

Library Management: A Glimpse of Benchmarking Approach

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose: *The purpose of this paper is to present benchmarking and to review application of benchmarking in libraries particularly in special libraries.*

Design/Methodology/Approach: *Benchmarking is considered as one of the quality approaches which is attracted by many librarians. A review of literature on application of benchmarking in libraries carried out.*

Findings: *Benchmarking, as a formal recognized management method, has been around for almost twenty years in the business world. The first reported library benchmarking study was conducted by the Metro Toronto Reference Library in 1985. Literature shows that benchmarking is attracted by librarians around the world. According to the literature, when used appropriately it can have real and long-lasting benefits, particularly in driving a culture of continuous improvement. When used inappropriately it is a waste of time and effort.*

Originality/ Value: *The paper provides a useful glimpse of benchmarking approach as a quality tools in libraries.*

Keywords: *Benchmarking, Libraries, Quality Management*

Introduction

As information services become more complex in nature and more technologically sophisticated, library and information managers need to keep pace with innovations and thinking in the field to offer the most professional service with the resources they have. Following the parent organization, librarians have been trying to apply quality management approaches in libraries to better manage their tasks. Benchmarking, as a formal recognized management method, were used in libraries since 1985. The first reported library benchmarking study was conducted by the Metro Toronto Reference Library in 1985. The reference service, sadly in need of improvement, was targeted. Since the new director, brought in to "get things on track," came from the business world and was familiar with benchmarking, she had a

valuable tool to help sort out the problems. Since that time, librarians have been very slow about jumping on the benchmarking bandwagon. In this paper, we will discuss library management and then review application of benchmarking in libraries particularly in special libraries.

Quality and Benchmarking

Quality as described by John Brockman (1997) is the conformity to requirements provided the requirements are agreed with the customer. Quality focuses on the satisfaction of the customer and is seen as the process of ensuring that goods and services conform to requirements, are fit for the purposes, and meet and exceed customer needs (Gehrke and Britz, 2004).

Literature shows that quality management has been influenced by the philosophies and ideas of the American, Edwards W. Deming, Joseph M. Juran and Amand Feighenbaum (Gehrke and Britz, 2004, Washbash, 2002,) and has its roots in the production quality control systems of the 1920s. It relates to how businesses respond to the current business and technological culture.

During the industrial revolution period there was a reliance on final inspection to ensure quality of the finished product. It was the production inspectors who decide the quality of the goods and whether to accept or reject a product. As businesses increased, the provision of adequate number of inspectors was impractical and so output decreased and more technical problems occurred. There was now the need for specialised skills, often not possessed by production workers and the inspectors lacked training. Hence, inspectors were ordered to accept defective goods in order to increase output.

Although the ideas existed decades ago it was not until the 1940s when the Japanese market became virtually destroyed that the concepts gained prominence. The “Japanese industry was reputed to manufacture cheap imitation products using illiterate workforce” (Gehrke and Britz, 2004).

The Japanese along with the help of the American philosophers set about solving the problem. This led to the rapid increase in quality management practices so that by the 1960s there was a national quality management ethos in Japan and the Japanese import into the USA and Europe increased significantly. Since then the term has been accepted and often used interchangeable with total quality management (TQM).

There is a plethora of information on TQM as a strategy used for effective measurement in businesses. Jurow and Bernard (1993, p. 3) provide a broad view. TQM is “a system of continuous improvement employing participative management and centered on the needs of the customers”.

Benchmarking Process

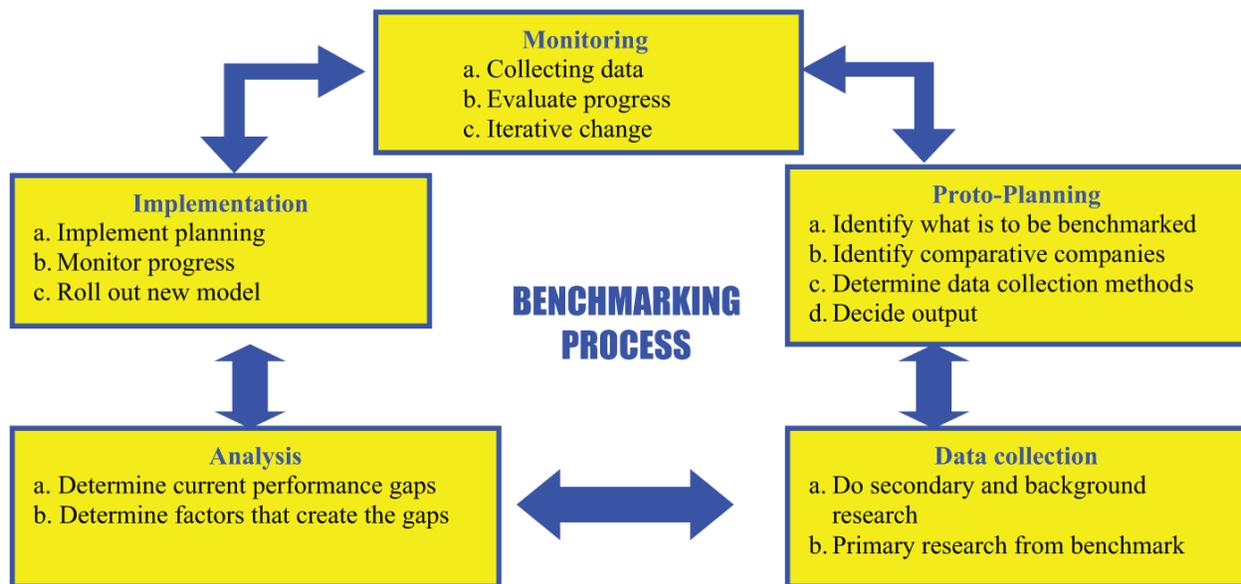
Benchmarking, by extension, is a TQM tool which also has its genesis in the corporate world. Jurow and Barnard (1993) believe that “benchmarking can be defined as a process for improving performance by constantly identifying, understanding and adapting best practices and processes followed inside and outside the company and implementing the results. In general, there are different types of benchmarking that may be used to improve performance:

- Strategic benchmarking – re-aligning business strategies that have become inappropriate.
- Performance benchmarking – assessing relative level of performance in key areas or activities in comparison with others in the same sector and finding ways of closing gaps in performance.
- Process benchmarking – achieving improvements in key processes to obtain quick benefits.
- Functional benchmarking – improving activities or services for which counterparts do not exist.
- Internal benchmarking – several business units within the same organization exemplify good practice and management want to spread this expertise quickly, throughout the organization. A library may choose to measure their performance in comparison to other parts of the organization. This type is often used to justify the existence of the library when faced with threats of downsizing. It can also be used to prove the contribution made by the library to the organization’s success.

- External benchmarking – where examples of good practices can be found in other organizations and there is a lack of good practices within internal business units. Libraries may choose to measure the processes or services in one library with that of another library.
- International benchmarking – where the aim is to achieve world class status or simply because there are insufficient “national” businesses against which to benchmark. A library may choose to benchmark with good practices found in other libraries worldwide.

Jones (2004) represented the process of benchmarking on a five step continuum as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Benchmarking process cycle



Application of Benchmarking in Libraries

Historically, some library managers in the business or corporate sector have been "encouraged" to follow their company's lead and conduct benchmarking studies to "prove their value" to the company. Most of these librarians have started out doing a comparative benchmarking study used mainly for justification purposes. Statistics are collected and compared on staffing size and ratio, expenditures, services offered and productivity with similar type libraries to measure how they rank. In the other word, benchmarking between library and information services is often based on performance statistics that are collected from a group of libraries. Statistics collected on specific services may also be useful for benchmarking the performance of specific functions or processes. For example, Ruthven and Magnay (2002) report a benchmarking study of 100 Australian libraries in the context of interlending operations; summary statistics from these data can be used to benchmark the performance of individual library interlending services.

Wilson and Town (2006) carried out a research in UK to gather evidence to establish whether benchmarking provides a real and lasting benefit to library and information services. Their study was set to investigate the long-term effects of a benchmarking exercise on the quality level of three UK academic libraries. They developed and used a framework, namely, the Quality Maturity Model (QMM).

The evidence from their study showed that the two libraries which were at stage one on the QMM before the benchmarking exercise remained there; and the library which scored at the penultimate level, level

four, before benchmarking, was, four years afterwards, at level five. They concluded that there is still much research to be done, but a tentative conclusion can be drawn that benchmarking should be viewed as a tool for organisations at a high level of quality maturity. When used appropriately it can have real and long-lasting benefits, particularly in driving a culture of continuous improvement. When used inappropriately it is a waste of time and effort. We should remember not to run before we can walk (Wilson and Town, 2006).

Another benchmarking study carried out by Missingham and Morenoon the Australian interlibrary loan and document delivery (ILL/DD). They found that the benchmarking study and activities undertaken to implement the findings of the study have improved the turnaround time and the operation of ILL/DD in Australia both for libraries and users. All sectors reduced delivery time by up to 50 per cent, creating much more effective access for users to the Australian distributed collection (Missingham and More, 2007).

A study by Voorbij (2009) on the Dutch academic library benchmarking system carried out in The Netherlands. He used the following benchmarking instrument: the size of the population, library expenditure, collection expenditure, number of book acquisitions, number of printed and electronic journals, FTE library staff, number of opening hours, number of loans and number of ILL requests, etc. The results showed that benchmarking data should be used with caution. Although, benchmarking enables libraries to compare their performance across a variety of aspects, however, one should realize that a low score does not necessarily mean low performance. First, raw data may be unreliable. This applies not only to complex financial data, such as building costs, but also to more basic data such as the number of current serials. Second, performance indicators do not take into account the context of the library and may thus be invalid. There are legitimate reasons for not being worried about low values. They may only show (the more measurable) part of the picture, or they may be adequately compensated by high values on other aspects. Libraries may even fear that benchmarking brings more harm than good, if their position is endangered by policy makers relying on sheer numbers without any further consideration of backgrounds and context. One should be critical when interpreting benchmarking data, but that does not mean that these are without value (Voorbij, 2009).

A recent study of benchmarking on special libraries in the Caribbean (in Jamaica) recommends that special libraries in Jamaica must move away from being cost centers to being value-added units. Through strategic alignment, cooperation and the librarians' immersion in the plans, goals and project of the organization it is possible for the Special Libraries in Jamaica to remain relevant and play important roles within the organizations of the twenty-first century. Clearly, benchmarking is a total quality management tool that will help libraries achieve the goals of the organization (Nicholas, 2010)

Discussion and Conclusion

A review on the literature indicates that one can benefit from the experiences of other libraries in how they have created their quality management system. One could even argue that there may be the possibility to create common tools for libraries in the procedures utilized in their quality management. For example, these could be best-practice databases, education materials, even drafts for quality monitoring manuals. In addition, literature highlights that each organization must create or at least implement its own type of quality management, otherwise this will not have any true impact on how the library improves its services and their production. Considering benchmarking, as a formal recognized management method, it is been around for almost twenty years in the business world. In reality, it's been around as long as there have been people with common sense, ingenuity and a willingness to look for new and better ways to get things done. There is always someone who can do it better somewhere, somehow. Benchmarking is also a Total Quality tool that requires librarians to look closely at how other librarians accomplish selected works, it can be considered a kind of "friendly" competitive intelligence used to increase library's performance and customer service.

At the other side, we should keep in mind that benchmarking is not quite as easy as it sounds. It takes time - usually from 4 to 6 months to conduct a study. One librarian can accomplish a benchmarking

study, but a team is better. Benchmarking is a time consuming process that is extraordinarily worthwhile because of the value of the improvements and savings in time and money librarians hope to achieve in the long run. So librarians can definitely use benchmarking to improve their library operations and services. Literature shows that benchmarking is attracted by librarians around the world. According to the literature, when used appropriately it can have real and long-lasting benefits, particularly in driving a culture of continuous improvement. When used inappropriately it is a waste of time and effort.

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