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HOW TO SURVIVE IN A DOWNSIZING ENVIRONMENT

By Mitzi M. Rinehart

Two years ago I returned from vacation to find that my staff had been reduced by two thirds. I was the lone survivor. I reacted by trying to maintain the services that the library had always provided. I just knew that working faster and putting in longer days would enable me to keep up with everything.

After trying this for two months, I finally came to my senses and realized that it wasn’t going to work, no matter how many hours a day I worked. My home life and my health were starting to suffer. Stacks of paper and library requests were about to bury me. The library looked as if a “search and destroy” team had descended upon it.

I had been so busy doing and trying to keep up with everything that I hadn’t taken the time to study the situation. Now was the time to use my Total Quality (TQ) training; evaluate the situation logically and find a solution to this challenge. I needed to make the best use of my expertise and time.

SURVEY OF ACTIVITIES

First I listed the services that the library provided to the Division. Besides the standard ones: reference, circulation, interlibrary loans, database searches, acquisitions and processing of all books, periodicals, standards, videos and reports, for the whole division, other services were: participated as a TQ facilitator, wrote and published a monthly library newsletter, previewed and rented safety videos, maintained and ordered standards and specifications, searched Dun & Bradstreet database and provided credit reports, provided competitive intelligence information, monitored the clipping service, provided Commerce Business Daily reports, gave information talks to groups on library services, served on TQ teams, and maintained files of map and annual reports.

We had been encouraged many times by top management to cut out work whenever possible; get rid of duplication, waste, rework, unnecessary work or steps, and services having little or no value. With this thought in mind I knew the time had come to reevaluate library services. No longer would things be done because it was the way that libraries have always done them. I started to review all the services that I provided with the question “why do I do what I do at all?” This was a battle for survival, and I had to be able to provide quality service at a rapid pace.

When working in a continually changing and downsizing environment, it
is important to keep visibility up as well as maintaining your quality of service. Each service was evaluated in regard to who the users were and the amount of visibility it provided to the library. Was I providing a value added service or could a lower level of library service, or another department, still fill the need? Could the users get what they needed easily from another source? What was the expertise that I provided the user?

**STAFF DOWNSIZING**

Since there are times when the library is totally unstaffed, it was necessary to make it, as much as possible, into a self-service center. The graphics department made 3 large 24 x 36 inch colored charts with explicit instructions on how to check out library materials—a blue chart for checking out books, a green chart for periodicals, and a yellow one for checking out videos. These were placed on the counter, near the card catalog, with all the necessary materials for carrying out the instructions.

A sign has been attached to the library door with the name of the secretary to see or call for help if I’m not available in the library. When I’m away on vacation or absent from work, a similar sign is placed in my chair. Voice mail also has a message on it with instructions on whom to call for help. When attending conferences, I call in daily to check for problems and answer any questions that may have come up in my absence. You might say I’m a virtual walking library.

Library hours were changed. Instead of working the same hours as the whole Division, I needed some quality time with few interruptions. So the hours became 6:45 am - 3:15 pm, which usually provides me with an hour each morning without distractions.

**TECHNICAL SERVICES**

Some changes were philosophically hard for me to make. Previously each copy of an ordered report would be cataloged, checked out to the requestor, and filed in storage on its return. Lacking support staff, the reports and catalog cards were stacking up, waiting to be filed. The titles were listed in the library monthly newsletter under new reports. After studying the recall usage of the reports, I found there were not enough requests to justify the time involved in processing and filing and the cost of providing storage for them. Now the user gets the requested report and is informed that it has not been added to our catalog. If someone else at a later time needs a copy of the report, it is reordered.

The same time that I was reevaluating my services I reevaluated vendors, and in some cases selected new ones. My vendors had to be able to meet all my time requirements: FAX, next day air or drop shipments, as well as having an excellent fill rate. Using this process, I needed fewer vendors to fill library needs. This resulted in a time savings for myself and for accounting as it cut down on the number of check requests and purchase orders written.

Book ordering has been drastically modified. Previously book order forms were typed on standard order forms and mailed to the vendors. A copy of the order was filed in the card catalog. Now the orders are typed on letterhead and ordered via fax. A copy of the fax is filed in a notebook under the vendor’s name. Using this process, the book has been
received before I could get the cards filed.

My method for doing document ordering has also changed. I used to spend time checking online catalogs to see who owned the material I wanted, and then ordering it from them direct. Now I order almost everything from my two document delivery services. When questioned about the cost of the delivery services, I justify it as the equivalent of a part-time staff person.

I use a local supplier for items I know are at the local university and one other document delivery service for the majority of my requests. I still order items direct, ordered by phone or fax, from NTIS, DTIC, AIAA, SAE and AMS.

Whenever possible, I do not retype the information on the requested document. I cut the citation from the request form, paste and fax the pertinent information to my document delivery person. Unless it’s a special order, I receive the information in less than a week.

The ordering process was under control, but I was still smothered with incoming mail, mostly periodicals. It took 3 hours a day to process, check in and route all the mail that were received in the library. Originally all the periodicals were directly to the library to enable us to skim them for items of interest to the Division, and to notify our subscription agent of missing copies.

Since we use a subscription agent, it was easy to change the mailing address and have the periodicals, normally routed to one person, sent direct to a person. All items needing routing to two or more users were still sent to the library for processing and routing labels. The negatives to this is that usually the direct periodicals were never returned to the library, nor could we notify our vendor of missing copies, nor could the current issues be skimmed for items of interest to the Division. The upside is, the mail is received in a timely manner and the librarian is free to provide more specialized services.

When cutting library services, it is very important to tell your user why you not providing them any more. Whatever you do, do not take the blame and feel like you failed when you have to cut a service. Most users are understanding and realize you can’t do everything.

**USER SERVICES**

Three very time-intensive services were cut: monthly library newsletters, safety videos, and the clipping service. The 8-page library newsletter was filled with listings of new materials, explanations of services, humorous quotations and original cartoons. This was one service that was missed. The four engineers all enjoyed reading it. To keep up library visibility, it is one service that, after two years, will be reinstated in October with fewer pages. This time it will be one double-sided sheet containing services, new items and, of course, some humor.

The library has a large collection of safety videos available for the employees to use for their meeting and educational needs. To provide variety for the users, we were renting new safety videos every two weeks. After previewing the videos at home, I wrote reviews which were published in the library newsletter to aid the staff in selecting their films. The videos were scheduled and rented on a two-week turnaround. The staff now selects safety videos from the ones we already own.
The clipping service took a lot of time. Clippings were screened for usefulness and repetitions and finally sorted by company and copied onto separate sheets. These were then sent to the requesting department. Now the clippings go directly to the user department's secretary to process as required.

After serving three years as a TQ facilitator, I resigned my position. I felt I was more valuable to the division as a librarian, since I was the only one, and that others could be facilitators.

I hope reading about my experience will help make downsizing easier for you. I have always found it helpful to discuss my experiences with other librarians having the same challenges. There will be things that you can't control and have no decision in. So take charge of the things that you can control and make changes as needed to meet your changing environment. Don't blame yourself or management about what is happening to the library. Just streamline, cut out unnecessary work or steps and be on the lookout for services having little or no value.

The future may seem bleak, but I believe it will gradually improve over a period of time, and I want to be ready with ideas for services. Therefore, I am constantly on the lookout for future needs and planning how to meet the next challenge. To survive downsizing and constant change one must always be responsive to the needs of the corporation.

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