

Strategic plan & policy analysis

Tacoma Public Library



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Executive Summary

Historically, the downtown Tacoma Public Library (TPL) was the **first Carnegie library built in the State of Washington.** Its renown as a Carnegie Library undoubtedly contributed to its success in the past. But today, in modern times, TPL's success depends more on strategic planning than historic fame. When the organization felt the pinch of the 2008 economic downturn and its funding was suppressed, the strategic plan came to halt, and the library faced ~~a~~ real challenge. These included the library's lack of funding to execute its strategic plan combined with the expectation that it meets customers' demands. It is recommended that there be an effort made to search for a new way to receive adequate funding to support all of TPL's programs and to give a new life to the library's strategic planning activities.

Strategic planning not only addresses core competencies such as collaboration, programs & diversity, and literacy, but is linked to information technology and its rapid rate of change. The strategic plan specifies information technology projects that the library is considering such as: a) development of a new website similar to Amazon’s; b) integration of the Sierra system, replacing the old Millennium system. In general, the strategic plan gives the direction that the library's information technology is going to take for next two years. This direction must be clear, consistent, and align~~s~~ at all times with library’s mission, vision, and values.

A good strategic plan gives an accurate picture of where library is, and where is going. It must list the things that library can do and is good at doing, with a short strategic plan being more likely to succeed than a bigger one filled with empty sentences. It is highly recommended for the library to hire a consulting firm to draft a well-developed strategic plan. Such a plan would emphasize offering library staff technical training to close the gap between staff and patrons. It would also include a 'plan to execute the strategic plan' because without such preparation the overall effort would be doomed to fail.

Introduction

This report describes an approach to strategic planning for the Tacoma Public Library for 2012 – 2014. The first objective is to determine the challenges that library faces. Some of these challenges are common among public libraries, such as inadequate funding, technology change, limited physical space, and homelessness. The second objective is to determine the core competencies of the organization, including information technology core competency. As a consultant hired by the organization, the analytical review of the interview I conducted with the library director, will help in making recommendations.

In addition, the paper's focus is on TPL's information technology and how it supports the organization’s strategic goal attainment. TPL's IT strategic plan dictates which direction the library intends to take for next two years. The strategic planning must be consistent with the library’s mission, vision, and values. As the technology is rapidly changing, so are customer’s needs. Therefore, adopting new technology and offering adequate training to library staff remain top priorities. The strategy is to build a team that works with excellent technical skills. The success of the Tacoma Public Library is linked to how effectively it implements information technology to meet today’s demand and satisfy customer’s on-going needs.

Organization Overview

Tacoma public library (TPL) first Carnegie Library built in Washington State in 1903. Today library has 8 branches and main library in downtown Tacoma. It employs 135 employees to serve residents of Tacoma, Washington. The Tacoma library has nearly 150,000 registered users, and over 2 million items

in circulation.

Mission: Tacoma Public Library’s mission is to enhance diversity by providing access to information through library services innovation. The results are positive experiences and a thriving community (tpl.org).



Through the coordination and determination of so many individuals, the powerful role Tacoma Public Library plays in community will continue to exist. The board of trustees represents the governing body of the organization. It is formed by five members who are appointed by the Mayor of Tacoma and confirmed by the city council. Each member of the board of trustees serves five-year term-contract. Their responsibilities are to help managing funds, setting policies and procedures, and determine the mission of the organization. In some way they oversee the management of the library. On the other hand, the city council is responsible for passing the annual budget.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Budgeted** | **Thru  December** | **Balance Budget to Actual** | **ATD of Budget** | **Budget** | **Diff Bud to Act** |
| **Expenditures** |  | Gen Ledger | (C - D) | (D / C) | (C / 12) | (G - D) |
| Salaries & Wages | $ 5,680,830.00 | $ 5,509,639.00 | $ 171,191.00 | 96.99% | $ 5,680,830.00 | $ 171,191.00 |
| Personnel Benefits | $ 2,549,217.00 | $ 2,510,983.00 | $ 38,234.00 | 98.50% | $ 2,549,217.00 | $ 38,234.00 |
| Administration | $ 55,146.00 | $ 57,545.00 | $ (2,399.00) | 104.35% | $ 55,146.00 | $ (2,399.00) |
| Assessments | $ 141,453.00 | $ 111,406.00 | $ 30,047.00 | 78.76% | $ 141,453.00 | $ 30,047.00 |
| Cataloging & Processing Services | $ 240,200.00 | $ 273,136.00 | $ (32,936.00) | 113.71% | $ 240,200.00 | $ (32,936.00) |
| IT/Network Services | $ 414,898.00 | $ 524,755.00 | $ (109,857.00) | 126.48% | $ 414,898.00 | $ (109,857.00) |
| Community Relations | $ 57,550.00 | $ 74,573.00 | $ (17,023.00) | 129.58% | $ 57,550.00 | $ (17,023.00) |
| Collection Development | $ 1,168,544.00 | $ 1,168,808.00 | $ (264.00) | 100.02% | $ 1,168,544.00 | $ (264.00) |
| Facilities | $ 861,348.00 | $ 690,412.00 | $ 170,936.00 | 80.15% | $ 861,348.00 | $ 170,936.00 |
| Main Dept & Branch costs | $ 294,630.00 | $ 292,580.00 | $ 2,050.00 | 99.30% | $ 294,630.00 | $ 2,050.00 |
| **December 2015 (Estimate)** | $ 11,463,816.00 | $ 11,213,837.00 | $ 249,979.00 | 97.82% | $ 11,463,816.00 | $ 249,979.00 |

Key Strategic Challenges

Adequate funding

Tacoma Public Library (TPL) has been challenged by financial constraints, including a reduction in city spending and donations. As a non-profit organization, TPL felt the pinch of the 2008 economic strain and its funding being suppressed for many years to come. In midst of this crisis, TPL remains under tremendous pressure. From one side of the equation, the library was forced to reduce its hours of operation, eliminate Sunday service, and even had to close two branches. From the other side of the equation, TPL was asked to meet the demands and needs of the community, and provide patrons with the quality service that they value. Rather than spend more time managing unexpected “management” crises, TPL needs to anticipate and prepare for these kind of crises, and be ready to take on the next challenges. An article in Wall Street Journal (WSJ, 2010), suggests that strategic planning doesn’t always work, therefore a new priority is to be able to shift course on the fly. There is a risk to sticking to a fixed strategy in the face of substantial changes in the competitive environment (Mintzberg, 1994).

Rate of change in IT and Change in customer’s needs

I think the library faces a daunting task of applying its strategic plan in a constantly changing environment. It is challenged to meet the needs of patrons even as those very needs shift in response to exponential changes in available information technology. This rate of change in information technology shows no sign of slowing down soon. Customers’ needs vary because their incomes are dynamic. Varying incomes lead to varying life-styles. Such dynamic influences make it next to impossible for TPL to apply its strategic plan with confidence. It would take a TPL miracle to meet these dynamic needs. This leads to an area in which libraries have traditionally responded - training of library staff.

Lack of Staff Training

While I recommend that library staff be trained to gain skills or increase the ease with which they employ those skills to serve patrons, a misconception may be in play. Library users believe that librarians are "well trained", "have all the answers" and can be counted on for help. I wish this was true. The vast variety of information resources and what is called ‘big data’ make it impossible for any librarian or anybody else to have all the answers. Moreover, if the help needed is outside the expertise of a particular librarian, attempts to help the patron are diminished.

Library Space

In terms of design and how it is utilized, Space is the most common issue facing public libraries. The building where Tacoma public library location is not too attractive, a little modern, with a physical space that is very limited. It is no longer suited for both patrons and staff to perform much needed work effectively. In an effort to keep patrons happy by meeting their expectations, and to attract new customers, the library will experiment with a new space design. The library should take into consideration flexibility and comfort for patrons who wish to work alone or with friends. Another challenge related to library space concerns there not being enough power outlets. Imagine the frustration of people going to library to get work done, only to find that they cannot plug in their devices.

Homelessness

Tacoma public library is facing the same challenge that most public libraries across the county are facing, the issue of homeless and mentally ill people. Many library patrons are either homeless, mentally ill, or substance dependent. Their use of the library is not limited to seeking refuge from extreme weather elements or the use of bathroom. Some of them use the library to access the internet and search for a job to get off the street. A challenge is that they have only one hour of internet access per turn. This is way too short for someone trying to find and apply for a job. They spend nights in shelters while they have plenty time during day time to be in library. This is one of the reasons that there are usually disturbances in the library. There is no program for the homeless people, and access to the internet is very limited. The real problem with the library information science bachelor degree or master degree curriculums is that neither course of study requires a single course that deals with this issue of guiding and assisting the homeless nor mentally ill to get the help they need. Clearly this is violation of an individual's right to free access to information regardless of race, color, or religious preferences.

Organizational Core Competencies

Collaboration

TPL has recognized opportunities for partnership such as with the City, School Districts, local businesses, non-profit and community-based organizations, and other library systems such as the Pierce County Library System. Partnership with these groups can save money by sharing costs and administrative expenses. The results are improved efficiency, with strengthening and expansion of programs. These work well and bring benefits across the entire community.

Diverse programs and diversity

TPL welcomes variety among all people it serves and staff. It provides a rich and broad selection of materials and programs. The library’s services for children and teens have grown steadily over the last biennium providing solid programming and outreach. Two objectives for these populations are focused on specific additions to those two services. The library’s services to seniors and to speakers of English as second language are well developed. In an effort to better understand and serve the needs and desires of these two groups the library will develop and implement a plan of service.

Literacy Program

While Tacoma public library provides materials in many formats other than written, most analyses of issues are still only available to those who can read. The library has a statutory mission to provide information to the community. If patrons cannot use that information because they cannot read, the library has an added responsibility to ensure that the community has access to literacy programs – whether through Tacoma public library or other community programs. TPL offers the following activities:

* Refers individuals to appropriate local literacy program.
* Provides tutoring space for the literacy program.
* Maintains a library collection of literacy materials for use by learners and tutors.
* Provides classroom space for the local literacy program.
* Participates in local literacy coalitions.
* Manages a direct literacy program for the community.
* Provides materials and programs for children and parents to encourage and support Early Childhood Literacy.
* The library does schedule Baby Story times at community branches in addition the Baby Story times offered at the Main Library.
* Library purchased Baby Storytime toys, board book sets, and playthings for community branches to be used during Baby Story times.

Integrated Library System

Library had completed a major upgrade to the Library’s Integrated Library System. This upgrade provides enhanced searching capabilities and integrated searching of library physical materials, Northwest Room databases, and online article databases through a powerful but easy-to-use interface.

IT as a Strategic Resource

Selecting among the many alternatives that may help Tacoma Public Library attain its goals and mission, the information technology is one of the alternatives. The IT is the actually the primary source of meeting library’s mission, it goes hand in hand with the strategic plan. The information technology is viewed as a backbone to offer more efficient and effective services to meet community demand and assist the library in achieving its mission. The real benefits of information technology, may serve as road map for indicating which the direction in which the library is proceeding.

Another benefit of having information technology proposal, library may qualify for an e-rate and LSTA grant from the state library or help the organization win a foundation grant. Often stakeholders want concrete evidence of the need for a new or upgrade information system, so that library’s service and patron demand may improve in the event of a constantly changing environment.

Information technology continues to play a major role in how the library supports its patrons, and staff. It plays an ever-increasing role in the operation of library. Information technology not only helps meet the demand of customers but also the learning experience, and the well-being of the entire community. It assists in strengthening connections, building bridges of relationships so that patrons and staff alike feel a sense of belonging.

For many people, social media is becoming daily practice. The Library needs to be where (social media platforms) patrons are and meet their needs. The information technology links users to library service through social media channels. With the use of the information technology and social media, the library may increase the average number of circulation, and improves communication with the community, all this at low-budget cost, which the library can afford. For instance, the library may share all kinds of news with the users 24/7 on Facebook and on Twitter. The library may tweet a short message on daily basis to tell patrons about programs such as summer reading, art presentation, maybe to let them know about story-tell cancelation. Many library users are not aware of library services. Perhaps, the library may use social media to send one message a month to let people know about these services. The use of social media creates traffic and therefore get the community fully engaged. Definitely the information technology expands library services through the use of social media.

The down side of the technology is that it is not complete, with continuous pressures to upgrade or change what is currently working. In addition, technology demands constant care and feeding which can very costly, knowing that financial resources are very limited at the present time. Thus, the change in technology is inescapable, and it must continue to be revised to reflect the change in the strategic plan priorities, and the change in the information technology itself.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Analysis and Recommendation

TPL's strategic plan begins with a mission statement, which explains the organization goals and objectives. The purpose of the mission statement is to guide and inspire everyone involved to take action to accomplish one common goal. A solid elevator pitch before the mission statement that gives a brief description of the organization, would have made mission statement meaningful.

The core values statement is fairly described and articulated, it helps identify strengths and determine the best opportunity to reach the goal. It is considered as a critical element in the strategic plan. Core values statement also identify the library staff, target customers, and their interactions. However, I have a little trouble understanding some of the language being used in this strategic plan. A great strategic plan should not be filled with empty words or sentences, such as “inclusiveness”, “stimulate the application of knowledge”, “diverse citizenry”, etc. Instead a clear, concise, and simple language works better to communicate. It is best to remember the rule ‘keep it simple’. I like the fact that Tacoma public library strategic plan is neither condensed nor complicated. The smaller the plan, the more likely to succeed and vice versa, the bigger the plan, the more likely to fail. A great strategic plan should be short. If it is too long nobody will read it, and it should be in simple format easily seen and understood.

Comparative Advantage: Nothing in the strategic plan suggests any comparative advantage that allows TPL to differentiate itself from neighboring libraries thereby making TPL stand out. Similar programs are offered by libraries in the area. In this case innovation is no longer a choice; it is a must. Innovation is either an introduction to a new service that adds great value to customers, or improvement of an existing one. The question remains: how can TPL be creative while there is lack of funding?

It is said that everywhere we turn we hear librarians complaining (Laughlin, 2008). Indeed, librarians are unhappy with their staffs and customers. But most nerve-racking are their budgets. According to Tacoma public library's director, the library is facing financial challenges more than anything else. All other issues related to the financial problem. To escape this negative loop, TPL needs to find new, successful ways to fund its programs. It is worth it to search for a new prospective grantor properly, and learn and discover new techniques that have not been used by many grant seekers. At this stage, writing an excellent proposal is highly recommended. Therefore, a well-written proposal, with clear and concise descriptions, must align with the library mission and fit into the strategic plan.

Careful thought must be given to the planning of any strategic plan. Pre-planning is a major step for setting priorities, and creating a roadmap. Otherwise, the strategic plan is nothing but a word document that can be revised, updated every two years and placed on shelf or stored in someone’s hard drive. To avoid this kind of problem, Tacoma public library should hire a consulting firm to do strategy planning. Because of skills and expertise, the consultant is in a position to determine the weaknesses of the organization, keeping management from being too close to the issues to recognize them. Also the consulting firm would make new suggestions regardless of the organization culture which will bring a new life to the library. And one must not spend time, effort, and money on developing a strategic plan only to place it on the shelf to collect dust or only for the sake of having a strategic plan. Having a strategic plan with a fewer manageable goals, is much better than one with too many unrealistic goals which will stretch your financial resources thin.

IT strategic planning

The IT section of the strategic plan defines the library’s strategic direction for the information technology. It specifies the projects TPL intends to take on for next two years. The plan doesn’t identify how much money will be invested in these projects. The budget was kept off- site. The library has just completed development of a new website to create an on-line presence that is information rich, intuitive to navigate, and provides an interactive environment for users. This happened concurrently with a major upgrade to the library’s information system from Millennium to Sierra. According to the library's director, the plan is consistent with the library’s mission and core values. The IT strategic plan specifies the technology that library is considering and how this technology improves services. It also shows how technology supports demands of the community and staff needs, and the learning experience.

The Information technology strategic plan serves as a technology roadmap. It is important for this plan and its objectives to be aligned with the library’s mission. However, the Library’s goals should not be long lasting. Objectives that are supported should be subject to change to reflect a changes in the strategic plan. This way the library remains technologically relevant to the community.

To remain competitive, TPL needs to keep up with rapid change in technology, and offer technical training to staff. In any library, most librarians don’t own iPod or iPhone and don’t try to learn how to use these new technologies. Personally, I noticed a gap between patrons and library staff when it comes to technology. Librarians have learnt technology later in life, while some patrons (like the millennium generation) have been born using technology. This doesn’t mean the millennium generation are tech savvy. According to a report by ‘Change Equation’ a non-profit organization, 58% of this generation failed to master tech skills that help increase work productivity. High number of these young people don’t use the public library, and the reason they don't use it is because of a failing technology. If they use the public library, they expect fast, reliable, and very cool technology. The solution to this problem, is to offer a new training to both new hires and existing staff, so they may acquire skills and become equipped with new competencies in the information technology. Updating job descriptions to include these new requirements is necessary as well. Otherwise, library staff become incompetent in the new environment which leads to frustration on the part of patrons.

Sometimes the problem is not the technology nor lack of training. It is a problem of mindset, and culture. I have heard librarians expressing disapproval with digital books, they still prefer print book over kindle ones. Unfortunately, they can be seen as antagonistic. Prosperous relationships with technology requires people with enthusiasm, conviction, and passion to embrace it and inspire others to do the same. The strategic plan must include employees trained to close the gap between patrons and staff when it comes to technology.

Core technology competencies are required by any library to deliver the goods -- library collections and services, and meet customer’s expectations. New hires are expected to have more responsibilities and roles more greatly concentrated on information technology. Librarians should be able to perform basic troubleshooting, upgrades of computers, setting up firewalls, and have some understanding of database development. Quarterly training programs should be developed to keep staff abreast of relevant technological changes and get them used to constantly improve their knowledge and skills in serving clients through technological means.

The strategic plan should address the issue of Infrastructure Management and Support which includes a disaster recovery plan (DRP). I suggest using Amazon Web Service (AWS) that would allow library to continue to provide services if primary servers go down. The Amazon EC2 cloud provides an off-site backup for data, and an off-site backup of the services themselves. Cloud computing is the opportunity to replace up-front capital infrastructure expenses with low variable costs. With the Cloud, you no longer need to plan for and place order for servers and other IT infrastructure weeks or months in advance. Instead, many servers can be added or removed in very short period of time. Another benefit of AWS, it offers low, pay-as-you-go pricing with no up-front expenses or long-term commitments.

At present, public libraries use cloud computing to create a virtual desktops called a "thin clients." These thin clients are workstations with only keyboard, mouse, and a screen. Everything else is on the cloud server, hard drives, memory, and application data. Thin clients pull images from the server, giving specific virtual desktops loaded with programs. These images are completely customizable. You can maintain all virtual images from one single image called master image. Cloud infrastructure offers low cost and lower personnel costs as well.

Hiring a consulting firm to help in developing a solid strategic plan that is clear, concise, and aligned with the library’s mission, vision, and values will not guarantee execution success. The real challenge is making a good strategic plan work. Without a perfect plan to execute a strategic plan, it is doomed to failure. To ensure that the strategic plan works as designed, performance measures must be in place to document progress. Laying out a good strategic plan is something that can take an organization to level of performance never imagined before. A strategic plan can keep an organization on track with an eye on the future.

References

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<https://www.webjunction.org/content/dam/WebJunction/Documents/webJunction/laughlin-and-wilson-chapter-1.pdf>

Strategic plan lose favor:

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703822404575019283591121478>

Appendix

Interview with Tacoma Public Library director Susan Odencrantz.

1. What challenges are you facing?

We are facing many challenges. However, the biggest challenge is a financial one.

1. Who is responsible for developing strategic plan?

We don’t hire independent consultant; we have a committee that been selected to serve this purpose.

1. How often do you keep the strategic plan in place?

Sometimes rising costs and limited funding are major factors forcing us to move away from strategic plan.

1. What are your core competencies?

Collaboration and diversity are part of core competencies. We work closely with Tacoma school districts and other library systems in the area. We are very diverse community, we welcome all people and proud to serve them all.

1. What is library IT strategic plan?

The Information technology strategic plan serves as a technology roadmap. It is important that the plan reflects rapid change in technology to remain competitive and technologically relevant to our community.