

Agile Management: Strategies for Success in Rapidly Changing Times – an Australian University Library Perspective

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Abstract:

This paper explores the concept of agile management, revealing multiple meanings for the term. Notable innovations and developments in Australian university libraries reflect conscious (or possibly not) applications of agile management techniques. As a case study, changes at The University of New South Wales Library are examined in the light of agile management concepts.

Keywords: Agile management; Change management; University libraries; Innovation; Digital libraries

INTRODUCTION – AGILE MANAGEMENT

Agile management is a term more associated with the commercial world than libraries. It is used in commercial and manufacturing environments to emphasise the need to move easily and quickly in response to changing economic circumstances or competitive forces. One of the Oxford English Dictionary definitions of ‘agile’ states that for a company or activity, it means being able to change or be changed rapidly in response to customer needs and market forces. Other adjectives associated with agility are ‘adaptive’, ‘flexible’ and ‘responsive’. At first thought, ‘agile management’ hardly seems to be a term to apply to universities and their libraries. These organisations are not typically seen as nimble in the face of change; instead, they are often perceived as bureaucratic, conservative and traditional. In the eyes of many, this stability is seen as a virtue. Libraries strive to be adaptive, flexible and responsive but the general perception is that they tend to act cautiously, adopting evolutionary approaches over those that are revolutionary. Exploring the concept of agile management can help us determine whether this is a fair perception or not.

Two of the IFLA 2013 Congress themes appear to align strongly with the concept of agile management. The theme of ‘users driving access and services’ implies that libraries need to adopt a responsive approach. The theme of ‘ideas, innovations and anticipating the new’ is

reflected in the commercial world, with competition driving the creation of new products and services. While libraries have a proud history of innovation, it is worth examining whether this reflects agile approaches, such as flexibility, responsiveness and speed.

A recent short paper in a management journal provides five ‘ways’ for businesses to become more agile and strengthen them to meet the challenges of difficult economic conditions (Birkinshaw 2012). They are:

1. *Use peripheral vision.* Organisations should actively monitor trends and innovations. The congress theme of ‘anticipating the new’ seems particularly apt here. Scenario planning is a useful tool to help identify and assess industry changes.
2. *Encourage dissent.* Leaders of organisations are successful when they encourage debate and are prepared to have their assumptions and beliefs challenged. There are dangers in organisations becoming complacent or being unwilling to change course.
3. *Experiment.* It is important that organisations try out new activities, even if this requires redirecting resources from existing activities.
4. *Simplify and flatten.* Birkinshaw recommends pushing decision-making to the front line to enable responsiveness as opportunities arise. He notes that ‘agile companies are typically very flat, with clear lines of accountability’ and mentions that they are often major users of outsourcing allowing them to reduce or increase capacity as needed.
5. *Act quickly.* Paradoxically, it is sometimes smarter to wait, make preparations and save resources, so that when an opportunity arrives, an organisation can act quickly.

Birkinshaw’s five ways of agile management are put forward in the context of economic conditions and competitive markets. This context partially applies to university libraries which have faced reduced funding and other economic pressures such as increased prices for information resources. Another environmental factor is the rapid change of the scholarly information environment, along with users preferring and expecting to access scholarly content on mobile devices. These major changes inject uncertainty into all players in the information industry – libraries, suppliers, library system vendors, publishers and library consortia. The digital era has arrived quickly and suggests more nimble responses are needed. Has this happened?

CHANGES IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION AND UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Background

First, it is useful to provide some background about the higher education system in Australia. (Sources of data for this section come from official statistics published by the Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (<http://www.innovation.gov.au>) and the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) (<http://www.caul.edu.au>)). There are 39 Australian universities, 37 of which are public and 2 private, serving a population of 23 million people. Universities are funded through a mix of government and non-government sources. In approximate terms, government provides about 55% of the revenues, with student fees from both domestic and international cohorts providing 38%. Revenue growth has been considerable, rising from \$10.2 bn in 1996 to \$21.5 bn in 2010, which is an increase of 211%. Expenditure on university libraries as a proportion of university revenues fell from 3.4% to 3% over this period.

While university libraries' share of revenue decreased, enrolments have soared. Between 2000 and 2010, enrolments rose from 695,485 to 1,111,352 which is an increase of nearly 60%. From these figures, it is clear that library expenditure per population member decreased over time. Australian university libraries have found themselves meeting increased demand for services and resources, while budgets did not increase commensurably. How did they manage?

Digital Information and Innovation

Australian university libraries seized opportunities presented by e-journals. Many university libraries adopted an electronic-preferred policy for journals in the early 2000's, often in the face of dissent from academic and library staff. CAUL statistics show that serial volumes added to Australian university library collections fell from 170,889 to 34,498 between 2000 and 2011, which is a decrease of 80%. This figure reveals the amount of print journals not being added to shelves. Australian university libraries stopped taking print subscriptions. When backfiles and initiatives such as JSTOR became available, many libraries removed journals from shelves, placing them in storage or discarding them. This released space, enabling libraries to seize an opportunity to improve the study and learning environments for students which had suffered as growing print collections consumed increasing amounts of library buildings. Australian university librarians are surprised to see questions in library user surveys in other nations attempting to gauge the degree of comfort users have about print versions of serials being removed in favour of electronic versions. In Australia, this is an unnecessary question – the print has been and continues to be removed, along with major reductions in print subscriptions. Between 2000 and 2001, Australian university libraries increased the stock of study seats by 26%, from 60,601 to 76,551 places. This is merely a statistic however: it does not reflect the amount of innovation, creativity and experimentation applied to the provision of new study spaces. This was not merely about adding more carrels or rows of desks. The new spaces featured group study rooms, informal environments, technology and flexibility to support major changes in teaching and learning practices.

These changes reflect some of the 'ways' of agile management. The rapid uptake of e-journals and moving to electronic-preferred over 12 years ago is a good example of 'anticipating the new' and applying innovation. The transition was carried out in the face of hostile comment. There was a degree of experimentation at work here too. The opportunities presented by the release of space enabled university libraries to act quickly and improve the student experience, adding considerable value to the services offered to users.

This was the first act in the transition from print to digital libraries. The next act brought new opportunities.

Digital repositories and new roles

A significant development in the last decade has been the development of repositories. It is fair to say this employed the 'peripheral vision' way of agile management. In 1997, a small group of Australian university librarians became aware of an activity led by Virginia Polytechnic called the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLDT). This initiative enabled the dissemination of higher degree theses via the World Wide Web using software developed by Virginia Polytechnic. This was clearly an interesting innovation. Seven university libraries under the leadership of The University of New South Wales Library won project funding from the Australian Research Council to implement and

test the NDLTD system – this is a good example of experimentation, another ‘way’ of agile management. The project worked, and in 2000, it migrated to program status to become the Australian Digital Theses (ADT) Program managed by the Council of Australian University Librarians. In its time, the ADT Program was regarded as a major innovation (Genoni 2003). The ADT Program expanded to include all university libraries in Australia and New Zealand contributing digital versions of theses. Digital theses became standard business and several universities are now in the process of implementing the digital thesis as the ‘version of record’. The transition from print to digital for this research output is well underway.

The success of the ADT Project led to further employment of ‘peripheral vision’. Australian university librarians were becoming aware of developments in institutional repository software. It was clear that digital theses could seed institutional repositories, which would contain other research outputs in a wide variety of formats. Government funding enabled further experiments such as the ARROW (Australian Research Repositories Online to the World) which ran from 2004 to 2008. Led by Monash University Library, its key goal was to identify software and solutions for best practice institutional repositories which could store any digital research output in any format (Groenewegen 2008). ARROW was one of a number of experiments which have led to institutional repositories becoming standard activities in Australian university libraries. Factors contributing to this included some universities adopting a strong approach to open access, such as Queensland University of Technology, and government-led research assessment exercises (Research Quality Framework, Excellence in Research Australia) which required universities to provide repositories of evidence containing publications authored by university researchers.

These activities continue to steer Australian university libraries towards new roles in supporting research. The implementation of research assessment exercises provided opportunities to develop new services for academics covering bibliometrics and research measurement. Many libraries are developing research data management services, and taking advantage of the opportunity to experiment provided by the Australian National Data Service (<http://www.ands.org.au>). Repository developments provided the platform for the development of new services to support research which were aligned.

The ‘ways’ of agile management here include use of peripheral vision to monitor trends and innovation and a willingness to experiment. While government funding provided some resources, libraries needed to divert resources to support experimentation. Leaders recognised that external project funding would meet only a portion of costs: the remainder would have to be met internally. This is an example of agile management.

Applying Birkinshaw’s five ‘ways’ demonstrates features of agile management across Australian university libraries. There are other examples of innovation include quality programs, staff development and support for learning and teaching. Of course, not all libraries have and can do this at the same pace. However, the transformations in all libraries over a decade are significant, so a close examination of one university library, the one I lead, follows.

AGILE MANAGEMENT AT UNSW LIBRARY

The University of New South Wales is a major research-intensive Australian university in Sydney. It was founded in 1949. UNSW Library has faced rapid changes in its operating environment over the last decade. The changes in the information environment are a

challenge for all university libraries, but as will be discussed later, these have been exploited to enable change. UNSW Library sees its future as a digital library and states this regularly to its users and the senior management of the university. The University of New South Wales has been through rapid enrolment growth. For example in the 2005 to 2010 period, full time equivalent enrolments grew 30% (from 28,381 to 37,020). In the same period, the library's budget increased by 9%. Some conscious (and not-so-conscious) application of agile management has enabled the maintenance of services and resources. However, Birkinshaw's recommendation to 'simplify and flatten' organisational structure and culture is highly relevant. The Library's ability to be responsive and more nimble arose from a process to simplify its structure.

This process of simplification was hardly agile or nimble. A major structural change in 2005 was the outcome of a process which commenced in 2002. This began with scenario planning (mentioned in the 'way' of using peripheral vision) which developed a vision for UNSW Library in 2007. This was a highly consultative and slow process. Its benefit was to build agreement that the Library needed to change in the face of major changes in the information environment. UNSW Library's structure featured special discipline-based libraries which were created when print was dominant. The scenario planning process recognised the need to move away from a structure which was designed to support a print-based service model which emphasized on-site physical interaction with users, staff and resources. The model duplicated services across libraries. The costs involved in maintaining this structure limited the Library's ability to release resources to enable innovation and carry out the experimentation needed for the transition to a digital library.

The outcome was the abolition of special libraries, replaced by a simple structure emphasising that UNSW Library is one library, not several. The proportion of resources applied to managing digital services has steadily increased, with one of the three departments called Digital Library Services. The other two departments are Information Services (client and academic support) and Central Services (physical library and corporate services). This is not the structure of a library dominated by print. There is no 'front-room/back-room' division, as no technical services department exists. With nearly 95% of the budget for information resources used for online resources, a structure which aligns with the dominance of digital information and services is essential. A further emphasis driving the need for a different structure was the existence of a technologically literate population.

This simplification of structure has enabled the Library to deal with rapid changes in enrolment with less resources, and act in an agile manner.

Here are some notable examples.

No service desks. There are no desks in our libraries. Instead, users are greeted in Help Zones. A tiered reference model is used. This is a case of using the 'way' of peripheral vision. Customer service models in other environments such as banks and airports stimulated our thinking. It has worked well – users and staff enjoy interacting in a more friendly and relaxed atmosphere. This change was implemented quickly, over a period of three months. It did not require extensive consultation and persuasion.

Self-help. The Library had to develop a service model which could meet increasing enrolments in a relatively static budget. Self-help is a conscious strategy which suits the online environment. People are becoming comfortable with searching and carrying out

transactions online. More than 90% of borrowing is now performed by users. A recent implementation of the RightNow software features a knowledge base that develops in response to client needs. This strategy moves the Library forward to understanding and delivering services for a predominantly digital information environment. In 2013, UNSW has nearly 50,000 students: this strategy is essential for the Library to scale its services according to its budget.

Stop doing things or do them differently. Librarians find this hard to do, but every service needs continual examination. Our key action was to stop face-to-face information literacy classes and transfer it to the online environment, as suits a digital library. Face-to-face information literacy does not scale (there are too many students), does not appeal to technologically literate students and frequently uses teaching styles that our old-fashioned.

Stop doing things to release resources for new activities. Changing the structure, reference services and the information literacy model enabled us to redirect the considerable professional resources of the Library's information services staff to develop new services supporting research, such as research impact measurement and bibliometrics. Resources were also redirected to placing more effort in communicating with academic staff.

While the management of UNSW Library has not consciously used the term 'agile management' to describe its approach, it has used many of the 'ways' of agile management described by Birkinshaw to meet the challenges of rapid change.

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