

State of Project Management in Libraries

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Abstract: Project management as a discipline has been around for decades within such fields as business and manufacturing, however, the library profession has seen slower adoption, along with apparent gaps in training support. In 2018, an American Library Association project team surveyed library professionals regarding their experiences with project management in their organizations and LIS programs. The results highlighted a number of gaps in project management practices in libraries and preparation among library professionals for managing projects. Recommendations are given for ALA Core and for library administrators to address gaps in training and support of project management in libraries.

Keywords: Project management, professional development, training, projects, library administrators, survey

Introduction

As a library administrator, successful implementation of projects in your library is an important component in making your library run more smoothly. Library projects come in all shapes and sizes, from small to large, simple to complex. It may include an implementation of a new technology, new process, building renovation, collection shift and everything in between. You yourself may have to lead projects and/or you may delegate these tasks to others. Having an understanding and skill in project management will likely make those projects, of any size and any complexity go smoother, faster, and hopefully stay on budget.

In 2018, the American Library Association's Library Leadership and Management Association (LLAMA, now known as Core) created a project team to study project management in libraries. The team conducted a literature review and survey that explored if and how librarians were serving as project managers in their institutions, as well as their interest and needs regarding the subject. The resulting conclusions indicate a growing need for project management skills to be built and supported by library administrations, organizations, and schools.

Review of Literature and Project Background

While project management as a discipline has been around for decades within such fields as business and manufacturing, the library profession did not join these ranks of a more formal acknowledgement until the mid-2000's. As Schachter (2004) put it, "[w]e don't often call ourselves project managers, but the fact that we do so much project management as part of our regular positions is increasingly being acknowledged and promoted as a core skill set of

librarianship” (p. 10). Much of the earlier literature in libraries focuses on case studies and experiences where employing project management techniques would be useful in library technology projects, including managing digital projects and designing websites (Schachter, 2004; Choi and Rassmussen, 2006; Revels, 2010). Later, Abbot and Laskowski (2014) articulated the need for project management techniques and skills in effective management of technical services projects, such as collections and Currier, Mirza, and Downing (2017) support a project management focus, with customization, in the digital humanities.

Vinopal’s 2012 work outlines why project management is relevant and important to libraries by advocating for using formal project management processes in the increasing number of collaborative projects with other libraries. And Burich, et al. (2006) state using project management techniques in projects with other institutions is useful because “[e]stablishing a planning process at the outset of a partnership can serve to delineate the responsibilities of each institution, both in financial and human resources; create mutually agreed upon timelines and outcomes; and bridge the cultural gaps between different organizational cultures” (p. 18).

Delving into more specifics, in 2007, Kinkus analyzed library position announcements for project management skills, and notes, “It is unclear whether current library science literature and education adequately address project management skills or other traditionally “extra-librarian” leadership qualities now needed to effectively manage project-based initiatives in libraries” (p. 352). The author analyzed several years’ worth of professional librarian positions as they relate to project management to identify the trend and the need for these skills. Horwath

(2012) added research relating how Canadian librarians managed projects. In addition, she investigated literature on project management skills and training needs.

Recently, Daugherty and Hines (2018) evaluated more broadly the implementation of project management in a wider variety of library work through their book, *Project management in the library workplace*. The breadth of chapters and topics outlined how project management has become a more embedded part of library culture. It could be seen as a vital link in library administration to provide common lightweight understanding of what project management means to an organization's overall project and decision-making process (McCready and Clark, 2018) and to developing full-time project management positions within libraries (Guimaraes, McGowan, VanNevel, and Wang, 2018).

The first survey of project management literature, by Winston & Hoffman in 2005, showed an increasing need for project management expertise in libraries and a corresponding need for increased focus on project management coursework in degree programs. Revels (2010) describes librarians as often being “accidental” project managers because they are tasked with leading projects but not given the training to do so effectively. Nearly a quarter of Horwath's (2012) Canadian survey respondents reported being responsible for projects but having received no project management training. And Serrano and Aviles (2016) went further afield when they surveyed academic librarians around the world about project management skills and usage in libraries. Their investigation also analyzed the presence of project management as courses in library and information science (LIS) programs. Most respondents indicated project management had become a common part of work as they had “participated in three to eight projects in the last

five years” (p. 473), indicating the increasing importance of LIS programs providing courses on project management in degree programs.

The above brief review shows that project management as a topic has become more integrated into the library profession but there appear to be gaps in training support. This study, originally as part of the LLAMA Project Management project team, works to provide a more comprehensive review of current practices and needs in the profession.

The team’s charge was:

- To conduct an environmental scan of project management practices in libraries,
- To identify the gaps and needs of library professionals on the topic of project management, and
- To provide recommendations for creation of an ALA Core (formerly LLAMA) community/group dedicated to facilitation, education, and promotion of the project management discipline.

A further goal of the project team was to find a general consensus from the profession on their experiences with project management in their profession, as well as, their thoughts on the need for training and types of training needed on the topic of project management.

While the work of this project team began under the organizational leadership of LLAMA, ALA Core (<https://ala.org/core>) is used throughout the rest of the text to indicate the new reporting structure.

Methodology

In order to gather information directly from library professionals regarding their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with project management in their organizations and LIS programs, the team created a survey of questions to use as a tool to gather quantitative and qualitative data on the topic. In early review of the literature, the team found a survey on academic libraries and project management conducted by Serrano and Aviles (2016). The team reached out to Serrano and Aviles and received permission to use their 2016 survey as a starting point for our survey. Some questions between the two surveys are quite similar, particularly demographic questions and questions related to LIS. The team reviewed the Serrano and Aviles (2016) survey, modified, and added our own unique questions.

The final survey was created through an iterative collaboration process amongst the team members and went through a vigorous revision process. The team decided to use a Qualtrics survey with a variety of question types in order to provide enough data to make a formal recommendation to ALA Core. Question types included short answer, Likert, and multiple-choice, both single and multi-answer. The survey was sent through a variety of email/listserv platforms to American Library Association (ALA) and non-ALA members, both within the United States and internationally. Examples of listservs used included those associated with ALA, LLAMA, ALCTS, ACRL, LITA, IFLA, OCLC, and various US state library associations. Membership in ALA was not a requirement to complete the survey. Limitations of the survey were that it was a single survey collecting data at a single point in time, and the team did not have the ability to conduct the survey over multiple time periods. The survey was conducted June-August 2019, and the survey data uploaded to Tableau for analysis.

Results

Overview of Respondents

While having an overarching project management focus for the survey, some basic demographics were collected to provide context to the responses. The following results were first limited to those respondents that completed the entire survey with 426 responses. Of those, the two largest types of libraries represented were academic (208) and public (124), after which there was a large dropoff into more loosely defined types such as specialized, i.e. government, library school, tribal, or library consortia. In describing their current positions, most respondents fell into administration/directors (174) followed by broader categories that focused on cataloging/metadata (56), and public services (38). The breadth of positional expertise though showed project management as part of many roles within libraries. The overall results also showed that many respondents came from libraries with a work force under 50 people, and from within the United States.

Use of Project Management in Libraries

For many respondents, project management was used in the organization at a little to moderate levels (261). Pulling in the next two higher categories of a lot (104) and a great deal (47), nearly all respondents indicated some acknowledgement of project management being used. The majority (260) indicated that it was enough of their position to be outlined in their official job description but a further breakdown showed that project management was still a major part of their workload by percentage and the number of projects currently being worked on.

Managing multiple projects

- 1-3 projects: 122

- 4-8 projects: 163
- 9+ projects: 132

Percentage of job that is project management

- 1-25%: 154
- 26-50%: 150
- 51-75%: 79
- 76-100%: 33

Training and Professional Development

The next set of survey questions asked for information on training and professional development related to project management. The majority of respondents indicated they never received formal training (130) or were self-taught (248). Others indicated that they were mentored in some way (108), came to their current job with previous experience (97), or utilized other institutional offerings (108). The smallest group indicated that they received credit courses in project management (38).

When asked what opportunities the respondent would like their library to offer for training, multiple choices were selected with attending seminars/workshops (280), ongoing onsite training (189) and participation in a community of practice (160) being the top choices. When given a list of potential training topics to focus on, software and tools (257), methodologies (162), assessment (252) / needs assessment (229), and change management (229) were the top identified areas.

Respondents were also asked about the availability of coursework associated with obtaining their library degree. Of the identified ALA members who held or were working towards a Library / Information Science degree at the time of the survey (234), the majority stated there was no coursework associated with project management (207). Of those that stated there was a project management course (27), the course was an elective (15). When asked if project management should be part of LIS education, the vast majority indicated that it was extremely to very important to include.

Discussion

The analysis of the survey results highlighted a number of gaps in project management practices in libraries and painted a picture about the current state of preparedness among library professionals when it comes to managing projects. The project team was also able to provide several recommendations on next steps to ALA Core with an idea that they would help librarians increase project management skills. Although applicable to library workers at every level, authors believe that most recommendations are especially applicable to those in management positions because recommendations highlight the need for professional development and point to the lack of ongoing available training in project management for library employees.

Gaps in Project Management Implementation in Libraries

A gap analysis of organizational structure, administrative support, resources, and development opportunities as it relates to project management in libraries showed areas of potential focus in training and support of library professionals.

Organizational Structure

As indicated by survey participants, project management was not an official part of most people's job responsibilities, while at the same time, a majority of respondents managed projects on a regular basis. Many respondents stated that they often played multiple roles on a project, such as project lead, team member, subject matter expert, etc. An overwhelming majority of libraries do not have employees specifically trained in project management who can lead projects, and thus, usually managers fulfill that role.

The survey highlighted the importance of recognizing that project management is a separate unique skill that is important for libraries to develop and cultivate. It also stressed the need for designated trained individuals to serve as project managers.

Administrative Support

Based on the survey responses, an overwhelming majority of libraries today have accepted the concept of project management at their institutions. At the same time, only a small percentage of the same institutions actively support it through professional development, training, and recognition of the unique skills required to effectively manage projects. Such findings pointed to the fact that not enough support internally was offered to those employees who are tasked with managing projects at their institutions. In addition, the majority of respondents reported lack of consistency with implementation and application of PM practices at their libraries. Lack of consistency, in turn, tends to lead to frustration and inefficiencies, as evidenced by the following comment taken from the survey:

“Administration and colleagues across the library appreciate, accept, support the outcomes that come from well-executed Project Management, but the lack of

consistent adoption, application, recognition of it as a skill and tool results in stagnation, duplication of effort, and lack of communication/transparency across many library initiatives.“

Resources and Development Opportunities

The overwhelming majority of the survey respondents, including those with longevity in the profession and who managed projects, indicated a strong desire for project management training. They expressed interest in training and development opportunities offered by their own institutions, as well as ALA Core. All individuals who stated having received some training in project management indicated that they obtained it either from outside sources or by being mentored on the job, and that they would welcome additional training opportunities.

This might suggest that, as a profession, librarianship is not doing a good job at recognizing that Project Management is a profession with its own best practices, standards, and approaches that need to be studied and developed in libraries. Librarianship has also been failing to recognize the overwhelming need for training and to provide support to employees assigned to managing project work.

Another gap that the survey uncovered was the prevalent absence of available and/or required coursework in project management from curricula in library schools. Such findings, coupled with the fact that the project management training and development resources being provided to library professionals was insufficient, indicated a significant gap in preparing the library workforce for effectively managing projects on the job.

Recommendations to ALA Core

Based on the data that the project team gathered in the course of its work, the following recommendations related to project management in libraries were submitted to ALA Core in June 2020:

1. Expand current ALA Core training and development offerings to include more seminars, workshops, presentations, and webinars on project management in libraries. Those could range from basic topics to intermediate to advanced.
2. Establish a relationship with the [Project Management Institute \(PMI\)](#), a professional organization for project management professionals, to create a partnership between ALA and PMI.
3. Investigate opportunities for offering certifications in Project Management. They might range from workshop certifications to professional certifications offered through the [Project Management Institute \(PMI\)](#).
4. Work with ALA to include project management as one of the foundational competencies and recommend that introduction to project management be included in library school curricula.

Since the initial recommendations, one was accomplished.

5. Launch a [Project Management Interest Group](#) where practitioners and those interested in project management could get together and share knowledge and experiences related to project management in libraries.

Conclusion

While the focus of the survey and resulting report was to provide ALA Core information on the current state of project management and potential next steps for the organizations to support the professional development of its members, the authors also developed their own set of conclusions that might help provide library administrators with next steps on a smaller scale.

Additional recommendations on how to implement project management in libraries include:

1. Identify employees interested in learning more about project management and foster their development in this area.
2. Set aside training funds for identified employees to take courses and classes in project management, at the same level of other training opportunities in the discipline, i.e. information literacy or cataloging.
3. Seek out and network with other libraries that have established project management practices.
4. When possible, hire a trained project manager for a high-visibility project to have the organization experience the benefits of professional project management approaches.

These steps show an increased support for project management at the library administration level so it is clear that the organization is willing to try additional approaches to running projects, and to acknowledge the work many of their staff may already be doing.

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Appendix 1

ALA LLAMA Project Management Survey Questions