The Role of Management Consultants in the 1980s

RICHARD M. DOUGHERTY

Management consultants have been a fixture on the library scene for many years. Consultants, or surveyors as they were commonly called, provided advice and counsel on matters such as salary and job classification plans, collection evaluation, physical planning and fund raising. Early surveyors collected data by examining existing documents, distributing questionnaires, and conducting personal interviews. Prior to World War II, analytical approaches to systems and procedures were not yet common. One of the earliest, often-cited, analytically oriented surveys was conducted by the management firm of Cresap, McCormick and Paget at the New York Public Library (NYPL) in 1951. In a historical context, this study proved to be an important event. The survey demonstrated how analytical tools could be applied to library-related procedures. Its recommendations resulted in an extensive revamping of processing procedures within the library. The study also forced the library's administration to cope with the process of managing large-scale change within a complex organization. The experience as described by Kingery in 1954 suggests that the problems faced by NYPL's administration almost thirty years ago were very similar to obstacles that must be overcome by the contemporary manager who initiates organizational change.

The Cresap, McCormick and Paget study also revealed what can occur when a surveyor does not possess a completely clear understanding of a library's purpose. Some of the recommendations for cost cutting...
were more appropriate to a profit corporation than they were for a socially oriented institution.4

The literature contains many examples of the early survey reports. Those interested in the history and development of management consulting in libraries should consult it for reports published by notables such as Maurice Tauber, Louis Round Wilson, Robert Downs, and Joseph Wheeler.

General library surveys frequently resulted in the issuance of a formal report that was made generally available. It is, however, more difficult to assess the impact of management consultants because their reports were seldom published or even widely circulated, particularly those surveys initiated by university administrators or boards of trustees for the purpose of evaluating the performance of an incumbent director. A report that assessed the performance of individual staff members had to be handled with discretion, for such surveys often touched upon sensitive issues. But as Wilson and Tauber observed in 1956, these surveys were sometimes necessary to obtain an objective clarification of existing conditions.5 Even though the lack of generally available written documentation hampers our ability to assess the contributions of early management consultants, the large number of surveys cited in the literature suggests that consultants often made important contributions.

The availability of consultants as well as professional attitudes toward the use of consultants have not changed radically during the last generation, but the managerial climate in which library directors labor has changed. Overall, the role of a typical library manager has become much more complex. Budgets have become tighter, the constituencies a library serves have become more diverse, users have become less tolerant and more vocal, and library staffs are quicker to display their anger when they become dissatisfied with a director's performance.

Library managers are expected to manage effectively during a period of resource decline. They are asked to encourage resource-sharing programs even though resource-sharing requires that dollars be diverted from traditional library activities. Library managers must wrestle with an almost bewildering array of state and federal regulations in order to comply with affirmative action and equal opportunity, OSHA regulations, and programs intended to aid the handicapped. Managers must become conversant with many technical issues related to AACR 2, alternative catalog formats such as computer-output microform (COM), and computer-based catalogs. And, as if this weren't enough, most of these issues must be further subdivided. For instance,
Role of Management Consultants

network development involves not only technical considerations, but also complicated legal, fiscal governance problems, and several unresolved public policy issues, such as who owns data, who should pay for data, and how data should be shared among libraries. Each of these questions will ultimately affect the way libraries operate and the way libraries deliver services. Therefore, they are matters with which a library director should become familiar.

This paper explores the reasons consultants may play more prominent roles in library management in the coming decade. Most library managers today do not have the time to keep abreast of all managerially related issues, and it is unlikely that tomorrow's manager will fare much better. The rapidly changing economic and technological environment is creating too many complex technical problems. These pressures on management will dictate the use of specialist problem-solvers, the management consultants.

In order to understand better why management consultants will become more important to the library manager of the 1980s, one can begin by reviewing the events of the immediate past which created the environment in which libraries currently exist. Libraries have been in the throes of accelerated change for more than a decade. Following World War II, academic libraries entered a relatively long period of unprecedented growth and prosperity. Libraries were able to build comprehensive collections that seemed to double and redouble almost overnight. Hundreds of new buildings were constructed. Staff sizes mushroomed and services to users were greatly enriched. Probably few professionals fully appreciated the uniqueness of the period until its time had almost passed.

Paradoxically, this sustained period of growth also sowed the seeds that caused many library staffs to become restive. Staffs wanted to play larger roles in determining program priorities and they wanted more voice in deciding how budgets were to be allocated. At the same time, library staffs became increasingly dissatisfied with their status on campus. The lure of faculty status was great, for faculty received better perquisites and enjoyed more generous salaries. Consequently, more and more staff energy was directed toward improving the status of professionals.

The management style of directors that had been so effective during the period of growth began to be questioned. The travails of library directors were forcefully chronicled by Robert Downs and Arthur McAnally in 1973.6 Unfortunately, few staffs realized how complicated most management issues were. It was not until later, when staff...
RICHARD DOUGHERTY

to participate in library planning, that they came to understand how complicated were the dynamics of managing large libraries.

Colleges and universities themselves experienced similar problems during the prolonged period of growth. Colleges became instant universities, Ph.D. programs were created from the fabric of marginal master's degree programs, and faculty argued for a more prominent voice in governance and budget allocation decisions. College and university presidents found their authority questioned in ways that were unprecedented. Disgruntled alumni, faculty, and university groups forced some presidents from office and others found it more desirable to resign than to cope with the pressures of their office, particularly during the period marked by the Vietnam War.

As the euphoria of the late 1960s began to fade, higher education found itself largely unprepared for what lay ahead. In fact, few recognized and even fewer understood that the great growth period in higher education had ended. Moreover, societal attitudes toward education had undergone a decided metamorphosis. Higher education had not solved the ills of society, so it no longer held its special status in the eyes of many legislators. No longer were budget requests granted carte blanche; it became fashionable to construct quantitative formulas for budget allocations based on factors such as the number of academic programs and student enrollment. Unfortunately, the student enrollment-driven formulas that had served so well during the period of growth seemed less attractive as enrollments leveled and in some cases began to decline. Then, too, inflation, which had become so pernicious by the late 1970s, began to take its toll on educational budgets in the late 1960s.

The failure to adjust at the end of the growth period contributed to the severity of problems libraries and their universities faced in the early 1970s. Even though officials intellectually understood the predicament, many were emotionally unprepared to deal with the consequences. The governing structures of libraries and their parent institutions were still geared to render decisions that involved the allocation of additional resources. It is one thing for a manager or a committee to decide how new funds are to be divided; it is quite another for a manager or a committee to decide whose budget will be cut, whose staff will be reduced, or who must be laid off. While committees are capable of making tough decisions, preparatory training is highly desirable. Most library staffs were not prepared to advise managers on how to reallocate static budgets. The hard decisions that would have facilitated organizational transition from the growth period of the 1960s into the stable 1970s were often deferred through inaction. It became increasingly
Role of Management Consultants

apparent that directors had to become skillful in the management of organizational decline. Kenneth Boulding predicted some time ago that a high premium would be paid to those who learned how to manage constructively during a period of budgetary and programmatic retrenchment. 7

As one ponders the immediate future of libraries, it seems certain that library managers will be expected to do more, but with fewer resources. Political slogans heralding the "age of limits" are already in vogue. Although people seem less willing to tax themselves for social services, there seems to be little willingness for people to surrender what they have come to expect as their due. People who demand that budgets be cut, however, are likely to single out activities that do not directly affect them. The attitudes of those in higher education are very similar. Students, faculty, and librarians may recognize the need to reduce programs, but they rarely support proposals that will cut services upon which they have come to depend. The need to reorder priorities, to make choices in the face of stiff opposition, only adds to the challenge of the contemporary library manager.

The austere budgetary climate is not the only factor that has altered the operating of libraries. The technological revolution has been equally dramatic. Computer technology, long heralded as the panacea for library ailments, finally began to realize its promise in the 1970s. OCLC's arrival ushered in a new era. Librarians could begin to think about cataloging, bibliographical control and bibliographical products in a new light. But a technological innovation improperly implemented can create more problems than it solves, as more than one library manager has discovered. At the time a library joined OCLC, the astute library manager took steps to reorganize technical services procedures in order to take full advantage of OCLC's capabilities. But as Barbara Markuson discovered in her study, some library managers failed to develop adequate implementation strategies. 8 As a result, some libraries did not enjoy the full advantages of the OCLC system. Managers discovered that technology improperly implemented could lead to increased operating costs rather than the economies that had been promised.

Managing a technologically oriented environment is further complicated by the rapid evolution in the technologies themselves. What is the state of the art technologically today may be obsolete tomorrow. Rapid technological obsolescence is a phenomenon that is now generally recognized, but recognition alone will not ease the problems of maintaining systems that are likely to become quickly obsolete. It was
only a few years ago that OCLC was viewed as a state-of-the-art system. This is no longer the case, as other sophisticated bibliographic utilities, such as the Research Libraries Information Network and the Washington Library Network, have appeared on the scene. OCLC's management must now allocate a larger share of its organizational resources to accelerate system update and renewal. Many libraries have purchased sophisticated minicomputer-based circulation systems. Such systems are already found in hundreds of large and small libraries. Unfortunately, these systems will become obsolete as more sophisticated and cheaper versions reach the market. Replacing obsolete equipment is expensive. Therefore, a plan that permits the systematic replacement of obsolete equipment should become part of a manager's overall organizational plan.

The changes in the budgetary climate, coupled with the greater availability of technology, have also produced changes in the way libraries deliver services. Libraries have traditionally attempted to satisfy the information needs of its clientele by utilizing their own resources, but no library can be totally self-sufficient. The present period of relative budget austerity has forced librarians to become even more dependent on others in order to serve their users. Fortunately, technological advancements have facilitated interinstitutional sharing. Computer-based bibliographic data bases are increasing the awareness of library collections, and document delivery will soon become more cost-effective as telecommunication systems become available.

The proper utilization of technology combined with expanded resource-sharing should help to offset the damage caused by the current period of budget decline. But if resource-sharing proves successful, this new operating environment will create other problems for the contemporary library manager. The attitudes of some users toward resource-sharing will have to be changed. Library staffs must learn to cope with an environment that causes divided institutional loyalties, and managers will have to secure general agreement on new patterns of budget allocation as some traditional library services wither and new services expand. These changes cannot be orchestrated without careful and considered planning and negotiation.

The working environment of the 1980s will require managers to become conversant on many diverse issues—so many that it is probably unreasonable to expect those responsible for formulating and implementing policy to become knowledgeable on all technical issues. Even elected officials do not have the time or resources to become conversant with all of the issues on which they must legislate. Since time is of the
Role of Management Consultants

essence, legislators have learned to specialize. They have become increasingly dependent on the advice of their administrative assistants and technical experts. The legislators' time-bind is analogous to the predicament of library managers. This highly technical, rapidly changing environment argues for the greater use of specially trained consultants.

A qualified consultant can serve management in many capacities. He can: (1) provide advice on a specific technical or managerial problem, (2) confirm a prior administrative action, (3) convince the administration of a parent institution of a particular course of action, (4) train or educate a library staff, or (5) facilitate the process of organizational change.

In years past, library directors depended heavily on informal advice of colleagues at professional meetings. Library organizations such as the Association of Research Libraries have served as forums to assist library managers in solving problems. But such informality serves less adequately in today's more complex operating environment. In fact, as it became apparent in the early 1970s that there was growing dissatisfaction with library management, ARL established its Management Review and Analysis Program (MRAP) to assist directors by providing a mechanism whereby research libraries could assess and, if necessary, reformulate their goals, objectives, and service programs. The MRAP process is predicated on securing broad participation of a library's staff; MRAP techniques draw heavily on the concepts of team building and group decision-making. The MRAP process illustrates one form of group consultation. Programs such as MRAP, however, may not be appropriate when what is needed is an immediate solution to a pressing problem. In such cases it is a management troubleshooter whose advice is needed.

The most important decision a manager can make, once the decision to employ the services of a consultant has been made, will be the choice of the consultant. One should pay particular attention to the credentials of prospective consultants. Anyone can call himself a consultant. There is no consultant's code of ethics, nor is there any test one must pass in order to qualify as a consultant. One need only examine the listings of a directory of consultants for confirmation of this assertion. A librarian who has designed one new building or who has attained the position of assistant director for technical services, coordinator for bibliographic instruction, or ascended to the lofty position of director is not by virtue of that position qualified to serve as a consultant.

The person selected should already have acquired a broad range of
experiences and have demonstrated the capacity to provide practical and successful solutions. A person possessing broad experience should be better able to identify problems and recognize behavioral patterns than the neophyte. An experienced consultant would recognize that tension usually exists between staff who work in branches and those who work in a central facility, whereas the neophyte might not realize that this is the rule rather than the exception. The experienced consultant can explain why such tensions exist; the causes might not be so evident to the neophyte. Furthermore, a less experienced consultant might tend to superimpose a prepackaged solution based upon limited personal experience; a good consultant should be able to recommend a course of action that is tailored to specific needs.

The consultant selected should bring to the assignment an attitude of objectivity. The importance of objectivity merits special emphasis. It has been common among librarians to engage the services of friends and colleagues. This approach might appear to be the safest course, but it can also backfire. The consultant, because of personal involvement, may find it difficult to maintain objectivity. Thus biased by friendship, the consultant may temper his criticism to avoid hurting a friend or colleague, and instead of rooting out the real problem, the recommendations could lead the colleague to initiate a course of action that might further exacerbate it.

A consultant will play a different role in every assignment, but in each case he should function as a positive agent for facilitating change. To be a successful change agent, a consultant should possess the requisite analytical skills and the ability to communicate with staff and administrators. He must be able to assess middle-management's readiness for change, and to persuade key decision-makers that change is desirable and that it is in the best interests of all concerned. A creative solution may not prove successful if a consultant fails to create a solid foundation that facilitates organizational change.

An organization should prepare carefully for the arrival of a consultant. The manager should take steps to analyze the existing situation, gathering policy statements, procedural manuals, and other documents which will provide the consultant with relevant information. Staff who will be directly affected should be informed and given time to prepare in advance. Special efforts should be made to review the goals and objectives of the library. It is essential that there be a common understanding of the library's mission and where its priorities lie. It is not necessary that everyone agree with the goals and objectives, but there should be a common understanding of what they are. The failure to secure an
Role of Management Consultants

understanding could cause a manager to provide a misleading assessment to the consultant.

The dangers attendant on such misunderstandings are clearly underscored by an incident with which the author is familiar. In this case, a library director was subjected to severe criticism from his campus administration generated by faculty dissatisfaction with the quality of library services. A campus confrontation led to the employment of an outside consultant. The university's administration was looking for an excuse to terminate the services of the director. They attributed the problem to the director's lack of leadership. But the consultant found that the faculty and the administration had sowed the seeds of controversy. The administration had allowed the faculty, either intentionally or unintentionally, to ignore formal institutional goals and objectives. Whereas the campus was established to provide high-quality undergraduate instruction, the faculty appointed by the college were more interested in research than in teaching. Whereas the library collected and organized materials to support undergraduate instruction, the collection lacked numerous tools considered important by the research-oriented faculty. Who was at fault: the library director, the faculty who were appointed, or the administrators, who may have misled the faculty at the time they were appointed? The culprit is not important, only that recognition and prior agreement on goals and objectives might have avoided the confrontation that eventually occurred.

A consultant should prepare carefully prior to the actual site visit by reading all of the documentation provided by the library, but no matter how well prepared, a consultant should be ready to deal with any eventuality once on the scene. It is important to remain open-minded and receptive to input and to avoid making prejudgments. In many cases, the real problem may not emerge until after the consultant has interviewed all of those directly involved with the situation. Often, a consulting assignment which has been construed as a technical problem is in reality more related to interpersonal conflict. For example, a sudden decline in cataloging productivity occurring soon after a computer-based cataloging system is installed might logically be attributed to causes such as poorly designed processing procedures or inadequate training, when in fact the decline might have been caused by the catalogers' perception that the use of records obtained from other libraries had degraded the quality of local catalogs, thereby reducing the job satisfaction of the catalogers. The consultant might have been requested to develop a better training manual, but a training program would not get to the root of the problem. What appeared at first to be a production
problem to management was in reality quite a different problem, one which required a different solution.

The success of a management consultant will be closely correlated to his ability to identify problems as well as to develop practical solutions. For this reason a consultant should be an attentive listener. It is well known that people view the same problem from quite different perspectives. An individual's perception will be influenced by factors such as his training, professional philosophy, status within the organization, and personal stake in the issue under review. An administrator may be more interested in a unit's productivity, whereas the staff of the unit may be concerned about personal esteem and satisfaction. It is only after a consultant has listened carefully to all points of view that the different attitudes may become apparent.

There has been a general reluctance on the part of library managers to utilize the service of outside consultants. Two explanations are that libraries cannot afford to pay for outside advice, and that there is an insufficient pool of qualified consultants available. Some librarians believe they cannot afford to pay for outside advice, but the complexity of today's management environment suggests that the prudent manager can ill afford not to pay for outside advice. Library managers should establish a distinct line in the budget to fund the use of consultants. Qualified consultants have also been in short supply. In fact, this condition was one of the factors that motivated the Association of Research Libraries to initiate a program specially designed to sharpen the skills of midcareer librarians who desire to function as library management consultants. The program is termed the Academic Library Development Program (ALDP).

Another explanation for the traditional reluctance to use consultants is not associated with cost or availability but rather more related to the stigma associated with the use of consultants. The appearance of a consultant may be interpreted by a staff or by the academic community as a signal that something is very wrong. This attitude probably can be traced to the management style that has prevailed in libraries for many years. Library managers, like most other managers, have governed traditionally in an autocratic manner. This observation is not intended to imply that managers did not operate with the best of intentions,
Role of Management Consultants

working diligently to facilitate staff and organizational development, but by playing such a dominating role, a manager may (though unintentionally) have assumed the proportion of a father figure. To draw an analogy from one of television’s most successful situation comedies of the 1950s, “Father knows best,” and for “Father” to call upon the services of a consultant contradicted the image that father knew best. The contemporary library scene with its growing technological orientation, coupled with the rapidity of change, presents a strong argument for the use of qualified management consultants. There is no alternative if a library manager is to cope successfully with issues that are on the horizon; therefore, it is important that the negative stigma associated with consultants be dispelled.

Libraries are already hampered by a plethora of internal and external restrictions such as state and federal regulations and collective bargaining agreements. Managers will be expected to make decisions on issues that demand technical expertise which they personally do not possess. The rapid rate of environmental change will not permit a leisurely approach to problem-solving. Time has already become a manager’s valuable resource. It must be conserved whenever possible. Officers of colleges and universities are surrounded by experts knowledgeable in the subtleties of personnel management and financial planning. The problems confronting the library manager are equally complex, the need for special assistance no less pressing. For this reason, in the near future it will be a normal managerial strategy to draw upon the expertise of skilled management problem-solvers.

References

4. For examples, see Cresap, McCormick and Paget, op. cit. (recommendations section)