"Thanks for being awesome": using the learning organisation model to enhance client service

Catherine Clark
Information Services, University of Western Australia, Crawley, Australia
catherine.clark@uwa.edu.au

Bel Shilkin
Information Services, University of Western Australia, Crawley, Australia

Jill Benn
Information Services, University of Western Australia, Crawley, Australia

Merrilee Albatis
Information Services, University of Western Australia, Crawley, Australia

Roz Howard
Information Services, University of Western Australia, Crawley, Australia

Felicity Renner
Information Services, University of Western Australia, Crawley, Australia

Abstract:

Aim

Libraries are increasingly expected to demonstrate their value to parent organisations as well as an ability to be flexible and adaptable in a rapidly changing environment. A change in organisational structure provided the catalyst for student IT support services to be delivered from the Research and Learning Support (RLS) directorate within the Information Services department at the University of Western Australia (UWA). RLS had previously provided more traditional library services and the need for a flexible, adaptive and productive approach to learning and development as described by Senge (1990) led to the learning organisation method for the delivery of this new service model.

Method

The authors chose to devise a service implementation method that utilised the development of both people and the organisation. This included engagement with all levels of staff prior to the new service commencing and throughout the implementation; the development and delivery of a training programme and mentoring. Opportunities within and outside the programme for practice and reflection were embedded and included peer to peer learning across two different organisational units.

Outcome

The integration of student IT support into traditional library inquiry services was an ambitious goal. While the new service model is still in its first year, the integrated approach has provided staff with a much broader skill set and increased interaction with clients. It sets the libraries and their people up as the experts in student IT support on campus and meets the University's strategic aim of an enhanced student experience. Although the method was devised for this particular organisational change, it could be applied to other areas of need particularly as the learning organisation approach has become a more integrated part of the organisational culture.

BACKGROUND

In 2009 the department Information Services was established within the University of Western Australia (UWA). Information Services combined the two pre-existing sections of Information Technology Services and the Library. The integration provided the catalyst for a number of improvements and changes to service delivery, including student IT support. Early in 2012, an organisational change process was initiated within Research and Learning Support (RLS), one of the five directorates within Information Services. At that time RLS was providing traditional services from its six subject libraries, including lending, information literacy and reference services. Many of these services had decreased in volume (lending of print materials had, for example, decreased by 35% in eight years) prompting a review of the service delivery model. The three aims of the organisational change process were: to define a new service model for student IT support including provision of service from all six subject libraries; to implement a new style of service point to encourage a more collegial relationship with clients; and to reduce the focus on print collections and lending services due to increased availability of electronic resources. This paper focuses on the use of the learning organization model in relation to the implementation of the new service model for student IT support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been much discussion over the last three decades about what constitutes a learning organisation. While the concept evolved through system thinking ideology in the 1970s and 1980s, the term gained prominence in 1990 with the publication of Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*. A learning organization is one where "people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free,

and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (Senge 1990, p. 3). Senge outlines the five essential key components in a learning organisation:

- *Systems thinking* – an understanding of the system as a whole over time, "to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively" (Senge 1990, p. 7).
- *Personal mastery* – the spiritual foundation of the learning organisation, "an organisation's commitment to and capacity for learning can be no greater than that of its members" (Senge 1990, p. 7).
- *Mental models* – our assumptions and generalisations about the world and the organisation: in a learning organisation "people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others" (Senge 1990, p. 9).
- *Building shared vision* – working towards a common sense of purpose; when there is a truly shared vision "people excel and learn…because they want to" (Senge 1990, p. 9).
- *Team building* – teams are the basic learning unit in organisations.

According to Senge (1990, p. 14), by fully employing these five disciplines an organisation is able to "continually expand its capacity to create its future".

Since the release of *The Fifth Discipline* the idea of the learning organisation has been variously described, defined and critiqued by a large number of academics and practitioners. Pedler, Boydell and Burgoyne (1989, p. 91) define a learning organisation as one "which facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself in order to meet its strategic goals". Further to this, to be successful, learning organisations are "continually seeking data from the environment, are fluid and adaptable, and learn from their previous experiences" (Johnson 2002, p. 242). Systems and processes within an organisation are in place to streamline the sharing of knowledge and information enabling the organisation to adapt to rapidly changing environments and unpredictable pressures.

Garvin (1993, p. 80) believes that "a learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights". More recently, Garvin, Edmondson and Gino (2008) suggest that for a learning organisation to achieve this it requires organisational vision, staff training and staff incentives. The building blocks for such an organisation are "(1) a supportive learning environment, (2) concrete learning processes and practices, and (3) leadership behaviour that reinforces learning" (Garvin 2008, p. 110). In their discussion of the future of the learning organisation, Rowley and Gibbs (2008, p. 368) extend the concept further, building on Senge's five disciplines to develop the notion of a *practically wise organization,* one which "captures knowledge and learning created by a deliberate engagement with its environment and becomes skilful at the engagement through experience, practice and judgment".

There are significant challenges in the extent to which the ideal learning organisation has been successfully achieved with very few researchers proposing suitable and/or adequate means of measurement. This paper uses the survey tool developed by Garvin, Edmondson and Gino (2008) to measure the extent to which the UWA implementation of the student IT support model has succeeded in developing the learning organisation as described by Senge (1990). The Garvin, Edmondson and

Gino survey was chosen as it has been used in a number of other studies (e.g. Dada et al (2012), Finnigan (2012), Shabbir (2009)), provided benchmarking data and gave an evidence-based framework for the evaluation.

METHOD
Through the change consultation process that preceded the implementation of the new student IT support model, a number of meetings were held with RLS staff and much feedback was gathered in relation to the organizational change that was being proposed. A decision was made to form a number of working groups comprising staff affected by the change. The working groups planned the various elements of the implementation, e.g. identified the need for a Student Information Technology Support (SITS) training course and the requirements for the new service desk, and included staff from across the six subject libraries. This provided staff with an opportunity to engage in the implementation of the new service model for student IT support, adopting the learning organisation model as defined by Senge (1990) in the following ways:

- Involving staff in the definition of the change contributed to a *shared vision*, a new *mental model* resulting in new ways of thinking and working and the facilitation of *team learning*.
- Enabling staff to define what services would be offered and what training was required resulted in ownership and openness for learning and *personal mastery*.
- Employing the working groups, overseen by a steering group made up with representatives of the working groups, enabled *systems thinking* and a comprehensive and consistent approach.

Training Methodology
The Coordinator, Learning and Inquiry (LI) in RLS, oversaw the task of coordination, design and implementation of the SITS training course that comprised two stages: Formal Training; Shadow Training.

Stage 1: Formal Training
The Formal Training comprised a schedule of twelve three-hour sessions, held from October 2012 to February 2013. Excluding review sessions, this formal training schedule covered 24 individual topics (Appendix 1). Topics were specifically planned so that the course began by revisiting known topics (Weeks 1-2), building to those that were new (Weeks 3-9), and concluding with topics that were likely to be asked at information desks on formal course completion (Weeks 10-12). All information desk staff from the six subject libraries were required to attend, including Library Officers (LO), Senior Library Officers (SLO), and their supervisors.

To accommodate staff training whilst maintaining information desk services, a session was repeated four times each week with an additional session for SLO and supervisors only. Staff were allocated to a regular training day and time according to their subject library. This approach allowed the Coordinator (LI) to establish and foster a community of practice in each subject library. It was intended that the community of practice approach would continue to sustain itself in each subject library once formal training ceased.

The use of an online reference tool, Collaborate, was used for the community of practice with an extensive collection of web pages dedicated to each of the 24 training topics. Each Collaborate page included background information, how to diagnose and

resolve specific problems, and who and how to escalate to if needed. At the conclusion of formal training, responsibility for Collaborate was given to all information desk staff, with editing undertaken by SLO. This enabled staff to continue to contribute to their own learning and the learning of others long-term and served to highlight that although the staff in subject libraries are physically separate, they are part of one team. This responsibility also made it possible for the reference tool to be kept up-to-date by the staff using the resource, ultimately ensuring its relevance long-term as both a support mechanism and training tool.

A tiered approach to service delivery was enabled with LO providing basic level support and triaging each query to determine resolution or escalation. The SLO performed a dual support role, on the one hand supporting students by utilising additional skills and wider access to systems, and on the other hand mentoring LO colleagues providing on-hand guidance. The separate SLO training prepared staff to take on this more senior role.

Each training session included a mixture of theory, discussion and practical exercises, allowing staff to explore and practice applying the content in real-life scenarios. For example, staff practiced connecting different devices to the wifi network and problem-solved connection problems.

Stage 2: Shadow Training
As Formal Training drew to a close, four experienced IT staff were employed at information desks as shadow staff. Shadow staff assisted with the transfer and development of skills by helping information desk staff as they tackled new student IT queries. Depending on the nature and volume of queries, shadow staff would demonstrate how to triage and resolve a problem, or coach information desk staff through a resolution.

Shadow staff predominately worked in the two busiest subject libraries, but did spend time in all of the subject libraries. Information desk staff reported that shadow training was very helpful and assisted to alleviate concerns about taking on unknown student IT questions.

EVALUATION
Staff evaluation
Two surveys were conducted with staff: the *UWA survey* and the *learning organisation survey* (Garvin 2008). All staff who had been involved in the working groups as part of the change consultation process, had undertaken the training programme and participated in the associated support (e.g. shadowing) were invited to participate in the surveys.

The UWA survey (conducted three times) was designed to measure staff confidence in problem solving using the knowledge learnt in the training sessions. It was hoped that this would identify areas that needed more training as well as issues that had not been covered. The UWA survey was conducted after week six of the formal training programme (Survey (a)), repeated at the end of the formal training (Survey (b)) and then repeated six weeks after implementation of the new student IT support model (Survey (c)).

Table 1: Response Rates for Survey 1

Survey	Response	Percentage response
Survey 1a	16/32	50%
Survey 1b	32/32	100%
Survey 1c	25/32	78%

Figure 1: Self-reported confidence rating (percentage) by staff six weeks into the course (Survey (a)), directly after the course (Survey (b)) and six weeks after completing the course (Survey (c)).
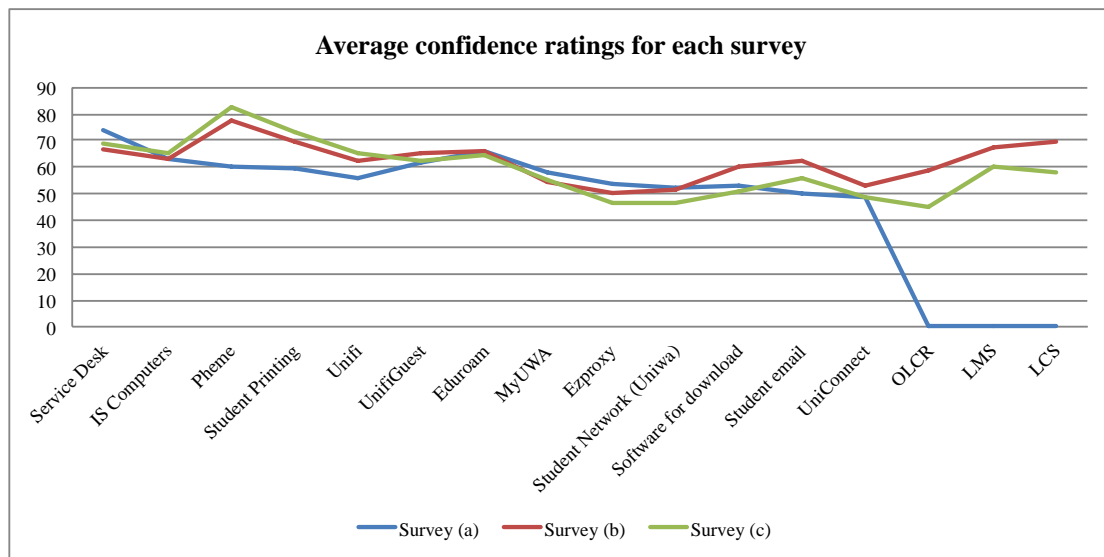

Figure 1 illustrates that the IT systems that were most often used, due to the high number of student queries that were associated with them, scored highest in the confidence surveys (Pheme, LMS, LCS). The drop to zero for Survey (a) is because OLCR, LMS and LCS had not been covered in the formal training when Survey (a) was completed. The generally higher scores in Survey (b) are most likely because this was pre-semester and so staff had yet to have their skills and knowledge tested to any extent. This confidence rating survey was largely designed to determine areas that would require 'refresher' training.

Figure 2: Usefulness of shadow staff
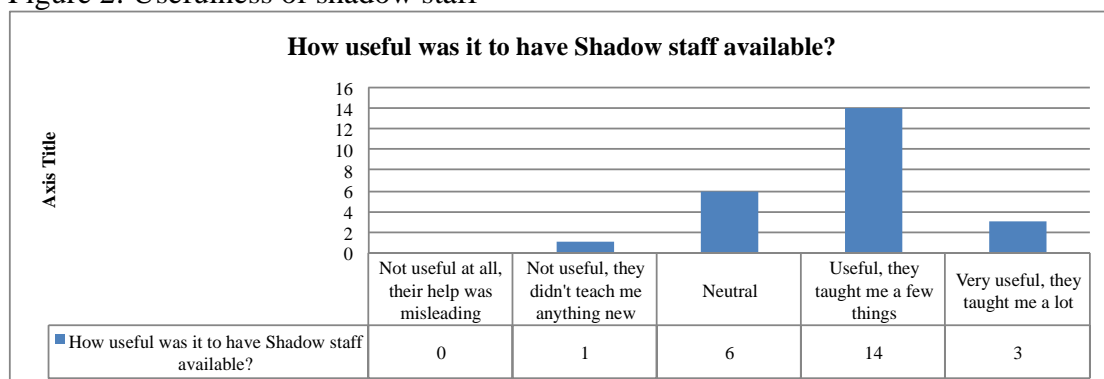
Shadow staff were considered a useful addition to the student IT implementation with 71% (17/24) staff responding they were useful or very useful.

Garvin, Edmondson and Gino's (2008) *Learning Organization Survey* was conducted seven weeks after the implementation of the new student IT support model and results are shown in Table 1. The survey had a 75% (24/32) response rate. As directed by Garvin, Edmonson and Gino (2008), to convert a scale to a score, the raw scores for the scale were multiplied by 100, divided by the number of points on the scale and then divided by the number of questions in the scale.

Table 1: UWA survey scores in relation to benchmarks identified in the Garvin, Edmondson and Gino (2008) study

Building blocks and their sub components	UWA mean scaled scores	Gannon (2011) scaled scores	Bottom quartile (Garvin)	Second quartile (Garvin)	Median (Garvin)	Third quartile (Garvin)	Top Quartile (Garvin)
Supportive learning environment							
Psychological safety	**68**	74	31-66	67-75	76	77-86	87-100
Appreciation of differences	**51**	50	14-56	57-63	64	65-79	80-100
Openness to new ideas	**63**	75	38-80	81-89	90	91-95	96-100
Time for reflection	**58**	61	14-35	36-49	50	51-64	65-100
Learning environment composite	**60**	65	31-61	62-70	71	72-79	80-90
Concrete learning processes and practices							
Experimentation	**55**	57	18-53	54-70	71	72-82	83-100
Information collection	**n/a**	65	23-70	71-79	80	81-89	90-100
Analysis	**52**	66	19-56	57-70	71	72-86	87-100
Education and training	**68**	73	26-58	59-79	80	81-89	90-100
Information transfer	**42**	68	34-60	61-70	71	72-84	85-100
Learning processes composite	**55**	67	31-62	63-73	74	75-82	83-97
Leadership that reinforces learning							
Composite for this block	**61**	73	33-66	67-75	76	77-82	83-100

The UWA scores were below those of the benchmarked results described by Garvin, Edmondson and Gino (2008), with only one scaled score sitting above the benchmarked scores and seven of the eleven scores sitting in the bottom quartile. However, this is not unexpected given the difference in the cohorts that were surveyed. Garvin, Edmondson and Gino's (2008) benchmarks were derived from a survey of 125 senior executives who completed management training at Harvard Business School while the UWA survey cohort were junior members of staff in an academic setting. Similar results to those at UWA were recorded in a study of a research enterprise in an academic medical centre (Gannon 2011) with eleven of the twelve scales falling below the benchmark and three of the scaled scores sitting in the bottom quartile: *information collection, openness to new ideas* and *appreciation of differences*. The Gannon (2011) study reported that the Garvin, Edmondson and Gino survey benchmarks average scores and the UWA results showed variation in survey responses, which is perhaps not adequately reflected in the mean score and another reason why it is difficult to view the UWA results in the same context as the benchmarked scores.

Client evaluation
Client evaluation has been anecdotal to date but will be formerly collected as part of a survey to be completed by students in May 2013. Anecdotal feedback is that students are very happy to be able to access IT support from six locations when compared with the previous two. The "thanks for being awesome" comment in this paper's title was made by a student who appreciated the wider roll out of the service.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
Despite the difficulties that have been identified in comparing the UWA results to those benchmarked by Garvin, Edmondson and Gino (2008), it is possible to use the survey results to identify areas that could be improved in future at UWA by considering the lowest scoring areas. The lowest scores for UWA, possible reasons for these results and suggested future directions are:

- *Appreciation of differences*: this category acknowledges the need to recognise alternative world views and opposing ideas. To a large extent, this was difficult to accommodate in the student IT implementation. The main reason for this was the 'black and white' nature of the content i.e. there is only one correct way for a student to access and update the University's IT system such as their timetable. However, it would be worthwhile exploring in future how work teams can influence, for example, the design of the training programme to accommodate different learning styles.
- *Openness to new ideas* proposes that taking risks and being encouraged to explore new ways of doing things leads to a learning organisation. The short time frame and large amount of content to be covered made this difficult for the student IT implementation. It is worth noting that the working groups as part of the earlier change consultation process were designed to explore new ideas. These working groups were completed more than six months before the survey was distributed and so were perhaps not considered by survey respondents.
- *Analysis* also considers conflict and debate as important and, as discussed in the two categories above, a way to include this either in the design or implementation of future services should be explored.

- *Information transfer* proved to be more difficult than anticipated so it is not surprising that this scored below the benchmark figures. Information transfer within the staff who were engaged in student IT support was difficult due to the high volume of content that needed to be covered and the geographically dispersed subject libraries in which they were working. This category largely focuses on external engagement and that was not done by those who were undertaking the training programme and perhaps the work that was done by others in this area was not transparent to staff who responded to the survey. However, issues with this category were also highlighted in communication with staff internal and external to Information Services. Communication across the University needed to be continually undertaken as more and more areas that referred students for IT support were revealed.

The use of the learning organisation framework to evaluate the implementation of a new service at UWA has enabled senior staff to identify areas that can be improved in the future. Using Senge's (1990) five key components of a learning organisation and Garvin, Edmondson and Gino's (2008) associated building block principles, UWA has identified specific ways to approach upgraded client services into the future.

Appendix 1: SITS Training Schedule

Week	Topic
Week 1	Collaborate and Service Desk
Week 2	IS Computers and Pheme
Week 3	Browsers, Standard Operating Environments (SOE), and Student Printing
Week 4	Internet Access and Wifi (Unifi, UnifiGuest, and Eduroam)
Week 5	MyUWA, Eziproxy, Student Network, Software for download and Review
Week 6	Student Email, Mobile Devices, and UniConnect
Week 7	askUWA
Week 8	Suggestions
University closedown	
Week 9	StudentConnect
Week 10	Online Class Registration (OLCR)
Week 11	Review
Week 12	Learning Management System (LMS) and Lecture Capture System (LCS)

REFERENCES

Dada, MO, Akpadiaha, B & Ologunagba, MM 2012, 'Disposition to Organizational Learning: A Survey of Selected Construction Industry Organisations in Lagos State, Nigeria', *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 487-496.

Finnigan, KS & Daly, AJ 2012, 'Mind the Gap: Organizational Learning and Improvement in an Underperforming Urban System', *American Journal of Education*, vol. 119, no. 1, pp. 41-71.

Gannon, S 2011, 'Assessing the Academic Medical Center as a Supportive Learning Community', *Journal of Research Administration*, vol. XLII, no. 1, pp. 74-87.

Garvin, DA 1993, 'Building a learning organization', *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 71, no. 4, pp. 78-91. Available from: bth.

Garvin, DAEACGF 2008, 'Is Yours a Learning Organization?', *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 86, no. 3, pp. 109-116. Available from: heh.

Johnson, J 2002, 'Leading the learning organization: portrait of four leasers', *Leadership and organization development journal*, vol. 23, no. 5/6, pp. 241-249.

Pedler, M, Boydell, T & Burgoyne, J 1989, 'The Learning Company', *Studies in Continuing Education*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 91-101. [2013/04/28].

Rowley, J & Gibbs, P 2008, 'From learning organization to practically wise organization', *The Learning Organization*, vol. 15, no. 5, pp. 356-372. Available from: ABI/INFORM Complete; ABI/INFORM Global; ProQuest Central; ProQuest Education Journals.

Senge, P 1990, *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*, Random House, Sydney.

Shabbir, S 2009, '*Supportive learning environment - a basic ingredient of learning organization*', in *Proceedings 2nd CBRC*, Lahore, Pakistan.