the number of 3 year plans was observed relative to 2006, perhaps because the crisis and resulting uncertainty have induced libraries to narrow their decision-making windows. A preference for the term 'strategic plan' over 'long-range plan' was also detected in 2016.

Originality/value

The study provides empirical evidence of the existence of routine planning. The continuity of plans in a series of libraries shows that in practice planning is a systematic, continuous and iterative activity, as contended in planning theory.

Keywords: planning, routine, public library, strategic plan, long range plan

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

Ever since the advent of long-range planning in the nineteen sixties, planning has been generally accepted to be necessary for organisations to meet their objectives. Strategic planning, which prevailed in the nineteen eighties, further reinforced the

advantages of planning for any organisation. Planning has been adopted ever since as the way to pilot organisations toward the future and mitigate the unexpected effects of technological, demographic, economic and political change. It has been shown to be a technique for anticipating an organisation's desired results and determining the action required to reach its intended destination.

Nonetheless, planning has not always been viewed as a suitable technique in very complex and uncertain settings. It has not been recommended under certain circumstances: when organisations are confronted with very pressing problems or when no key leaders are at hand to carry the process forward (Vernis et al., 1998, p. 89). According to Sallán Leyes's PhD. thesis (2001, pp. 333-338), many empirical studies have shown that strategic planning only contributes to organisational success in the presence of certain internal or external conditions specific to the organisation at issue. Other authors contend that strategic planning contributes to success only in certain organisations, characterised by a series of contingent variables. One example of such reasoning is to be found in a paper by Brews and Hunt (1999, pp. 347-348) who, after establishing a relationship between planning and performance, drew two conclusions. 1) Strategic planning raises organisational effectiveness in stable environments, with no significant relationship observed in unstable settings; and 2) planning yields greater benefits as the organisation gains experience with its use. Fernández and Trullenque, (2010, pp. 19-44), however, deem that in changeable or turbulent environments, the likelihood of failure is clearly higher where no plan is in place.

Strategic planning enables organisations to define their goals, but not necessarily how to attain them. At the same time, however, no matter how detailed a list of means, if no ultimate aim is defined, the exercise is futile. Strategic planning, by determining 'where' the organisation is heading, is beneficial insofar as it charts a course that can be adapted to cope with unexpected events.

Two key principles of planning theory are as follows.

- Strategic planning is systematic and ongoing (Drucker, 1981, p. 88) and should be constant and fluent, as well as flexible to adapt to internal change and external forces (Howell, 2000, p. 3).
- Strategic planning, like any other iterative organisational process, affords an opportunity for continuous learning on an institutional scale. That in turn favours (although does not necessarily guarantee) higher performance, as a paper by Sirén and Kohtamäk (2016, p. 658) shows.

Based on those principles, the terms 'systematic', 'continuous', 'constant' and 'iterative' denote the need to repeat the technique time and again, making it a routine task. The aim of this research is to determine whether in organisations that have engaged in planning, it constitutes an ongoing activity. Affirmative results would obviously infer that organisations derive greater benefit (more effective allocation of human and material resources) from formulating plans than from failing to do so. Moreover, since they learn as they plan, they should perform this task with increasing efficiency.

Despite the abundant literature on planning, no papers have been found that analyse planning as a routine organisational activity. This study aims to verify whether planning becomes routine in organisations after an initial experience, i.e., whether after completing one plan they formulate its follow-up.

2. Literature review

Strategic planning is a fully valid and useful management tool in all manner of organisations, libraries among them. As information-based services, libraries may be deemed to constitute one of the categories for which a world-scale strategy is most pertinent, for they depend on the collection, processing, interpretation and dissemination of information and knowledge to create added value. That situation supports the contention that they need planning to minimise the uncertainties stemming from their constantly changing environment, defined by external, internal and user circumstances. As not-for-profit service organisations that depend on the budgetary allocations furnished by their parent institutions, they are in even greater need of objectives and appropriate systems for assessing their results.

The literature on library planning shows that the technique has been deployed to enhance efficiency, as attested to by the early interest in its application, with many examples dating back to the nineteen seventies. Some of the more prominent examples are listed below.

According to Biddle's (1992, p. 55) historical review of planning in academic libraries, "the discussion of the application of strategic planning to libraries as it had emerged in management theory began in 1967 with Robert E. Kemper and the doctoral dissertation he completed at the University of Washington, *Strategic Planning for Library System in 1967*". In his thesis Kemper addressed the need for library managers to apply this management tool more widely to libraries.

Beginning in the nineteen seventies and thereafter, some papers on the subject began to encourage its use in libraries (Sewell, 1970), whilst others advocated for its application in specific types of libraries (Anders, 1975). Significantly, in that decade and later (Freiband, 1976; Tees, 1984, 1993), proposals were also forthcoming for planning to be included in the academic curricula for future librarians.

In an overview conducted in the nineteen eighties, McClure (1982, pp. 7-26) drew lessons from and identified opportunities in library service planning implemented in the nineteen seventies. Riggs encouraged the use of strategic planning in all manner of libraries, contending that it 'is one of the most important and difficult tasks of modern management' and 'it would be folly to expect that a single strategic plan could be developed and implemented for all types of libraries' (1984, p. 2). McClure et al. (1987) published their own view of the systems and procedures to follow to implement library planning. Case studies of its application were also published (Anders, 1975; Ensor et al., 1988).

In the nineteen nineties and the early years of this century the volume of literature on the subject grew substantially, as did libraries' tendency to post their plans on their websites, an indication of their implementation of the technique (Pacios, 2003). Bryson (1990) and Corral (1994, 2000) were among the most prominent advocates of library planning in that decade, while other writers supported the use of specific planning-related techniques, such as scenario planning (Giesecke, 1998), to enhance effective performance when the future brings a changing environment. New papers are constantly being published, some focusing on the improvement of results (Nelson, 2008). A practical guide by Matthews (2005) on plan development and implementation describes strategic planning and discusses the various theoretical approaches to the process. It has been contended, for instance (Germano and Stretch, 2009), that marketing plays a critical role in strategic plan development and implementation.

Papers have also been forthcoming on a number of subjects lying within the specific realm of public library planning. Some have focused on the priorities or preferred areas of action prevailing in certain periods (Pacios, 2007; Kostagiolas, Banou and Laskary, 2009). Buchanan and Cousin (2009, p. 125), in turn, authored a very interesting article that proposes and tests an inspection-based approach to the evaluation of strategic plans, based upon a rubric specifying the key attributes of each of the core components of a plan, combined with an appropriate assessment scale. Municipal library directors' perceptions around strategic plan development have also been discussed in the literature (Kostagiolas and Korkidi, 2008). Other studies have addressed the problems faced even today when attempts are made to implement planning in difficult cultural conditions (Ke et al., 2016). As noted, however, nothing yet published shows whether strategic planning in public libraries is a management habit and whether new plans are routinely drafted when existing plans expire.

3. Purpose and methodology

This study aims to determine the existence or otherwise of planning as a routine activity in organisations, based on practice in a series of public libraries. A sample of 71 public libraries that had a plan in place at the beginning of the millennium (Pacios, 2007) were re-visited. Their websites were searched to study their plans in October 2016, 10 years after the plans that served as the basis for the earlier study had been identified. At that time, the planning period most frequently covered was 2001-2006. The duration of the plans surveyed varied (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 or 10 years) with most starting in 2000 and a few in 1998. The latest end date was 2015. Of the 71 plans in the sample, 38 were denominated 'long-range' and the remaining 33 'strategic'.

The plans were downloaded from each library's website: i.e., the information used as a basis for this paper was collected online. As specified in the table in the appendix that lists all the plans in place in the libraries studied, only one strategic plan was emailed to the author by the head librarian. The plans were normally found on libraries 'About us' link. Where the website included no such page, others on library management were visited or the information was sought with the site's own search engine. When the plan could not be found on any page, but the head

librarian's e-address was provided, a request was emailed to him/her. Where the head librarian's e-address was not posted, the request was sent through the website's 'Contact us' or 'Ask' links.

After the analysis of the libraries' websites verified the existence or otherwise of new plans, the head librarians in institutions where no plan was underway as well as those in which the plan had changed its name since 2006 were contacted in an attempt to ascertain the reasons underlying these two circumstances. Two questions were sent in each case to the head librarian's private e-address as posted on the organisation's website. In the six cases where that information was not available, the questions were forwarded via the contact form (for user queries) on the library's website.

4. Findings

The analysis of the information found on the new plans in place in the libraries in the sample yielded the results discussed below. Ten years after the initial study, i.e., in October 2016, the situation of the 71 libraries that had a plan in 2006 was found to have varied in the three respects discussed below.

4.1) Existence of new plans ten years on (Figure 1)

- Information on new plans was found on the websites of 56 libraries or 78.87 % of the sample. As in five cases it was outdated, i.e., had finalised prior to the search date, current plans were identified for just 51 libraries (71.83 %). Two of these institutions, the only two that in 2006 had plans running through 2015, had formulated direct follow-ups. Their current plans expire in 2017 in one case and in 2020 in the other.
- Thirteen libraries (18.3 %) had no plan at all, three (4.22 %) of which were in the midst of formulating a new one.
- No information was available on two of the libraries (2.81 %), which had disappeared in the interim.

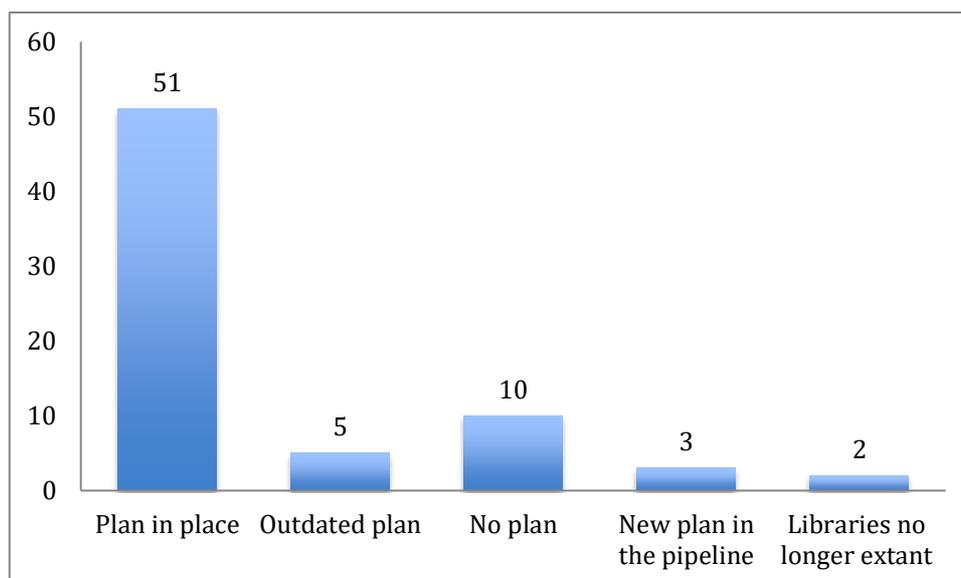


Fig. 1. Status of the 71 library plans in 2016

As the chart in Figure 1 shows, most of the libraries had a new plan 10 years on, proof of their determination to continue to focus on and attempt to prepare for the future. Their plans revealed a highly positive and creative attitude, geared to solving their problems, learning the lessons afforded by the experience and capitalising on successful past endeavours.

The two questions sent to the 10 head librarians whose websites contained no mention of a plan were:

- Why does your library no longer post its plan on your website?
- Were you the head librarian when the plan referred to above was drafted?

Only two replies were received. In both cases, the head librarians reported that they intended to begin to formulate a new plan shortly. Their answer to the second question was likewise identical: neither had been head librarian when the plan explicitly referred to in the email was drafted. Had the head librarian been the same as 10 years ago, a new plan may have been in place, as was found in the four cases discussed in a later item.

4.2) Period covered by plans underway (Figure 2)

As in the initial study, the duration of the 51 new plans identified on libraries' websites varied widely: 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,10 or 11 years. The three most common terms were: 6 (25.4 %), 3 (23.5 %) and 4 (11.7 %) years. Only two plans had the longest terms, 10 or 11 years. Taken together, the plans covered the period from 2008 to 2021.

A comparison between the duration of the 51 new plans and the plans in place 10 years earlier showed the following.

- Fifteen libraries had a plan with the same duration as in 2006, i.e., they continued to plan for the same number of years as in the past.
- Seventeen libraries formulated plans for *shorter* periods than in 2006. Specifically, the proportion of 5 year plans, the most numerous in 2006, dipped by 5.75 %, whereas the 3 year plans rose by 8.03 %. These findings may be related to the effect of the economic recession on libraries and the uncertainty induced by cut-backs in resources and budgets (Mostad-Jensen, 2009). Libraries are known to have had to strive harder, attending to more users with more and increasingly complex needs with fewer resources (Gutiérrez Santana et al., 2012; Eberhart, 2015; Foster and Evans, 2016). The effects of smaller staffs and budgets, including the discontinuation of many services, have been identified in academic papers (Guarria and Wang, 2011) as well as in the press ('BBC News', 2016; *The Guardian*, 2016). This study did not aim to determine the implications of the crisis for library strategic planning, however. Nor could conclusions in that respect be drawn from an analysis of the content of these 17 plans. Whilst some alluded to budget cuts, reduced funding could not be concluded to be the reason why a shorter period was covered by a given plan than by its predecessor.
- Sixteen libraries had plans with a *longer* duration than in 2006. The duration most often found in the sample as a whole was 6 years (25.49 %), compared to 5 years in 2006. This one year change may be related to the experience acquired, which may have prompted libraries to experiment with a longer term.
- Three libraries failed to specify the period covered by their plans.

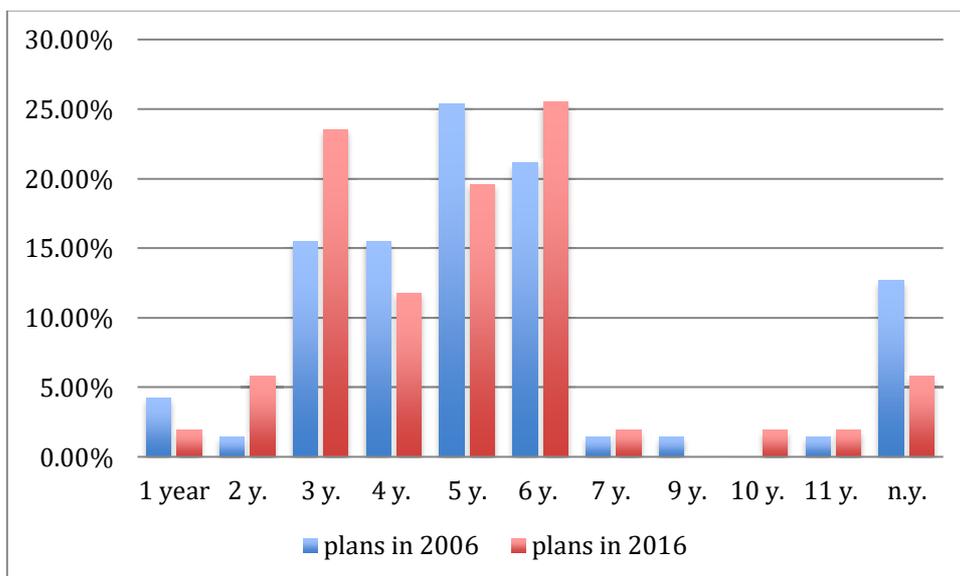


Fig. 2. Duration of plans identified in 2006 and 2016

The value that varied the most relative to 2006 was the 3 year duration, which rose by a significant 8.03 % (Figure 2). The explanation would be as noted earlier: the effect of the crisis on libraries. Uncertainty might have led to shorter-term planning. That reduction in the period planned also impacted the last year of the range, 2015 in 2006 but 2021 in 2016.

4.3) Plan denomination (long range plan/ strategic plan and similar expressions)

Of the 56 libraries that posted their plans on their websites, the name was the same as in 2006 for 27 and different for 29. The changes were as listed below.

- Twenty-one changed from long-range to strategic plan.
- Only one changed from strategic to long-range plan.
- The remaining seven used a number of denominations: Five Year Plan, Community Impact, Master Plan, Strategic Priorities, Plan to Improve Library Services.

Note the more intense use of the term 'strategic plan' and a preference for the word 'strategic', found in 46 of the 56 plans in place. That prevalence is indicative of a change in trend relative to past practice, where more plans were termed 'long-range'. An earlier study identified no significant differences in the content or duration of plans bearing one or the other denomination (Pacios, 2004). That finding was confirmed here, in particular with respect to four plans with the same duration (2016-2021) but different names: 'long-range plan', 'plan to improve library services' and 'strategic plan' (twice). Their content was similar, the sole difference lying in the absence in the 'long-range plan' of strategic guidelines or areas for action, as it was confined to goals and objectives. In this case the plan posted may have been an abridged version, however, designed for access by library users. A fuller version might well include the same elements.

The term 'strategic' indisputably alludes to the importance attached to the plan, as to anything that is 'strategic'. Nonetheless, in this sample, 'strategic' was not observed to be associated solely to a medium- or long-term future (3 years or more), for even plans with a shorter duration (1 year) bore the word 'strategic' in the title. Libraries, certainly aware of the changing reality in which they are immersed, must design all manner of strategies to feature new offerings and gear their endeavour to meet user needs and desires.

The head librarians in the 29 institutions that had changed the name of their plans were asked, via email, to respond to the following two questions, in an attempt to ascertain why such changes had been implemented.

- 1- Why did your library change the name of its plan from 'long-range' to 'strategic'? (or vice-versa: each library's specific circumstance was mentioned in the correspondence)
- 2- Were you the head librarian when the plan referred to above was drafted? If not, do you feel the plan had been appropriately named?

The 11 replies received to the two questions, some of which concurred, are summarised below.

- The reasons for the change in the name varied. 1) The expression 'long-range' was deemed to be old-fashioned and to scantily reflect the needs met by the library or the ways and means deployed. 2) The library had aligned its terminology with that of its parent institution. 3) A new planning guide had been introduced. 4) The goals established were more strategic than long-term.
- Seven of the head librarians replied that they had not been head librarian in 2006, while four responded that they had (the latter reported that the new name was an attempt to keep up with the latest trends).

5. Conclusions

The conclusions drawn from this comparison of libraries' new plans to the ones formerly in place are set out below.

- The high percentage (71.83 %) of organisations in the sample that continue to plan for the future 10 years later attests to the importance of planning to attain results. Organisational strategy envisages the use of planning to continue to thrive. Planning is included in libraries' routine as a way to foresee possible difficulties, minimising the uncertainties characteristic of their changing environment.
- Judging from the two plans that in the 2006 survey had the longest duration (running to 2015), when an organisation completes one plan it follows it up with another.
- The number of 3 year plans was significantly greater in the new than in the former study. This narrowing of libraries' decision-making window may be related to the uncertainty stemming from the crisis.
- The prevalent use of the term 'strategic' in plan titles suggests that libraries adopt a strategic perspective in their attempt to perceive (vision) and improve on future realities. It also reveals the importance and weight attached to their future aspirations.
- The use of the term 'long-range plan' has declined in favour of 'strategic plan'. According to some libraries, this change was instituted to concur with the terminology in use in their parent organisation or because they deem that 'long-range plan' no longer conveys what they do or how they do it.
- As in the former study, plan titles (strategic or long-range) are unrelated to duration or content, inasmuch as no significant differences are observed between plans denominated in one way or the other.

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