SI 501 Final Report

Analysis of the Information Flow
at the Operations Department of MLibrary

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Executive Summary

Effective communication is a vital part to any organization and there are a wide variety of channels in which information exchange can take place. The purpose of this report is to share findings and recommendations for how the Operations Department of MLibrary can improve its communication flow. Based on the Contextual Inquiry methodology, we conducted interviews and observations to collect and analyze data. Our major findings and recommendations revolve around inconsistency throughout the communication flow, and also highlights that there is an open communication style that should be preserved. By establishing a formal protocol, the organization will be able to set regulations on how members utilize various communication tools. These tools include the Intranet, the newsletter, and Google products, especially email.

Introduction

Client Overview

The Operations department of MLibrary manages and supports the infrastructure across the library system. The Operations department has around 80 members who handle the management and maintenances of the physical collections and facilities, the safety of the staff and users and exhibits in 12 different building. Communication among such a large, decentralized organization can easily be interrupted. According to an article in the Harvard Business Review "large organizations in particular have always struggled with the challenges of communication". It is understandable why some members within the department have noticed areas within the staff communication flow that could be improved.

Project and Scope

The course, SI 501, focuses on Contextual Inquiry, which is the research method that our team conducted interviews and observations throughout the department. The initial issue presented to us dealt with miscommunication of policies and general information. The complaint was that staff did not seem to be aware of all of the resources and activities available to them. Some staff felt as if they were not receiving information they should have, while other staff felt overwhelmed with the amount of information they were receiving.

The purpose of this project is to reveal findings from our interviews and provide recommendations that we believe can improve the communication flow for the MLibrary Operations department. The scope of this project was to analyze the organization's methods of communication. Our project goal was to understand current communication patterns and identify areas in which modifications could improve efficiency.

Methodology

We utilized Holtzblatt et al's *Rapid Contextual Inquiry* methodology, which emphasizes learning from interviews and through observations. We interviewed six member of the organization to gain perspective from multiple vantage points. Our goal during these interviews was to observe each interviewee's regular work habits and view how tasks related to communication flow were accomplished. Throughout this process we observed how some members organized their email and how some members utilized the intranet. The information gathered from these interviews allowed us to understand the current communication process. After each interview our group conducted an interpretation session to analyze the information from the interviews and create diagrams and models that represent the information flow and show where breakdowns are occurring. We also utilized a process tool called an affinity wall. The affinity wall allowed larger, more encompassing ideas to evolve from notes taken directly from the interviews. This tool allowed our team to discover

patterns occurring across all interviews. We used the ideas discovered through the affinity wall to brainstorm and develop our recommendations for the organization.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1: The organization is committed to making sure all members feel included and promoting an open communication style.

We found that members truly enjoy the level of face-to-face interaction that takes place throughout the organization. They feel that this style of communication supports a close team and encourages a high level of engagement. One interviewee even stated, "face-to-face communication is what I am most comfortable using".

Recommendations
- Continue to encourage open communication. This can be achieved by having more face-to-face communication and respecting each member's opinions and messages.
- We also suggest that you continue to foster strong interpersonal relationships by organizing meetings and retreats regularly.

Finding 2: Members in the organization are unclear about the existence and usage of a formal communication protocol, which leads to uncertainty about what communication method to use and how to use it.

Several interviewees seemed uncertain of whether or not there is a communication protocol that the department utilizes. One interviewee stated that, "there is no communication protocol that our organization uses" while others insisted that, "the formal protocol is the Intranet" and another mentioned the newsletter was some kind of protocol. Due to a lack of formal information protocol, our interviewees sometimes feel unsure about which communication medium to choose and how to use it in a certain situation.

Recommendations
In the short term:
- Establish clear communication standards by implementing a protocol, which detail the expectations for various communication methods. This will clear up the confusion members have about whether there is or isn't an official communication protocol. This will also make the usage of specific communication mediums explicit. A potential communication flow protocol can include:
  - Introduction of what the protocol aims to accomplish
  - Communication mediums: how and when to use each one
    - Face-to-face
    - Intranet

- Newsletter
- Email
- Meetings

In the long term:
- Hold an informal workshop to show staff when and how to use communication mediums effectively. This recommendation will help members be more confident in when and how to effectively use different communication mediums. Suggested workshop topics include:
  - Utilizing Google applications
  - Organizing meetings
  - Appropriate quick communication situations (face-to-face, text, and IM)

Finding 3: Members of the organization are inconsistent in their knowledge and use of the Intranet.

One interviewee mentioned, "there is an Intranet but it does need some work", while another interviewee said, "the Intranet provides information for newer employees but older employees already know that information". Some members said they utilize the Intranet to view the newsletter and another interviewee said, "the Intranet provides information for newer employees but older employees already know that information". This inconsistency in how members view and value this tool is problematic because the Intranet can be an informative resource.

Recommendations

In the short term:
- Conduct a survey to gauge how members use and value the Intranet. This can allow your organization to discover what parts of the Intranet are most often used, what area is rarely used, and what parts members think are ineffective. Then use the results from these tests in order to improve how the Intranet functions.

In the long term:
- Change the layout of the Intranet based on the results from the survey. The most important information that the Intranet has to offer should be placed in easily visible locations. Areas that members find to be not useful can be removed if deemed unnecessary or improved so they have more of a purpose. This will enhance the effectiveness of the Intranet and will ultimately foster an increased use of the Intranet.
- Include a forum or comment area within the Intranet to allow staff to engage with the content and with each other. This will give all staff members the opportunity to have a similar use for the Intranet. This can also help make the

Intranet a more integral part of the organization's communication flow.

Finding 4: There are inconsistent opinions about the newsletter's value and formality.

Most interviewees said the newsletter is used to disseminate, update or reinforce information. One interviewee even considered the newsletter as a communication protocol. However it is clear from the interviews that it has it's own set of communication problems. For example, one interviewee said, "people don't read it" and another said that the staff don't take advantage of the training opportunities provided through the newsletter. A sample newsletter provides evidence for the inefficiency of the newsletter as shown in *Figure 1* in the appendix.

Recommendations
In the short term:
- In order to establish the formality and efficiency of the newsletter, our recommendation is to refine the newsletter's content and format with the following tips:
    o Be consistent between the email version and the intranet version to eliminate confusion.
    o Keep using the table of contents as a quick scan of the newsletter content and link to the corresponding part of the newsletter.
    o Include a calendar to show upcoming events.
    o Use structured information to make the content more readable, *e.g.* tables, short phrases or keywords.
    o Sort out items into different categories and order items by date or importance.
- To make the newsletter more visually appealing to staff members and improve their experience with the newsletter, we recommend your organization to:
    o Use colors to encode information.
    o Use illustrative pictures or figures to capture people's attention.

In the long term:
- In order to foster and strengthen the importance and formality of the newsletter, emphasize the newsletter when training new staff members. Managers can reiterate their formal view towards the newsletter to the staff.
- In order to encourage the staff's engagement with the newsletter, our suggestion is to keep collecting feedback from staff members about the newsletter and make improvements according to the feedback. If staff members feel like their suggestions are heard and changes are made, they will be more willing to use the newsletter as a communication medium.

Finding 5: Inconsistency in email usage and management can lead to miscommunication.

Many members use their email in various ways and there are different expectations of when members use email. Some members believe that email should only be used for important communications, while other members use it for more casual correspondences. For example, one interviewee said, "the information I convey via email varies in importance", while another interviewee stated, "I mostly use email for unimportant issues." Contact groups are also used inefficiently and messages are sometimes sent to unintended contacts. However, we also saw that members all felt strongly that they responded to emails and received responses within 24 hours.

Recommendations
- A simple but informative seminar in how to use Google products could help get staff on the same page about email usage. Some suggestions for skills to teach and discuss during the workshop are:
  - Automatic email filters
  - Applying labels
  - Archiving emails and subsequent retrieval
  - Starring emails for clarity and emphasis
  - Sending Google calendar invitations
  - Marking messages as unread
- Make more efficient use of contact groups. We suggest that you establish and organize official contact groups and encourage staff to make their own contact sub-groups when necessary. This will help standardize the way that email is managed for the organization, therefore reducing communication problems and getting messages to only the intended target populations.
- The promptness of email communication should continue to persevere because members of the organization respond really well to it. Keep up the good work!

Conclusion

As stated above, a protocol will help clarify how information flows through the whole organization. By doing so, members of the organization will have a clear reference of when to use which method to communicate efficiently with others. This will help avoid previous information flow breakdowns. Hopefully our suggestions around the three key media - email, the intranet and the newsletter, will facilitate better communication throughout all levels of the organization.
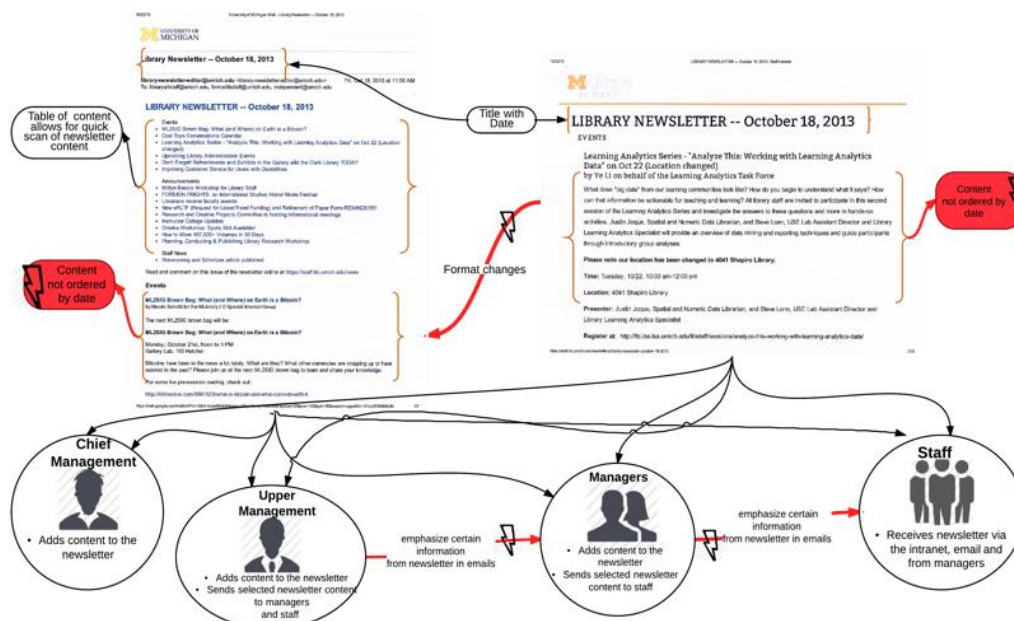
Appendix

Figure 1: This model demonstrates the inconsistency between the email version and Intranet version of an issue of the newsletter. The format of the newsletter changes from one version to another. The orders of items are different in the two versions. The email version also has a table of contents whereas the Intranet version doesn't have one. Breakdowns are noted in red.

Quick Reads about Communication:

Ashkenas, Rob. "Your Communications May Not Be Communicating." Web log post. *Harvard Business Review*. N.p., 15 Feb. 2011. Web. 11 Dec. 2013.

Gill, Stephen J. "Communication Problems in Organizations." Web log post. *The Performance Improvement Blog*. N.p., 2 Dec. 2008. Web. 11 Dec. 2013.