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Intellectual assets in libraries

Intellectual assets (IAs) are assets that belong to an organisation, and benefit the organisation, but are intangible and have no direct financial worth. For example, the number of people employed by an organisation is a tangible asset which can be measured. The knowledge and expertise those staff members possess is an intangible, intellectual asset. Due to their intangible nature, they cannot be assessed using traditional quantitative methods. Nevertheless, these assets need to be optimised in order for an organisation to run as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Edvinsson and Malone (1997) divide intellectual assets into three key areas: human assets, structural assets, and relational assets. Human assets refer to elements like staff expertise and the quality of training, structural assets to the organisational infrastructure and value added by intellectual property, and relational assets to the quality of the relationships the organisation has with internal and external stakeholders. Corrall and Sriborisutsakul (2010) add a fourth category specifically for libraries: collections and services assets. This takes into consideration the value added by the ways collections are used and the services offered by the library, and this category has been incorporated into this investigation. Creating these categories allows for IAs to be identified more easily, although it should be noted that some IAs can be applied to more than one category and these groupings should perhaps only be used for the data collection process and discarded for the final report.

This study focuses on the IAs within the Scholarship and Collections directorate at the British Library. The main aim of the directorate is to interpret and care for the Library's collections. As a non-profit organisation and one which has a primary function of sharing knowledge and maintaining cultural heritage, intellectual assets are key to the Library's success, and so an evaluation of the IAs attached to the directorate would be of great value. The intention of this study is to determine how effectively the directorate is using its intellectual assets, indicating its strengths as well as areas for improvement, to enable the Library to improve the services it provides.

This research focuses on one sector of the British Library: the Scholarship and Collections directorate. Scholarship and Collections (S&C) are responsible for the care, interpretation and development of the BL's collections of over 150 million items. The directorate has just over 200 members of staff, comprised of curators, archivists, restoration specialists, as well as individuals who have no direct contact with the collections at all. Without the collections, the Library could not exist. However, the collections as tangible assets are without value unless they are accessible, well utilised, and supported by human expertise. Therefore, capitalising on the directorate's intellectual assets is essential in order to improve the Library's services.
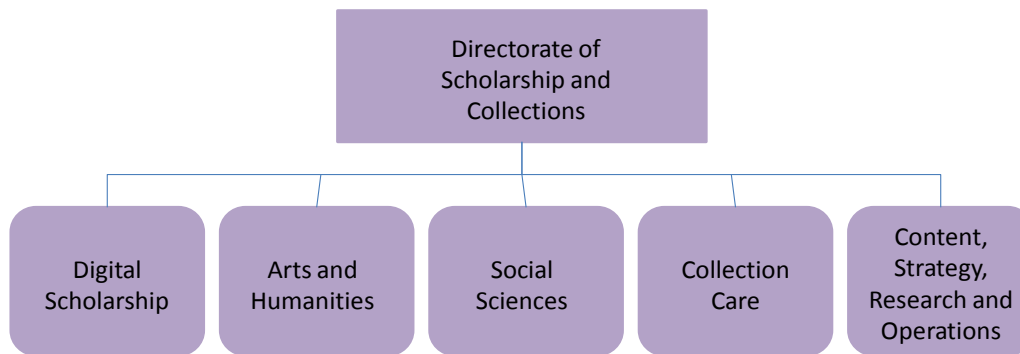
Directorate of Scholarship and Collections

Digital Scholarship

Arts and Humanities

Social Sciences

Collection Care

Content, Strategy, Research and Operations

Figure 1. New Structure of Scholarship and Collections

An evaluation of the IAs in Scholarship and Collections is of especial value at this time because the directorate underwent a major restructuring in 2009-2010. The final report of the review (Director of Operations and Services, 2010: 6) states that this change was prompted by a new emphasis on digital scholarship, as well as the 'changing external landscape in information provision and communications'. The report indicates that the Library wished to demonstrate its change of priorities from the collections to access, and felt the need to be more recognisable in structure to users who were used to an academic library structure (Director of Operations and Services, 2010: 11). Figure 1 demonstrates the directorate's new infrastructure: a thematic division rather than the previous structure which focused on the format of the collections.

The restructure has inevitably caused disruption in certain areas and this, coupled with the diverse professional knowledge within the directorate, has meant that employees would benefit from a means of capitalising on their strengths, identifying where the directorate could be improved, and learning where certain areas of expertise can be found, all of which this investigation is expected to provide.

Methodology

Corrall and Sriborisutsakul (2010: 5) suggest that using a mixed methodology is best for assessing the IAs in academic libraries in order to fulfil 'both theoretical and practical aims'. That is, a library should seek to analyse both the qualitative data provided by employees and external stakeholders, they should also attempt to provide some quantitative data and benchmarking in order to fully understand the strengths and weaknesses of their IAs.

One of the main shortcomings of existing intellectual evaluation tools is the over-reliance on quantitative methods. While the aim is to 'measure' IAs, the idea of measurement is somewhat misleading, as it implies a numerative value can be placed on IAs, which simply isn't the case. It was

determined that this investigation would be comprised of mostly qualitative data, only using quantitative methods as a support mechanism. In addition, this project is a case study which involves the input of BL staff members, making qualitative methods a natural choice.

A phenomenographical approach was used. Phenomenography is a philosophy developed in the 1970s by Ference Marton and other researchers at Gotenburg University in Sweden, intended originally as a means of studying education and the ways that individuals learn. The approach is similar in many ways to phenomenology, except that rather than focusing on the phenomenon itself, Ashworth and Lucas (2000: 295) state that it 'seeks to identify the qualitatively different ways in which individuals experience such aspects of their world'. It focuses on individual experience of a phenomenon, based on the assumption that everyone experiences the world differently (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000). The aim of phenomenography is to reveal variation in experience in the human world; the variation between qualitatively different ways of seeing, experiencing and understanding the same phenomena (Marton and Pang, 1999). Therefore, while phenomenography and phenomenology are alike in that both are concerned with a particular phenomenon within a particular environment, there are key differences. While the former tends to focus on the researcher's perception of a phenomenon, the latter focuses on the research subjects' experience of the phenomenon in order to formulate categories and find patterns of collective experience (Andretta, 2007). Also, while phenomenology emphasises individual experience, phenomenography attempts to reveal a collective experience by highlighting different facets of the phenomenon as experienced by different individuals (Trigwell, 2000). This is more useful for this particular project, which deals with a diverse set of individuals within Scholarship and Collections who may experience the phenomenon of intellectual assets in very different ways. While objective results (e.g. the management of IAs) can be documented from a first order perspective, phenomenography allows the researcher to investigate the second order perspective which focuses on the participants' internal understanding of the phenomenon and how this relates to the ways they manage IAs.

The primary method of data collection was a series of 25 in-depth interviews with S&C staff members, as well as a selection of key stakeholders. The interviewees were taken from diverse areas of the directorate and had varying levels of responsibility so as to obtain as wide a field of results as possible. Open-ended questions and prompts were used, as this allowed the subject to lead the discussion and bring up elements that the researcher, as an outsider to the directorate, may not otherwise have been aware of. The interviews were structured around the four areas of intellectual assets that have been identified: human, structural, relational, and collections and services, and interviewees were encouraged to give their personal opinions, allowing the researcher to gauge their feelings and beliefs about the strengths and weaknesses of intellectual assets in the directorate. The interviews were then transcribed and closely analysed with the purpose of finding key themes in the data, and divergences of opinion between interview subjects. This data was then followed by a questionnaire which was distributed to all staff in S&C. The purpose of this was to allow everyone the opportunity to participate, fill data gaps, and to allow for a small amount of statistical data collection by asking participants to rate certain elements of their experiences at the BL from 1 to 5, with one being very poor and five being excellent. All the data was supported by reviewing BL documents in order to ascertain what the Library is doing it and how they are doing it, and to compare the official and unofficial accounts of working at the BL.

Findings

The following are some of the most interesting outcomes of the data.

Defining the Library

Participants were asked to define the British Library, and it was pertinent that they found it much easier to state what the library is not. The most frequent statement was that the library is not a museum. While the motivation behind this (that the collections are there to be used and not kept behind glass cases) is understandable, it also limits the interpretation of the library. One of the BL's roles is to preserve and share the country's cultural heritage, and a large number of people who come to the library are not there to use the reading rooms. They are there to see the exhibitions and the precious objects. These are using the library in the same way that they would use a museum, and they are a valuable source of revenue. It is also interesting to note that many of the interviewees praised the ways that museums such as the Victoria & Albert and the British Museum promoted their collections and made them accessible. Employees also pointed out that the library is not a university. Again, in the strictest sense, this is true. However, the BL is an internationally vital seat of learning, and home to world-class academic experts who should be promoted. University websites have easily accessible web pages for their academic staff outlining their areas of expertise and their publications, which is something the BL would benefit from. It is very difficult to find the experts in S&C despite their academic prestige. One S&C employee even stated that the BL is not a library which, in the traditional sense of libraries as a place to find a book on a shelf to borrow, is accurate. However, rather than defining itself by what it is not, it is suggested that the Library adopts a more inclusive matrix approach to the way it sees itself. National libraries are unique even amongst themselves, but the BL has aspects of museum, university, library and many other types of institution. Rather than rejecting these comparisons, staff should embrace these aspects in order to enhance the Library's assets and make all staff feel that their work is valued by the BL.

Untapped Resources
It is obvious that S&C holds a great wealth in professional expertise, and that staff are passionate about what they do. However, many of these resources are untapped and obscured. Several participants discussed how they found valuable contacts within the directorate through word-of-mouth, and around 70% stated that they did not believe the rest of S&C were really aware what they do. Many staff members stated that the directorate would benefit from more comprehensive profiles on the intranet system. At present, intranet profiles include job titles and extension numbers, whereas many participants felt that they could also include information about what their jobs involve, including areas of expertise and special interest. This would enable a more matrix culture where employees could utilise their skills, and inter-departmental links could be made within the directorate.

Digital Scholarship
There is also a large degree of confusion about digital scholarship. While all research participants agreed that it is a priority for the Library, many professed confusion concerning what it actually means, or wariness over getting involved with it. The directorate would benefit from a clearer definition of digital scholarship and a greater degree of collaboration and understanding between those working with physical and digital media. It became clear throughout the research process that there is very little difference between the two. For example, staff working in Collection Care have largely the same aims as those working in Digital Scholarship: to ensure that collections are preserved and accessible. However, there is a divergence between the two departments, with many employees feeling there is an 'either/or' situation, which is not the case.

Annual Reports
The BL produces an annual report detailing its progress. However, it largely focuses on curatorial staff within S&C, leaving other employees unable to show what they have been doing. Some sectors within the directorate are forming their own annual reports to enable them to demonstrate the intellectual value of the work they are doing. The directorate would benefit from acknowledging that

departmental success cannot necessarily be determined by, for example, the percentage of collections that are digitally available, as not all departments are directly responsible for a collection.

The impact of tangible assets
While this project set out to evaluate only intellectual assets, it was quickly determined that it is impossible to completely separate intangible and tangible assets. Budget cuts and the restrictions on staff employment have understandably limited what S&C are able to do. It would therefore be unfair to criticise the directorate for something like not having collections extensively digitised, when the BL has no internal budget for digitisation and relies on external funding which is not always available. Lack of money and reduced staff numbers have a negative impact on IAs, and any evaluation should always be conducted alongside a financial review in order to form a fair judgement on what the directorate is able to do.

Discussion

Several attempts have been made over the past two decades to put a tangible value on IAs. Kaplan and Norton (1992) developed the Balanced Scorecard to allow intellectual assets to be considered alongside financial evaluations, and Sveiby (1997) and Edvinsson (1997) have also produced notable IA evaluation tools.

However, these models were not developed with non-profit organisations such as libraries in mind. White (2004) has suggested that the BSC can be adapted for the measurement of IAs in libraries. The scorecard could be adapted specifically for IAs to measure the four library IA components posited by Corrall and Sriborisutsakul (2010), and would allow a library to think laterally, make decisions about where their IA priorities lie, and track their progress. This, and the fact that the BL have used the scorecard in the past so staff will be familiar with it, suggested that it could be adapted for the purpose of this evaluation. The four aspects of intellectual assets fit neatly into the four scorecard areas (1) financial (2) customer (3) internal business processes (4) learning and growth, and it would allow the directorate to consider their IAs laterally. Having a limit of five or six key performance indicators allotted to each scorecard component allows S&C to identify and prioritise their IAs.
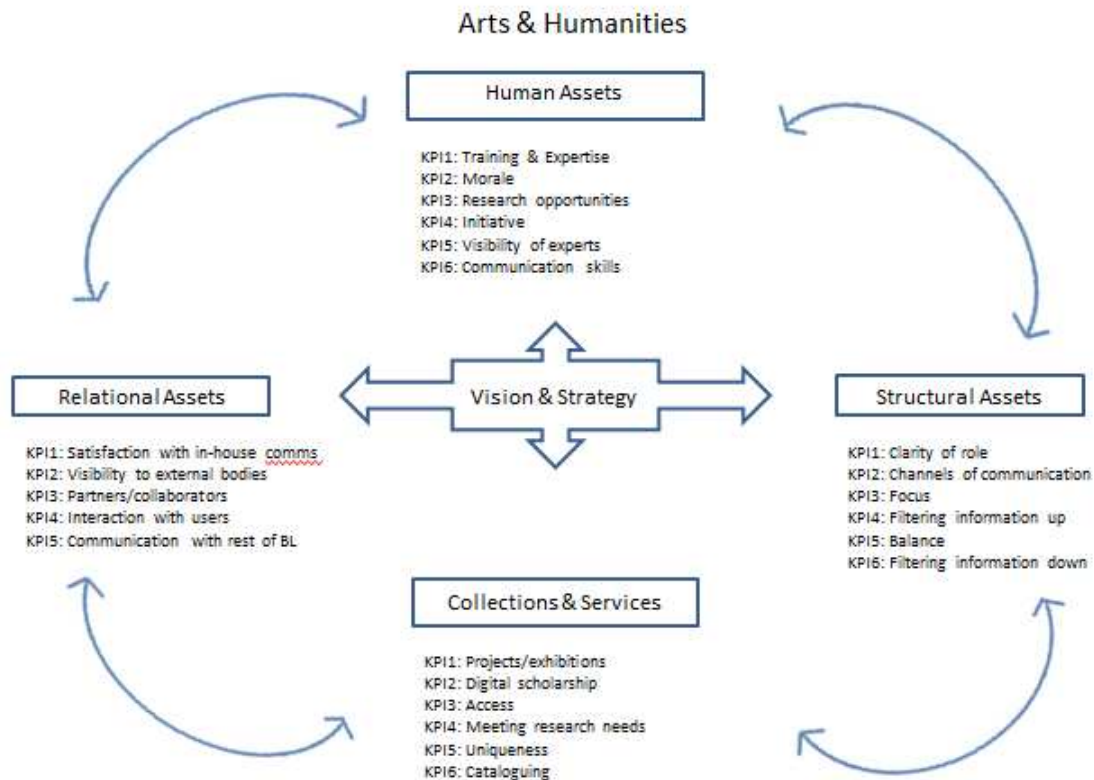
Arts & Humanities

Human Assets
KPI1: Training & Expertise
KPI2: Morale
KPI3: Research opportunities
KPI4: Initiative
KPI5: Visibility of experts
KPI6: Communication skills

Vision & Strategy

Relational Assets
KPI1: Satisfaction with in-house comms
KPI2: Visibility to external bodies
KPI3: Partners/collaborators
KPI4: Interaction with users
KPI5: Communication with rest of BL

Structural Assets
KPI1: Clarity of role
KPI2: Channels of communication
KPI3: Focus
KPI4: Filtering information up
KPI5: Balance
KPI6: Filtering information down

Collections & Services
KPI1: Projects/exhibitions
KPI2: Digital scholarship
KPI3: Access
KPI4: Meeting research needs
KPI5: Uniqueness
KPI6: Cataloguing

Figure 2. Scorecard adapted for the Arts and Humanities department in Scholarship and Collections

The original aim was to create one evaluation tool for the directorate, but it soon became apparent that this was not practical. The expertise and responsibilities of the various departments within Scholarship and Collections are very diverse, and an intellectual asset that is vital to one department would be meaningless to another. For example, the accessibility of collection catalogues would be very important to someone in Arts and Humanities, but would mean very little to someone in Research and Operations who has no direct responsibility for the collections. One theme that emerged from the data is that some employees felt that the work they do is not fully acknowledged, and this evaluation needs to incorporate all aspects of what the directorate does.

The solution was to create a scorecard for each of the five departments in S&C which would feed into a universal directorate-wide scorecard. This would allow individual key performance indicators (KPIs) to be tailored to suit each department's needs and ensure equal representation, an example of which can be seen in Figure 2. The general S&C scorecard would take into account all the results from each department, and would also evaluate how cohesively the directorate works together within the four components of intellectual assets (Figure 3).
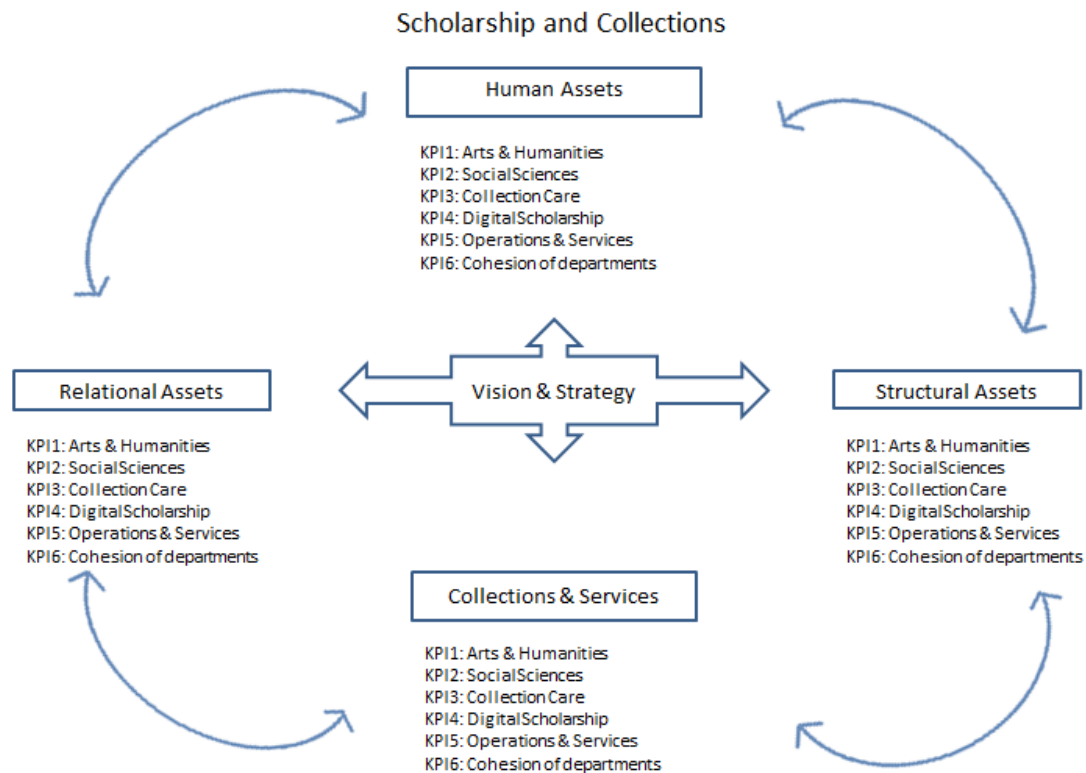
Figure 3. General scorecard for Scholarship and Collections

This scorecard can be updated over time as the directorate's priorities change to add different KPIs, and would allow the directorate to clearly see where its strengths and weaknesses lie. It is suggested that all staff members participate in the evaluation by rating how well they think the directorate is achieving each KPI on a scale of one to ten. The mean score could then be calculated for the departments and the directorate. This is a way of quantifying qualitative data. It is also suggested that staff should be encouraged to comment on how well they think the directorate is achieving its goals and suggest improvements, perhaps through an anonymous messaging board.

Conclusion

This tool for evaluating intellectual assets can not only be adapted for other libraries, but for any public sector organisation by altering the KPIs. It considers all aspects of intellectual assets and allows them to be considered alongside one another. It also allows the organisation to benchmark their IAs over time and prove the value of libraries in an increasingly challenging climate, and ensure that intellectual assets are used in the most effective ways. Moving forward, it would be interesting to incorporate the views of BL users into the study, something which the limits of this research project did not allow for. Similarly, it would be useful to get the input of a wider number of external stakeholders. Overall, this study has allowed for the gap to be filled in research concerning the intellectual assets of libraries. The value of libraries lies in their capacity for knowledge dissemination powered in the vast majority by IAs, and this tool will allow those assets to be identified, strengthened and demonstrated at a time when the financial climate has meant that libraries need to prove their value more than ever.

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