"Part of the job is to change the job" - a follow-up on horizontal career development and the changing roles of health librarians

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Abstract

Background

The concepts of library and librarianship, as well as the roles of the (health) librarians, are changing, and, as a matter a fact, more rapidly – and perhaps also more profoundly – than ever, so that nothing else is permanent but change. The paper is a follow-up study of my paper on the possibilities of horizontal career development and the changing roles of librarians, presented year 2006 in the 10th European Conference of Medical and Health Libraries in Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

Methods

The study is based on interviews and a questionnaire, and compares the results three years ago and now. It takes a look on what has been going on since autumn 2005 concerning task rotation and national or international career mobility as means and possibilities in horizontal career development in Kuopio University Library. The subject is then discussed in reflection to the literature on the subject.

Aims

The aim of the study is to collect information on the activities towards changing roles and staying in control of the changes, and to determine new goals in order to find implications for practice and research on the fields of career and professional development. I also aim to find implications for both practice and research in the field of continuing professional development of health librarians and the health librarianship profession.

Background

In 2005, my study on the possibilities of horizontal career development and the changing roles of librarians in Kuopio University Library showed that task rotation, job exchange, and international mobility are compatible with the values of Kuopio University Library and in accordance with the library’s strategy. According to the survey there would be potential for two different types of change: 1) internal task rotation in the library from three to six months at a time, and 2) international exchange for short periods, less than three months at a time.² The purpose of this paper is to identify changes in the attitudes towards and the
possibilities of carrying out horizontal career development.

The University of Kuopio, in Kuopio, Finland has solid know-how in the fields of health, environment and wellbeing. Kuopio University Hospital is one of the five university hospitals in Finland. Kuopio University Library is an academic library with collections and expertise focused on health sciences, pharmacy, biosciences, environmental sciences, information technology, business, and social sciences. Kuopio University Hospital Medical Library is a part of Kuopio University Library, a library for both the hospital and the university, offering medical and nursing resources to the clinicians and other hospital staff as well as to researchers and students. Kuopio University Library has been involved in the university’s quality system from the very beginning.

The major changes in the organization of the library since the first survey have been the merger of two library units – Canthia Library and Snellmania Library were merged into a renovated Snellmania Library – as well as the closing of one tiny library unit so that there now are only two library units instead of four. Especially the merger of the two units into one has had an impact on some staff members’ tasks and on the working environment of even more employees. This merger will from now on be referred to as the Snellmania merger.

At the moment the library is facing even bigger changes as the library is to merge with another university library while the University of Kuopio and the University of Joensuu will form the University of Eastern Finland (UEF) in the beginning of 2010. This bigger merger will further on be called the UEF merger.

**Methods and Aims**

It is a fact that the roles of librarians and other library professionals are changing, and therefore it is important to develop professional skills in multiple ways, e.g. through task rotation, job exchange, and continuing education courses. Collecting information on the activities towards changing roles and controlling the changes is important in order to stay in charge of the influences they have. The plan is also to continue following the development in the future when the remarkable organizational changes have had full effect on the staff for a period of three to four years.

The study is based on interviews and a questionnaire-based survey, and compares the results three and a half years ago and now. The survey and the interviews were carried out in late February and early March 2009 so that the information gathered is relatively new and reflects well the current situation.

The web-based questionnaire survey was conducted between 25th February and 10th March, 2009. The link to the questionnaire was e-mailed to all 34 staff members of the library. There were 28 answers, which represents 82 percent of the staff. The interviews were carried out during the same period.

A motivated, skilled and enthusiastic library staff is a valuable resource in the changing environment, and diversifying tasks and duties is one way of serving the purposes of staff development. Determining new goals for staff development and staying in control of the
impact the changes have requires constant awareness of the personnel’s views and experiences.

**Results**

The general notion about the survey and interview results is that there have not been any major changes in the attitudes, interests and contentment of the staff, but instead there are quite a few smaller and rather interesting changes, deserving a closer look.

**The survey**

The first four questions in the survey were about the staff’s attitudes and interest in task rotation and job exchange on different levels and through different methods.

According to the survey results, the library staff members’ general attitude towards task rotation and job exchange has become both more positive and more negative since 2005. The number of people who find it disagreeable has decreased to zero but there are a little bit more respondents who are insignificant about it and a little bit less respondents who find it interesting. (See figure 1.)

Yet, interest in task rotation in home campus, i.e. the university library units in Kuopio, has clearly increased. The number of those staff members who are not interested at all has decreased and the number of those who have some interest or a great deal of interest has increased. (See figure 2.)

It can be said that there is also more interest in task rotation or job exchange in some other Finnish university library now than there was three and a half years ago, though it must be remembered that then the idea of UEF was not even on the horizon.

In 2005, the personnel were asked whether they had any interest in job exchange in any other university library in Finland, and now they were asked about interest in job exchange on UEF level. This means that there is only one other university involved, namely the University of Joensuu, Kuopio’s partner in the University of Eastern Finland. This probably explains the major part of the increase in numbers, since there are much fewer of those stating they are not at all interested and much more of those who say that there is lots of interest (see figure 3).

The explanation is quite obvious as there now are mutual interests. The exchange partner is soon to be a part of the same work community, a library that many would like to know better. There are probably very practical reasons for the interest in this respect. It is important that this kind of exchange and rotation is made possible regardless of the distances between the three campuses. (Kuopio campus and the two Joensuu University campuses, in Joensuu and Savonlinna, are about 130 and 160 kilometres apart.)

Furthermore, interest in international job exchange has increased as the number of those respondents that are not at all interested is now smaller and the number of those that are interested at least to some extent is now bigger (see figure 4).
One explanation to this is the new opportunity to apply for Erasmus grants which were not accessible to library staff in 2005. This is the university’s new policy as it aims to become more internationally oriented on all levels. Earlier, the exchange grants were only offered to students, researchers and teaching staff but now also the so called “others”, i.e. administrative staff, library, learning center and IT personnel etc., can apply. But these grants only permit short excursions of five working days, and possibilities for longer periods must be explored.

The next four questions in the survey were about contentment with current situation, the assumption being that the there could be some relation between contentment and willingness to change. I was also interested in finding out if the constant state of change had caused any alterations in the staff’s contentment.

It is not possible to see any direct causality, but some alterations can be seen. Contentment with current tasks seems to have deteriorated a little (see figure 5) while contentment with career development appears to have improved a little (see figure 6). The answers about contentment with possibilities to learn and develop at work were partly different and partly the same as before (see figure 7). The number of those respondents who were not content remained the same while the number of those who were quite content increased and the number of those who were very content decreased. It could be concluded that the staff’s contentment with their possibilities to learn and develop is smaller than in 2005, either because they actually do have less possibilities, or because their expectations are higher than before. Figure 8 shows that contentment with salary has increased substantially, due to the recent major changes in the salary system of Finnish universities.

The next four questions were about how diverse, interesting, rousing and pleasant the staff members found their work and tasks. Figure 9 shows that at the moment work is not considered diverse as often as in 2005, which is a bit surprising in the middle of mergers which cause various new tasks. Figure 10 shows that work is as interesting now as it was in 2005, but, as can be seen in figure 11, work does not rouse all the staff as much as it did according to the earlier survey. There are now some people who never find their work rousing, and no one who would find it always rousing. But the numbers between work being sometimes or often rousing show a different picture: there are now more of those who answered “often” and less of those who said “sometimes”. The pleasantness of work, on the other hand, has not changed much (see figure 12).

The final four questions had to do with the Snellmania merger. About one third (37 %) of the respondents answered that the merger has not influenced their tasks at all; about two thirds (59 %) said it has had some influence on their tasks; and only one person (4 %) considered that the merger influenced his/her tasks a lot. (See figure 13.) The merger’s influence on careers has not been significant to three quarters (74 %) of the staff, but one (4 %) staff member sees a great deal of influence and about one fifth (22 %) of the staff report some influence on their careers. (See figure 14.)

The merger’s influence on the library work community was considered as being neutral by almost half (48 %) of the respondents, while the other half (48 %) saw it as positive; one staff member (4 %) saw a negative influence. (See figure 15.) The figures are almost the same when the respondents considered the merger’s influence on themselves personally,
though the personal influence seems to have been a bit more positive (52 %) than the influence on the work community. (See figure 16.)

In conclusion, it can be said that there is more interest for change than before, and that staff members are not quite as content as before. It is clear that the respondents mostly enjoy their tasks, and that the influences of the Snellmania merger have been more on the positive side.

Should more opportunities be offered regarding task rotation and job exchange in order to increase the contentment? It is important that motivation not be lost as it is key factor in the development of quality services.

Ballout proposes that mentorship, networking and supportive work relationships lead to enhanced career satisfaction, and that the compatibility between individual and work environment is a dominant force in explaining job satisfaction, performance, and career success. In order to increase contentment and satisfaction, some changes are needed, but not too many at the same time.

As both Garavan and Vos state, the primacy of vertical careers has to be challenged as it is likely that only very few workers will experience it in the future. In flat organization, the emphasis is on vertical movement and in the means of growing in expertise, receiving greater challenges and getting more responsibility. They also point out that career development activities must provide opportunities for the development of insights, positive attitudes and new skills, as well as encourage collaboration. In flattening organizations more control is placed in the hands of frontline workers. These are some of the challenges that the managers of the future UEF library are facing.

Giuse puts it like this:

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As \ the \ only \ true \ constant \ in \ history \ is \ change, \ successful \ businesses \ have \ learned \ to \ accept \ it, \ and \ good \ visionary \ leaders \ are \ trained \ to \ identify \ revolutionary \ spikes \ along \ the \ waves \ of \ change.
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The interviews

The interviewees consisted of seven staff members: three assistant librarians, two librarians (one of them temporary), and two information specialists (one of them temporary). The managers were not chosen to be interviewed, and only one of the interviewed persons had been in international exchange, since there so far exist only three or four such staff members altogether.

The staff members were asked about the changes on their tasks and/or career development caused by 1) the Snellmania merger, 2) the forthcoming UEF merger, 3) international exchange, and 4) any other matters during the past three or four years.

One of the interviewed assistant librarians (interviewee A) reported that the merger of Canthia and Snellmania libraries has influenced her tasks a lot, as she has been a member in one of the merger planning groups on part of the library's customer services. She also told that although the UEF merger had meant more tasks for her, e.g. as the
secretary of one of the working groups, she felt that the merger enriches her work and gives new perspectives. She is looking forward to seeing how the merger will finally influence her work and how the staff can make everything run smoothly on all three campuses. She has also experienced other changes as she has become a member of the library’s teaching team, which she said has been very educating. She sees it as horizontal career development as it is a totally new sector in her work history.

Another interviewed assistant librarian (interviewee B) told that the merger of the two library units has influenced her tasks and career so that she now is responsible for a bigger library unit’s customer services. Also for her the merger of the UEF libraries has meant more tasks, and in the future she expects even more intensive cooperation between the campuses. She has also experienced other changes due to health reasons.

Another assistant librarian (interviewee C) said that working in one of the UEF library working groups had increased her work load. The changes in library organisation had, in her view, caused uncertainty as to whom to contact in which situation. At the moment she feels uncertain about her future tasks. She is expecting to get new tasks and more responsibility.

Neither of the interviewed librarians experienced any influences on their tasks or career related to the merger of the two library units. One of them (interviewee D) had experienced no alteration caused by the planning of the UEF library, although she anticipated some changes in her tasks or working methods in the future. She was the only interviewee who had been in international exchange (Erasmus) but she said that the experience had not influenced her tasks or career development. Neither had she experienced any other matters having impact on her tasks and/or career development during the past few years.

The other interviewed librarian (interviewee E) told that the planning of the UEF library has affected her work, since she now has more tasks as a member of two working groups of the UEF library. The merger of the libraries has advanced her career development because of temporary posts and project funding. Due to the temporary posts, her tasks have changed a lot and quite often, which for her has meant having chances to learn many new tasks and being able to extend her professional skills.

One of the interviewed information specialists (interviewee F) told that the merger of Canthia and Snellmania libraries had affected her and her career a great deal, as she no longer has a position as a manager. She did not, however, consider the situation as a disadvantage:

Some probably think it is going backwards in my career but now I have better possibilities to focus on my expertise as an information specialist.

Subjective career success indicators, such as increased competence and learning opportunities must be regarded as equally or more important than the traditional indicators like status, income and level of responsibility. The interviewee also reported that the UEF merger had a big influence on her tasks, at least temporarily, but in the future she does not see that it will have as great an impact; only that the network of colleagues will be more extensive and there will be a wider perspective on different disciplines.

The other interviewed information specialist (interviewee G), in a temporary position, told
that she actually lost the tasks of her tenure as an assistant librarian: When she became a substitute for an information specialist, her tasks were unofficially given to two persons, and only later it was officially negotiated what tasks belong to that tenure. It can be said that she has been very much influenced by both of the mergers: the UEF merger has given her much more demanding tasks than before, and her opportunities to learn new things have increased notably.

In the light of the interviews it can be concluded that the recent and ongoing changes in the working environment and work community have influenced some members of the staff much more than some others and that some find changes desirable and search for them, whereas some, even in the middle of changes and opportunities to develop, hold still.

**Discussion**

It is not easy for the personnel to stay in charge of all the alterations that follow organizational changes, while at the same time focusing on keeping their own professional skills up-to-date as well as trying to follow the rapid development of the information services field. Alterations often bring about an opportunity to evolve and learn if there is enough motivation and willingness to contribute.

Vos\(^7\) introduces three types of horizontal career development. These alternative career movements concretise the notion of careers as lifelong learning, and all of these three have been in use in Kuopio University Library, as can be seen in light of the interviews:

1) Lateral move that involves a change in jobs but not necessarily a change in pay, status, or level of responsibility. Lateral moves broaden the base of knowledge and skills and helps develop new competencies. Interviewee F has experienced this kind of move, and partly also interviewees A and B.

2) Job enrichment refers to replacing firmly defined and over-specialized jobs with positions that enable to exercise greater responsibility and autonomy. This is an option for those employees who do not want to leave their current position, by giving them the opportunity to expand their responsibilities in their current job in order to develop new competencies. The changes in the tasks and careers of interviewees A and B can clearly be perceived as job enrichment, and interviewee C’s “willingness to do more” could also meet the criteria of job enrichment.

3) Temporary movement means taking short-term job assignments or participating in project teams. It is a relevant option for people interested in variability and change throughout their career. Interviewees E, F and G have experienced this type of horizontal career development.

Mobility can foster cooperation between units, departments and locations. Horizontal movements throughout the organization tend to blur the borders that often exist between these\(^7\). Offering chances to rotate tasks, to enrich jobs, and to temporarily move should be used as a way of boosting and maintaining motivation. In a setting where interest towards rotation between the campuses of UEF is significant, ways to implement this must soon be created. At the moment there is a possibility of one day excursions, which is a good start.
If an organization wants to encourage alternative career moves, it must, according to Vos, realize that employees differ in the extent to which they are attracted by alternative movements. It is important for any organization to define how and to what extent they need to broaden the field of experiences and expertise of their knowledge workers. Organizations wanting to stimulate knowledge exchange and cooperation between different parts of the organization have to work out active career policies in this regard.

**Implications for practice**

Organizational changes always mean new chances and challenges for the staff. More and more often, the tasks of the library personnel are either influenced by changes or influencing the changes. In other words, part of our job is to make changes, and the changes often are changes in our tasks – what is our job, how we do it, when we do it, with or for whom we work, etc.

Encouraging staff to take part in making these changes instead of complaining about them, and being active in the process of change instead of just waiting for changes to happen is important and necessary when creating information services that are up-to-date and always getting better. The personnel have to be well informed and highly motivated in order to be able to survive in the constant state of changes. One way to motivate is to involve as many people as early as possible so that not only managers plan. In the UEF project this has been done e.g. by forming working groups which staff members from all organizational levels can be part of.

In order to find out what effects the new setting has had on the horizontal career development of the staff, a third survey and interview will be necessary in the future. After all, we are talking about a brand new university library, with a staff of about 80 persons instead of around 40, and a greatly widened variety of disciplines.

**Implications for research**

Organizational changes are complicated and long-lasting processes as organizations are made of people, who either promote or oppose the changes. Leadership, management and support are essential in changes. Organizational cultures cannot be changed easily. It will be interesting to follow the impacts of the UEF merger on the library staff.

Although Kuopio University Library – not to mention the UEF library – is not purely a medical library, the health sciences are now, and will be in the future one of the strongest disciplines in the university and therefore essential to the library and information services. Especially medical librarians and other health information professionals must constantly keep track of the rapid changes in their field. Staying up-to-date would benefit benchmarking between libraries and information services in the same kind of situations. Future research could focus on best practices in managing the constant state of affairs – namely, living in and for change – and explore the best means of, not only survival, but success in the situation where there is no time to recover from the last change before starting a new one as part of the job.
Figures

**General Attitude to Task Rotation and Job Exchange**

N=29 (2005), N=28 (2009)

- **Disagreeable**
- **Insignificant**
- **Interesting**

**Interest in task rotation in home campus**

N=28 (2005), N=27 (2009)

- **Not at all**
- **Some**
- **A lot**

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Figure 1

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Figure 2
Interest in task rotation or job exchange in another Finnish Univ. Library* or UEF library**
(*2005, **2009)
N=28 (2005, 2009)

Figure 3

Interest in international job exchange
N=29 (2005), N=28 (2009)

Figure 4
Contentment with current tasks
N=28

Figure 5

Contentment with career development
N=28

Figure 6
Contentment with possibilities to learn and develop
N=28

Figure 7

Contentment with salary
N=28

Figure 8
Figure 9

Work diverse
N=28

Figure 10

Work interesting
N=28
Figure 11

Work rousing
N=28

Figure 12

Work pleasant
N=28
The merger's influence on my tasks
N=27

- Not at all: 37%
- Some: 59%
- A lot: 4%

Figure 13

The merger's influence on my career
N=27

- Not at all: 74%
- Some: 22%
- A lot: 4%

Figure 14
The merger's influence on work community
N=27

- Positive: 48%
- Neutral: 48%
- Negative: 4%

Figure 15

The merger's influence on me
N=27

- Positive: 52%
- Neutral: 44%
- Negative: 4%

Figure 16
References

7. Vos AD. To move or not to move?: The relationship between career management and preferred career moves. Employee Relations 2008;30(2).