Managing work

Introduction

Every member of a library staff is affected by management’s planning, or failure to plan. The better everyone understands and supports the aims and objectives of the organisation, the more successfully they will be realised.

From high-level planning at the top of the organisation to day-to-day strategies for ‘getting the job done’, staff members who contribute to planning, organising and coordinating work activities are more likely to feel positive about their work, and their role in the organisation.

When you have completed this section, you should be able to:

- explain the importance of planning
- identify different types of planning
- make some planning decisions
- use a procedures manual
- apply occupational health and safety principles in the workplace.

The main topics in this section are:

1. Planning
2. Operational Planning
3. Systems
4. Procedures
5. Occupational health and safety

Planning

One of the most important tasks for managers is planning. A popular maxim says that

‘Most managers don’t plan to fail - they fail to plan’

There is a hierarchy of types of organisational planning, each supporting and complementing the others. Operational planning deals with the short-term objectives necessary to reach broader strategic aims. Plans should be:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable
Relevant

Time constrained.

It is vital to include staff in planning. This helps staff understand the plans and how they fit into broader organisational goals; it also encourages commitment to making them work.

The subtopics in this section are:

1a. Why planning is important
1b. Why planning is not always done
1c. Planning and non-profit and service organisations
1d. The mission statement
1e. Strategic planning

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**Why planning is important**

1a.

As organisations grow in size and complexity, planning becomes increasingly important. This includes concern with the day-to-day and the longer-term future. Clear, formal plans, which everyone can see, help to avoid conflicting or overlapping aims. Such plans

- give staff direction and understanding on what they are doing and why
- give a sense of direction to the organisation
- encourage managers to think about what is affecting their business, internally and externally, and how it might evolve
- enable progress to be evaluated by setting goals and milestones.

The preparation of plans encourages information to be gathered and analysed, helping to ensure a better understanding of the business.

All planning brings benefits to the organisation. It can be complex and demanding, but the benefits far outweigh the difficulties.

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**Why planning is not always done**

1b.

Although most people accept that planning is necessary, sometimes it is not done properly or even avoided. Often, people have plans but fail to write them down or think them through. Some of the reasons are:
• Managers or supervisors are not capable of setting clear goals. This could be due to lack of training on the process, little understanding of the business, lack of organisational knowledge, or fear of failure.

• Planning for change can be challenging when resistance to change is strong. In these situations, involvement of staff in all steps is especially important.

• Time is always a problem. Gathering information, discussing it with others, evaluating it, and deciding on a course of action all take time which may be scarce.

• It can be difficult to plan and measure changes in a qualitative activity. Improving a reference service may mean better, more informed answers to clients’ questions - how can you plan and measure this?

• Longer-term plans can come unstuck due to unforeseen changes such as budget cuts, a falling Australian dollar, major technology upgrades etc. These may result in the plan becoming unworkable - and being seen as a waste of time.

Planning and nonprofit and service organisations

While nonprofit and service organisations need to plan as much as anyone else, some issues are particularly relevant. Often, libraries and information centres aim to provide a quality service rather than produce a set number of items. Some of the issues are:

• It is difficult to evaluate improvements in client satisfaction.

• With service organisations, it is not possible to prepare or stockpile ready-made ‘products’ for customer use. Thus if staff are off sick one day, no plan will cope with improving customer service on that day.

• Costing services may be difficult, which makes evaluation of the plan difficult as well. If the same number of clients is dealt with, but at increased cost, is that a failure? Perhaps they got better service and are much happier, but costing this is not easy.

• Most services are individually produced. There can be no mass production and economies of scale. Being reliant on the individual expertise and knowledge of the staff, planning and evaluating its success are not easy.
The mission statement

Most big organisations have a mission statement to provide a high-level description of its purpose. Usually it is a concise paragraph or two. It lays down in extremely broad terms the overall aims or purpose of the organisation. While these change over time, there is usually an underlying continuity about the mission.

It is important that staff understand the mission statement, and believe that its goals are achievable. Clients and stakeholders should also be able to refer to the mission statement and, at a glance, obtain a clear understanding of the purpose of an organisation.

The mission statement sits at the top of the planning hierarchy, defining the destination to which strategic and operational plans must head.

Strategic planning

Strategic plans focus the organisation on achieving its mission. These are long-term strategies, regularly reviewed to ensure their appropriateness in a changing environment.

Strategic plans are usually developed by senior managers in consultation with their staff. Management must ensure that the plans are communicated throughout the organisation to build ‘ownership’ for its objectives. Focus groups may be used with staff and clients to find out how the organisation is performing, to gain ideas as to where it should be going, and to discover where it is not achieving.

An important part of strategic planning is understanding the environment in which the organisation operates. A useful tool to assist in this is a SWOT analysis. This stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats. Strengths and weaknesses refer to the organisation. Strengths may be the breadth and depth of the collection, the goodwill in the community, and staff expertise. Weaknesses may be high staff turnover, inadequate computer systems or falling customer use. The organisation has some control over these and, in its planning, can build on strengths and address weaknesses.

In an organisation’s external environment there are opportunities and threats. Opportunities may arise such as the opening up of a new market, cheaper technological solutions. Threats could be competition, the falling value of the dollar, changing technology - often things the organisation cannot directly control. The aim is to grasp opportunities and minimise the impact of threats.
Finally, as in all planning, some measurement (often referred to as performance indicators) is necessary to assess the level of success achieved by the plan.

Operational Planning

Operational planning sets out the short-term programs and activities necessary to make progress towards long-term objectives. Involving both first-line and middle management, operational planning concerns inputs and outputs, resources and constraints, and how these can be managed to meet strategic objectives. Operational plans might include budgets, or a scheduling plan to get work completed on time in the right order, or an evaluation plan to assess a particular activity. Operational plans have most impact on the day-to-day work of staff and lower-level management.

The subtopics in this section are:
2a. Link with higher-level plans
2b. Planning tools
2c. Budgeting
2d. Other types of plans
2e. Prioritising
2f. Implementation

Link with higher-level plans

The hierarchy of planning is based on the size and timescale of the plans. The higher-level strategic plans are developed to meet goals in the distant future. This makes them difficult to develop and implement, and involves a greater risk of ‘expensive failure’ than do shorter-term plans. Because of this, strategic planning is undertaken at senior levels.

Once a strategic plan is developed, however, it needs operational plans to make it work. These plans, written by lower-level staff, tackle small parts of the overall strategic plan. They generally have a short timeframe, typically days or weeks rather than months and years, and need to be easily measured for success. Involving staff in their creation is an important aspect of making such plans workable. Developing operational plans builds confidence in a first-line manager, and expands their corporate and personnel management skills.
Planning tools

A wide range of tools and techniques can assist in operational planning. These range from pen and paper to elaborate computer programs. Their main aim is to help schedule activities and resources to minimise delays. They also help monitor progress against schedules. Tools include:

- pencil and graph paper to plan, say, rearranging furniture in the office
- itemised ‘to do’ lists - good for simple projects as memory joggers
- a diary for noting what to do and when it is to be done
- simple spreadsheets
- Gantt charts that show the timetabling of an activity
- more sophisticated tools, such as Critical Path Analysis, which highlight where blockages can occur that may slow down a project
- mathematical modelling techniques to help work out real situations (e.g., staff needed on a busy loans desk)
- other computer software packages designed for managing larger scale projects.

Budgeting

Budgeting is a way of ensuring that appropriate financial resources are allocated to an activity to achieve the desired outcome, and comparing the cost/benefit of this outcome with other possible uses of those resources. It is also a way to measure performance against the cost of achieving it. Thus budgets are useful for both planning an activity and controlling it.

Budgets are usually prepared or reviewed annually, or for a particular project. The essential information includes estimated costs, quantities and the timeframe in which the money will be required. Each organisation has its own procedures for preparing, presenting and acquitting budgets. (Acquittal is checking that the budgeted resources were spent on their original purpose.) Budgets are relatively easy to prepare and understand, and are useful for outsiders to get a feel of its size and complexity. A range of budgeting techniques may be used:

- incremental budgeting, using last year’s figures as a base and allowing additional funding to cope with inflation or planned increases. This process tends to assume that last year’s activities are automatically carried forward.
• program budgeting based upon the size and nature of the project necessary to reach its goals. This enables each activity to be costed and compared for the coming year.

• zero based budgeting, which calls for all projects to be evaluated each year as if they were starting from scratch. Each activity is then compared and its true cost assigned, making for better planning decisions.

Other types of plans

Particular types of plans can be developed to deal with specific situations. Two examples are event planning and operations planning.

Event planning is managing a special occasion - the visit of a VIP, the launch of a new system, running a workshop. There are several steps common to most events:
• establishing clear objectives, and defining the target audience
• promoting the event
• preparing a schedule of activities with deadlines and responsibilities
• deciding venues, guests, catering if necessary etc.
• determining budget and other resource implications
• conducting the event, follow-up and evaluation.

Operations planning is establishing systems to produce a certain output - e.g., cataloguing x publications in a year, or implementing a current awareness service. The plan deals with issues such as:
• current and future demand
• physical resources to meet this demand
• evaluation of alternative ways to achieve the desired output
• any technological considerations
• the workflow and job design
• physical layout associated with the workflow.

Once these issues have been considered, the costs can be assessed and standards and controls built into the approach.

Prioritising

Most organisations have many more proposals and prospective activities than they can afford. Funding is always limited,
appropriate staff often in short supply, and there is never enough time. Selections therefore have to be made and activities prioritised. This can be difficult, and must involve all stakeholders - management, staff and clients. In prioritising, some issues are:

- how directly is the proposed activity related to the core business of the organisation?
- what level of resources are required to implement the plan?
- are the resources required ‘one-off’ or will they be needed every year?
- will other activities be affected if this new one is implemented—will something else have to stop?
- what benefits are expected from the plan?
- will the benefits be visible to all stakeholders - or just selected groups?
- if benefits are relatively intangible - e.g., improving staff morale - how will this be measured?
- are there costs in not bringing in the proposal?
- will there be major disruption during the implementation of the plan, or will it be relatively painless?

**Implementation**

Introducing any new plan requires consultation. The problems discussed in *Managing change* are relevant. Also consider the following:

- How will you involve staff in planning and implementation? For simple activities, this may mean a short discussion over morning tea and an agreed date and time for implementation. More complex plans need formal meetings and detailed discussions, focusing on the impact of the change.
- How will you determine what resources you need? Then how will you acquire them? Must you bid for scarce resources, or are they readily available? If this plan is adopted, must you abandon some other activity? If so, is your plan more important, and can you negotiate the closure of the other activity?
- What role will technology play? If the plan relies on changes to computer systems, issues relating to training, levels of keyboard use and availability and reliability of equipment need to be considered. There may also be
questions about the impact if the system goes down, poor response times and inadequate hardware.

- What changes need to be made to workflows and relationships? These have a strong impact on morale and work culture, and staff concerns must be addressed.
- Time and resources have to be made available to conduct on-the-job or offsite training.
- Finally, some performance measure should be developed to monitor the impact and progress of the change. Again staff need to understand this and accept it. Be open about its use. If it shows the plan not to be fully successful, don’t be afraid to discuss with others, make changes or accept that it hasn’t worked.

### Systems

A system is a set of related activities that link to achieve an overall goal. At work, such a system transforms the inputs (e.g., staff time and expertise, technologies and raw materials) into the desired output (a fully catalogued book available via Kinetica). It should take into account external influences such as other work pressures, and provide mechanisms to give feedback to management - e.g., the numbers of books catalogued.

Each system exists in an organisation with its own ethics, principles and strategies. The systems are shaped by this. Operations systems are traditionally divided into two types - continuous and intermittent.

Continuous systems have a long life, and deal with regular volumes of a standard product - cataloguing. Systems that make this more efficient make savings. Intermittent systems deal with less predictable, lower volume activities. If you handle one interlibrary loan a month, you don’t need a sophisticated system.

The subtopics in this section are:

- 3a. Designing systems
- 3b. Building in controls
- 3c. Measuring success

### Designing systems

Establishing an appropriate system requires thinking about the nature of the work, how much is to be done, who will do it, where it will be done and how it relates to other activities.
The nature of the work and the desired outcome shape any system. If the work is simple and routine, then some form of assembly line or quotas may be developed. If it has to be finished to a certain standard then other factors need to be incorporated to ensure that these standards are attained.

The quantity of work is a major factor. In many ways this determines the effort necessary in developing any system. If the work is continuous and high-volume (McDonalds is a good example), then standardising actions, reducing distractions, and taking great care over the physical placement of things is essential. If volume is small or specialised, few of these issues matter, but quality and timeliness may be more important.

Where the work is done can be a major factor. Availability of space and equipment will influence the design of workflows. A good layout will assist in raising efficiency and staff morale.

Finally, consider the relation of this process to other activities. Is this a stand-alone activity, or an integral part of a larger whole? Will problems with the system affect only this area, or have a flow-on effect?

### Building in controls

Controls are integral to any successful operations plan. They need to be built in from the start. Controls cover factors such as:

- **timeliness** - are there deadlines?
- **accuracy** - how tolerant of mistakes can the organisation be?
- **quality** - what level of quality do we wish to attain consistently?
- **quantity** - what output do we expect; can it be accurately measured?
- **cost of producing the output** - how does this compare with a notional or actual standard?
- **impact on staff** - is motivation high, are teams working well, is there a good atmosphere?

Control mechanisms should be developed in consultation with staff. Emphasise that these are not to ‘catch people out’. They provide the organisation with information on how much an activity costs, how well it is done, and whether there is a need for improvement. If things need to change, corrective action will be needed. Contingency procedures should be established at the outset in case things do not work as planned.
Industry standards and benchmarks provide useful guides for assessing productivity. However, they need flexibility, as every work environment differs.

**Measuring success**

What is success? The new operating plan may be accepted quickly and implemented with minimal disruption, achieving its objectives. However, it may also reduce negatives: OH&S injuries fall, staff absenteeism is lower, staff/management relations improve.

To measure success, clear, measurable objectives must be included in the plan, together with a control process to guide their achievement. Then success can be measured by:

- the degree to which objectives have been achieved
- the degree to which the control procedures ‘fitted’ the process and were accepted by those concerned
- positive feedback from staff
- positive feedback from clients or customers
- positive feedback from management
- productivity levels (a ratio of inputs to outputs)
- positive comparisons with similar institutions doing similar work.

To measure success against these criteria, to conduct surveys (formal or informal), talk with relevant groups, and research costs and comparisons. Build this work into your initial plan.

**Procedures**

Every organisation has standard procedures for most, if not all, of the tasks they perform. Some depend on the requirements of a computer system. Others may follow the procedures of the larger institution, of which the library is a part. There are also things done in most organisations because ‘that’s the way we’ve always done it’.

Some procedures relate to efficiency of operation of equipment, or the demands of clients. Some - financial procedures in particular - may be dictated by an external auditing body or regulation.

Working efficiently in an organisation requires that the staff are aware of relevant procedures, and follow them. If a staff member does not agree with a particular procedure, there are
usually acceptable ways to propose changing it. Meantime, it is expected that everyone adheres to the methods laid down.

The subtopics in this sections are:

4a. Acquiring hardware and software
4b. Documenting procedures

**Acquiring hardware and software •4a**

Before equipment, computer software or similar items are acquired for an area, careful evaluation must be undertaken. The points in this evaluation include:

- What do we want to achieve by this - what will be the benefit of this expenditure?
- What do we want the item to do? Have we spelt out the functions we expect of it?
- How are we going to decide which item or package to acquire? How will we evaluate the contenders?
- What is the cost of this acquisition? This will affect how we acquire it.
- If it is relatively cheap it may be quite straightforward; if expensive, a number of quotes may be necessary and a written evaluation undertaken.
- Will there be a need for staff training and familiarisation?
- Have staff been involved in the acquisition, and understand and accept what is planned?
- Will it make life easier for our users? Or provide additional benefits? Or will we need to plan extensive user training?
- Do we need to involve others (e.g., the IT section) or is it a 'stand-alone' item?
- Will this acquisition impact on workflows or procedures?

There is more information about making purchase proposals in *Using multimedia equipment*.

**Documenting procedures •4b**

In order to put policies into practice, organisations devise procedures which provide detailed instructions on how the policies will be implemented. These instructions should be easy to follow, step-by-step methods that guide the newest users. This ensures that the same steps are followed, whoever is doing the work, providing consistency in approach. Procedures
are a means of providing instructions to handle routine situations.

Procedures are a good training mechanism and support staff in making decisions. If a client doesn’t understand or complains about a process, they can be referred to the procedure covering this activity. Good procedures reduce the workload for management by providing staff with the means to make decisions themselves.

Procedures are good for routine, common activities and decisions, but they cannot handle all situations and they must be used sensibly. Complex situations have to be handled individually.

Good, clearly written procedures, and keeping them up-to-date, are essential tasks for managers.

**Occupational health and safety**

Like all workplaces, libraries have a range of potential health problems. They include risks associated with the use of computers and other equipment. There are also hazards specific to library tasks - e.g., shelving and book repair.


Working on a computer for long periods of time without adequate breaks and exercises can cause severe pain, and a range of injuries including eye strain, headaches, stiff neck, sore shoulders, sore arms, tendonitis, and ‘frozen’ shoulder.


You can see an animated tutorial on using your computer comfortably [http://www.pc.ibm.com/healthycomputing/].

There is a set of exercises to download and print, keep close to your computer, and do regularly at http://www.shelterpub.com/_fitness/_stretching_at_computer_or_desk/online_stretches.html.

The e-stretch website [http://www.e-stretch.net] has online video and audio instruction on useful stretching activities.

There are also computer programs that remind you to stretch regularly, and show you what to do.