On Becoming an Employer of Choice: Gauging Employee Satisfaction Through ClimateQUAL®

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ABSTRACT
In 2007, Cornell University Library (CUL) established a strategic goal of becoming an employer of choice. This aspiration is firmly rooted in the belief that the employees’ satisfaction has a direct, positive impact on user satisfaction. This article presents a case study of Cornell University Library’s use of ClimateQUAL® survey instrument in 2008 to measure CUL employees’ perceptions of the library’s workplace climate. It illustrates the use of action research methodology for engaging the library community in organizational development, provides examples of actions CUL has taken, and offers general reflections on implications of adapting ClimateQUAL as an assessment instrument in libraries. Cornell University Library’s ClimateQUAL results appear to support the hypothesis that a healthy workplace climate as perceived by the employees is positively linked to the satisfaction of the organization’s customers.

INTRODUCTION
The Internet has necessitated reexamination of library service models. Technological advances have led to organizational overhaul and changing requirements of job knowledge and skills in today’s libraries of all types. Technological and organizational change, combined with an aging workforce and the recent financial instability, create what Bolman and Deal (2008) describe as the key characteristics of today’s organizations: “complex, surprising, deceptive and ambiguous” (p. 33).

In this disruptive environment, the foundational library mindset, as succinctly summarized by Stephens and Russell (2004), remains, “Libraries exist to serve users in a fluid environment of evolving expectations,
The healthy organization has policies, practices, and procedures that create climates that send two simultaneous messages to their employees. First, organizations need to send a strong “concerned for employees” message to their employees. This message is sent when organizational policies suggest that things like teamwork, diversity, and justice are valued. Second, organizations also need to send a strong “concerned for customers” message to their employees. This message is sent when organizational policies reinforce a climate for customer service (Schneider & Bowen, 1989). Organizations value their customers when they do such things as restructure the work environment to improve customer service and/or offer training and other resources to improve employee customer related skills and knowledge. When organizations have succeeded in developing a climate profile that sends these two messages, resultant employee behavior will be focused on maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship with the organization’s customers. (p. 7)

The healthy organization concept is very much in agreement with Cornell University Library’s concern for both employees and customers.
Research Questions

LibQUAL is “a suite of services that libraries use to solicit, track, understand, and act upon users’ opinions of service quality” that is offered by the Association of Research Libraries (see details at http://libqual.org/home). Over the past ten years, Cornell University Library has received very high user satisfaction ratings in four rounds of LibQUAL+ and other local user surveys. Does this imply that CUL has a healthy workplace climate in the eyes of the employees? Where are the areas CUL needs to improve? This is an important question for any organization that desires to continuously improve its services. Identifying influencing factors will help the organization aim its actions with informed targets.

Community Engagement and the Action Research Process

Cornell University Library used an action research approach to gain better understanding of employees’ perception of the library and to plan for improvement actions. French and Bell (1999) note that “action research is a cornerstone of organizational development, underlying both the theory and practice of the field” (p. 130). The action research process consists of “a sequence of events and activities designed for organizational improvement interventions (data collection, feedback, and taking action based on the data); and it is a cycle of iterations of these activities, sometimes treating the same problem several times and then moving to different problems” (p. 131). Cornell University Library is a large and complex organization with more than four hundred employees distributed in twenty subject libraries. In addition, CUL has a team-based culture, where many ad hoc groups and committees work on policies and service development. Engaging such a complex community in gathering data, validating findings, and planning future actions would not be an easy task. The action research framework seemed to fit CUL’s operating environment well; in particular, the framework would tie the many seemingly chaotic actions together, so that with the ever expanding engagement of employees, units, and ad hoc groups, the focus on improvement actions would not be lost. See figure 1 for an overview of CUL’s action research engagement cycle.

In addition, using an action research framework to explore how library employees perceive their workplace climate provided three other distinct benefits: first, the action research process “increases the likelihood of carrying out the actions once decided upon, and keeps the recommended actions feasible” (French & Bell, 1999, p. 137). Secondly, given the economic downturn of 2008 and 2009, this approach helped focus the library community’s attention on a positive future during a time when economic uncertainty, cost-cutting and downsizing made daily headlines. Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois, and Callan (2004) notes employee “participation in decision-making can short-circuit the damaging effects of uncertainty
by allowing employees to have a say in change related organizational affairs, thereby instilling a sense of control over their circumstances” (p. 507). Thirdly, an action research approach encourages “organizational responsiveness [which] comes from giving individuals and groups the freedom to behave in ad hoc ways to respond to unforeseen circumstances” (Haeckel, 1999, p. 142).

**SELECTING AND IMPLEMENTING CLIMATEQUAL**

Cornell University Library chose the ClimateQUAL®: Organizational Climate and Diversity Assessment instrument (“ClimateQUAL” hereafter) as the data collection tool. The tool “is an assessment of library staff perceptions concerning (a) their library’s commitment to the principles of diversity, (b) organizational policies and procedures, and (c) staff attitudes. It is an online survey with questions designed to understand the impact
perceptions have on service quality in a library setting” (http://www.climatequal.org). The instrument was initially developed by the University of Maryland Libraries in partnership with the University of Maryland Industrial and Organizational Psychology Program. After having received promising results from the initial use of the tool in Maryland Libraries, improvements were made to the instrument. The University of Maryland Libraries and the Organizational Psychology Program partnered with the Association of Research Libraries to test the implementation of ClimateQUAL across multiple ARL libraries. Several other libraries were brought in to pilot Phase I of a project to test the scalability of ClimateQUAL. The fact that the ClimateQUAL assessment instrument was originally designed for a library setting (the Maryland University Libraries), and the findings by Phase I participants, in particular, had a major influence on CUL’s decision to participate in Phase II of the ClimateQUAL Project.

Phase II of the ClimateQUAL Project came at the right time. In 2008, CUL had major turnover on the top management level: four executive positions were vacant, including the university librarian position. Undoubtedly, major organizational changes were looming on the horizon. Having diagnostics of employees’ perceptions of CUL’s organizational climate at hand would be invaluable for the anticipated changes. In fact, it was a great opportunity for CUL to build in improvements as it took on an organizational overhaul.

Significant preparatory work was done in the months leading up to the survey. CUL was a beneficiary of past participants: a great deal of practical information was provided in the ClimateQUAL manual. We also learned about best practices directly from several library directors whose libraries were Phase I participants. When we implemented ClimateQUAL at CUL, we communicated with our employees via a variety of venues: the interim university librarian announced CUL’s decision to all employees, articulated the goals and objectives CUL would like to achieve, and expressed the library’s commitment to sharing the results with transparency, taking actions where actions are due, and most importantly, repeating the ClimateQUAL assessment in the future so that library’s improvement progress could be measured. We created a wiki site (see fig. 2) to keep the employees informed of all activities related to Cornell Library’s participation in ClimateQUAL.

We invited Dr. Charles Lowry, the dean of University of Maryland Libraries, to present the overall project in which ten libraries including Cornell are participating and Maryland Libraries’ experience with it to CUL employees. In addition, we held several question and answer sessions in different library groups to provide face-to-face discussion opportunities within a smaller group setting. During the survey period, laptops were available for employees who might wish to take the survey away from their desktop to provide additional flexibility and psychological safety. CUL
employees’ participation in ClimateQUAL was completely voluntary, and their anonymity was protected by the design of ClimateQUAL. After CUL’s survey period ended, the authors held two open employee sessions to gather feedback about the survey instrument and the implementation process, and to celebrate our milestone.

**Understanding and Sharing Findings**

The second phase of CUL’s action research process involved sharing the ClimateQUAL findings with library employees. Through various community dialogues, senior leaders signaled their sustained support for a positive workplace climate. The presentations, group discussions, and individual conversations in this phase set the stage for the pragmatic actions to be planned and implemented in later phases of the action research cycle.

The ClimateQUAL survey was open for three weeks. CUL saw a high participation rate: Of a total of 426 eligible library employees, 337 (79 percent) took part, 305 (72 percent) completed the survey (7 percent dropped out during the survey).

Cornell University Library received two reports from the ClimateQUAL Project Team at Maryland University, which was responsible for the survey
of Cornell: a quantitative report and a qualitative report. These were
evermously informative in terms of providing a multifaceted view of the
organizational climate and diversity at CUL. The findings were shared as
follows:

- The Maryland Project Team reports on CUL were distributed to the
  CUL Library Management Team and Library Human Resources; we
  shared these reports, minus certain sections that made units potentially
  identifiable, with all staff through the CUL intranet.
- An internal report “Highlights of the 2008 CUL ClimateQUAL Findings”
  (Bryan, Barahona, Weissman, & Li, 2008) was created and shared with
  all staff; this report is shorter and easier to read, and focuses on CUL’s
  top strong and weak areas.
- Findings were shared and discussed with employees at all employees
  meetings.
- Leadership in individual units received reports that included their re-
  spective units’ scores. These reports did not provide comparison scores
  between CUL units.
- Several Cornell faculty and administrators with expertise in organiza-
  tional development and data analysis provided guidance on how to make
  the best use of the rich findings.

The Maryland ClimateQUAL Team recommended several strategies for
identifying CUL strengths and areas for improvement: “One way . . . is to
compare your library’s average score for each dimension to the normative
sample. . . . Another way to identify a theme is to examine the percentage
of employees that agree with each scale. For example, if an organizational
climate theme has fewer than 50% of the employees agreeing with that
scale, then that theme should be examined further in future intervention efforts
[italics added]” (Hanges, Aiken, & Chen, 2008, p. 22). We applied both of
the suggested strategies.

The survey results found that, overall, CUL has a strong and healthy work
environment. CUL employees rated some of CUL’s climate and diversity as-
pects particularly high: Cornell Library employees perceive CUL as having a
climate that values demographic diversity and non-discriminatory practices;
employees feel they are competent and empowered to get their work done;
team supervisors provide employees with the information they need to
complete their work; and our library enacts policies, practices, and proce-
dures that clearly indicate the importance and value of customer service.
We noticed that CUL held the highest average scores in thirty-four of a
total of thirty-six dimensions among the Phase II participants. Table 1 is
an excerpt from the CUL report provided by the Maryland ClimateQUAL
Team (p. 27–28), showing the average Cornell Library scores compared
with the average scores of the Phase II participants. For definitions of the
measured dimensions, please refer to ClimateQual (n.d.).
Linking these findings to known ratings of high customer satisfaction revealed by four rounds of LibQUAL+, the Cornell senior students’ surveys, and the Cornell faculty survey, CUL’s ClimateQUAL data seems to provide supporting “empirical evidence for the connection between the organizational climates concepts measured by ClimateQUAL and customer satisfaction in a library setting” (Hanges, Aiken, & Chen, 2008, p.7).

ClimateQUAL results also revealed CUL’s weaker areas. The employees perceive that CUL needs to improve rewards (pay, opportunities to advance, rewards, and recognition), the procedures used to determine rewards and recognition are not necessarily applied uniformly; CUL needs more transparency of policies and practices, and employees need better access to the information; supervisors actions need to reflect more concerns for innovation; and employees desire a stronger climate supporting diversity among employees of different rank. A review of the average scores of all Phase II participants shows that these appear to be shared weak areas among all, although individually it could vary from library to library. Because we do not have access to individual library’s data, we are not in a position to draw additional conclusions.

Table 1. Average Scores

The superscripts in the table indicate the number of points on each scale (e.g., 1 is the lowest, 5 is the highest score for a measure).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Climate</th>
<th>Phase II Cornell Library Average Scores</th>
<th>Participants Average Scores</th>
<th>Gaps*</th>
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<tr>
<td>Climate for Organizational Justice</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Distributive Justice$^5$</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.65</td>
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<tr>
<td>Procedural Justice$^5$</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Justice$^5$</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>0.18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informational Justice$^5$</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.47</td>
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<td>Leadership Climate</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust in Leader$^5$</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>4.01</td>
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<td>Leader-Membership Relationship Quality$^7$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager’s Passion for Service$^5$</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>0.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>Authentic Transformational Leadership$^5$</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>3.87</td>
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<td>Organizational Attitude Measures</td>
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<td>Job Satisfaction$^5$</td>
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<td>3.7</td>
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<td>Organizational Commitment$^7$</td>
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<td>4.91</td>
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<td>Organizational Citizenship Behaviors$^7$</td>
<td>5.11</td>
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<td>Organizational Withdrawal$^8$</td>
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<td>3.27</td>
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<td>Psychological Empowerment in the Workplace</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual empowerment$^5$</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>–0.07</td>
</tr>
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<td>Team empowerment$^5$</td>
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<td>Task Engagement$^5$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Task$^5$</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.59</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Gaps indicate the Cornell average score minus the average score of all libraries who participated in ClimateQUAL at the same time.
Taking Action Based on Data

Within a year of receiving its ClimateQual results from the Maryland Project Team, CUL had broadly shared the results, and had validated and shaped them into recommendations for action. Two library working groups engaged more fully in the action development stage of the action research process. These two ad hoc groups fit well with what French and Bell (1999) describe as a “parallel learning structure.” These groups serve as a mechanism to facilitate innovation in large bureaucratic organizations where the forces of inertia, hierarchical communication patterns, and standard ways of addressing problems inhibit learning, innovation, and change. In essence, parallel structures are a vehicle for learning how to change the system, and then leading the change process (French & Bell, 1999). That was precisely what these two groups did for CUL. Several organizational changes were made based on the recommendations from the groups (Horne et al., 2008; Weisman et al., 2009), aiming to address issues we learned from our ClimateQUAL results.

- ClimateQual findings informed the formation of the new library organizational structure and sensitized the senior administrators to employees’ current perceptions of CUL’s workplace climate.
- CUL’s Academic Assembly amended the Assembly’s bylaws to facilitate a more welcoming and inclusive workplace for all library employees. The Cornell Library Forum was formed to provide opportunities for all employees to be heard on issues important to CUL employees and the library, and to be engaged in the life of the broader library and university communities.
- A standing committee on career development was established to promote continuing education and career development programming.
- A Library Managers’ Council was created to promote a team-based and cross-domain culture in the library’s formal decision making, implementation, and communications.
- Cornell University Library enhanced its staff intranet to serve as the go-to place for all CUL employees for information they need for their work.

Limitations

During the ClimateQUAL survey, some of CUL’s participants had difficulties interpreting a few questions in the instrument. We have shared these with the Maryland Project Team as the instrument is being further refined. Although CUL’s high ClimateQUAL scores are in synch with our high customer satisfaction ratings and appear to support the theory that there is a direct link between employee satisfaction with workplace climate and customer satisfaction with library products and services, we have not compared CUL’s LibQUAL data with those of other ClimateQUAL
participants to validate this correlation statistically ourselves. An interesting future research project would be to determine if CUL’s LibQUAL rankings have a similar relative standing as our ClimateQUAL scores among the same group of libraries.

In addition, the authors are consciously aware that we have only scratched the surface of employees’ perceptions about the library’s workplace climate. Our understanding of CUL employees’ perceptions as reported in this article is drawn solely from the reports that the Maryland Project Team provided. The authors have not mined the data in greater depth, for instance, to research whether there are significant differences among various demographic groups regarding their perceptions of workplace climate. As a result, we have been unable to develop more targeted measures to address these differences.

Lastly, it is challenging to go below the level of library-wide changes, for example, it is hard to know what changes library units have made after they have reviewed the ClimateQUAL data for their units. The library-level changes mentioned in the earlier section of this article are too recent to show results. We have anecdotal evidence showing that our employees welcome the changes, but we do not yet know whether and to what degree these changes would influence our staff perceptions of the workplace climate.

Conclusions
The significance of employees’ perceptions is evidenced by Harer (2008). He notes that employees are engaged in their library’s operations throughout the entire process, for example, from the input to the output end, and as such, he argued, the employees are internal customers: “If quality is an organization’s primary goal, then it serves the organization well to ask employees for their assessment of that quality, and not just the external customer, because employees have knowledge of those goods and services that the external customer could never have.” He further points out that improving employee satisfaction “is a means to an end and that end is the production of quality goods and services” (p. 311).

The ClimateQUAL case study was a positive experience for the Cornell University Library. Among many takeaways, the greatest one was articulated well by the University Librarian Anne Kenney of Cornell, “Diversity is our future. . . . Diversity at CUL goes beyond race, gender and sexual orientation to include a diversity of opinion, perspectives, skills, knowledge and mindsets” (Kenney, 2008). This led her to note that sustaining a healthy workplace climate that satisfies employees and supports excellence in library user experiences is a social contract between the library and all employees. Employees can expect a safe, secure, fair, and respectful work environment; timely information, good documentation, responsiveness, support, and feedback to ensure excellent job performance; and
rewards and recognition for excellence. In return, the library expects employees to demonstrate strong service ethics, solid job performance, and engagement in the welfare of the organization by staying informed, raising concerns, and offering suggestions for improvements (Kenney).

Gaining a clearer understanding of the workplace climate through ClimateQUAL has multiple implications for library practice and policies. Most, if not all, libraries recognize that external factors, such as technology and economy, and internal factors, such as aging workforce and changing job requirements, will continue to disrupt the libraries’ operating environment. On the management level, ClimateQUAL data helps libraries focus attention on issues that matter most and areas where libraries can exercise interventions. The data can help prioritize actions and allocate resources to efforts most likely to result in workplace climate improvements. On the employee level, a healthy organization creates a protective environment for employees to adapt and reinvent themselves. Using employee feedback to initiate informed strategies will leave the organization less susceptible to unexpected decisions and unfocused actions.

Success of workplace climate interventions requires determination and a long-term commitment toward an inspirational future state, such as becoming an employer of choice. In their research, Ricci and Krin (as cited in Herman & Gioia, 2000) emphasize that “soft data (such as customer and employee attitudes or satisfaction and/or retention) are hard to define and collect” (p. 205). For this reason alone, it is understandable why many organizations have been reluctant to invest in gathering data on employee satisfaction with workplace climate. Some elements of workplace satisfaction, such as pay and benefits, are often beyond the control of the administrators of an organization such as the library. An organization may fear “opening Pandora’s box” and unearthing employee dissatisfaction in an area where it is not in a position to make substantial change. Cornell University Library’s ClimateQUAL experience tells us that pay and benefits comprise only one of many dimensions that make up the employees’ perception of workplace climate. While receiving a fair wage for one’s work is essential, improving workplace climate often involves improving non-monetary reward areas, for example, interpersonal relationships, which money cannot buy. Ultimately, the broader workplace climate, if healthy, will attract and retain talented workers, which will, in turn, help the organization adapt to change, navigate challenges, and plan succession more effectively. For academic libraries aspiring to provide their customers with excellent service, attending to the employee’s workplace climate is a worthwhile long-term investment.

References


**Related Readings**


