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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ensuring high quality research services that meet client needs, based on experiences at the Research and Information Services of the Ontario Legislative Library (Canada). The first section is an introduction that provides an overview of the Research and Information Services and summarizes factors related to quality control. The second section addresses getting priorities right, highlighting strategic planning and service evaluation. The third section considers meeting client needs, including formal quality checks, evolving best practices, building on strong skills, product development, and client feedback. The fourth section discusses working culture, including building on knowledge, human capital, and looking for innovation. It is concluded that ensuring high quality research services: takes place at both strategic and operational levels; is about informal collaborative processes and adaptability as much as editorial procedures and explicit standards; is more about knowledge sharing, consensus building, and teamwork than management edicts and monitoring; and depends on a work culture of innovation imagination and commitment to client needs. (MES)

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Ensuring high quality research services

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Paper

INTRODUCTION

How do we ensure our services are of the highest quality in a rapidly changing world of rising client expectations, tighter deadlines, new information technology and exploding information resources? I think meeting that challenge - ensuring our research services really do meet client needs - involves doing three things really well:

- Starting from sound strategic planning: knowing what our clients expect and need, and developing the best mix of services and products to meet those needs;

- If the strategic level is about making sure we are doing the right things, then we also need to make sure we are doing them right. This is about various internal processes, checks and balances, standards, tools and techniques. But while these processes are generally what most discussions on quality focus on, they are not enough.

- Ensuring quality is not just about checklists and databases, but also involves creating a work culture and environment that support innovation and imagination, that is always looking for ways to add value to what we provide clients.

In other words, I believe that quality control depends upon a number of

interrelated factors, ranging from strong commonly held values, a client-driven work culture, clearly articulated service principles, explicit standards and processes, an environment that supports innovation and collaboration, knowledge sharing and teamwork, defined competencies, and sound hiring and professional development strategies.

First, a bit of context. The Research and Information Services branch of the Ontario Legislative Library is a recent re-configuration. The Legislative Research Service was established within the Library in 1979 and consisted of 14 researchers, including lawyers, political scientists, economists, public administration specialists, environmental scientists and other research professionals, plus support staff. In July 1999 the research staff were merged with front-line reference librarians to create one unit of 30 providing an integrated continuum of non-partisan information services, from fast facts and stats to sophisticated research analysis. We also produce a wide range of Web-based products: including electronic briefing books on the major policy fields of the Ontario government, gateways on hot issues, background on bills before the House, analytical and background papers, links pages and a virtual reference desk. These products are published both on an internal Assembly Intranet and with some modifications on the Internet as well (http://www.ontla.on.ca). Ontario's economy and population are the largest of the ten provinces and three territories within the Canadian federation. Our unicameral Assembly consists of 103 Members (down from 130 prior to the 1999 election) and three political parties. In addition to our primary clientele of Members and their staff, we provide research support to all eight legislative committees.

My particular challenge is ensuring a high quality and integrated continuum of services across different kinds of staff (with their different professional backgrounds, approaches and cultures) and across a wide range of different services and products. A further challenge facing us all is the nature of the work we do. High quality and responsive research analysis is based upon the initiative and judgement of individual professionals, designing what works best to answer a particular client's specific question. You cannot over-codify that judgement or have people proceed step-by-step through some kind of manual.

Does this mean that it is impossible to ensure high quality research services? No, it is obviously crucial. What it does mean is that quality controls can never just be at the actual point of delivery, as the project goes out the door. We need different kinds of processes and methods at different parts of our production and work cycles. And I will argue that the general work culture and informal processes are every bit as important as formal quality controls and standards.

GETTING OUR PRIORITIES RIGHT

The starting point for quality control is strategic -- making sure that we are providing the best mix of products and services for our particular client group and our available resources. That involves a number of things, best seen as a continuous planning and implementation cycle. It starts with needs assessment to determine exactly what clients do need and how their needs are changing. We then build these findings into our product and service delivery planning.

The next stage is a ongoing process of service evaluation: finding out how clients are actually using our services and products and what they think of them (in fact, finding out how our clients define quality and how effectively our

services meet their standards). We need to understand how well what we are doing really meets client needs. We then feed this back into our service planning: acting on suggestions for improvements as possible, filling gaps clients have identified, proactively anticipating what clients need, and continually refining services and products.

This evaluation process isn't just about keeping clients satisfied, although as they are our funders client satisfaction is obviously crucial. It is really about understanding our clients better to guide continual improvements and innovation. In practice these cycles of needs assessment à service planning and product development à service evaluation à refinement and improvement - are continuous.

MEETING CLIENT NEEDS EVERY DAY

At the operational level we need to be well organised, efficient and focussed; ensuring that all products and projects we deliver to clients are of the highest quality. This involves a range of formal and informal processes, and explicit and evolving standards.

Formal Quality Checks
For a start, we have very strict quality controls on deliverables: all research projects are edited and approved by the director or designate to make sure they are soundly analysed, reliable and accurate, well written, comprehensive, and answer the particular question that the client asked.

To the same end of meeting immediate client requirements, we have developed management information systems that allow us to monitor workflow and document production processes. For example, we can flag when a deadline is overdue and quickly move to solve whatever the problem is and get the project out the door. These systems are also critical to being able to juggle and prioritise the large number of projects, and assign them effectively to the professionals with the required expertise.

Evolving Best Practices
Developing our 'best practices' takes place in many settings:

- people talking to each other informally about projects they are doing;
- regular staff meetings in which we will try to draw out the 'lessons learned' from projects that went well (analysing what didn't work so well is often even more valuable, which requires an environment in which people are comfortable talking about problems with their colleagues);
- specific skill sharing or problem solving meetings, for example, to consider the pros and cons of electronic delivery, whether we need to change our mix of services to committees, etc.;
- broader brain storming sessions, for example, at the beginning of a new House to anticipate upcoming policy issues and how the incoming Members and their particular service needs are going to be different.

All of this is a continuing process of developing consensus on how to meet clients needs, on what constitutes good research and information projects. The result is not so much explicit standards, but a set of guiding principles. We can't

have a step-by-step checklist for doing every single project; the work is just too complicated for that. But we have clear principles on what we are trying to achieve, what constitutes excellent research from the clients' point of view, what kind of performance we expect from each other, and so on. Broadly, the key characteristics of really good research projects are:

- always meeting client deadlines;
- clearly organised and well written (one concrete indicator of this for performance management and review purposes is how much editing or re-organisation is needed);
- thorough and reliable;
- analytically sophisticated and well grounded in the broader context of the field;
- appropriate to the client's specific needs:
    - the level of detail and analysis they needed;
    - designed to answer the question they asked;
    - presented in a form that meets what they need - which can range from comprehensive surveys of policies in other jurisdictions to briefing notes they can speak from, from a simple memo they can pass on to constituents to a quick briefing before Question Period;
- taking all of these factors together, we are really expecting projects that have the highest possible 'value added' for the clients:
    - presenting analysis in the most effective ways - graphics, tables, textboxes, downloading or scanning in material (e.g. statutes or regs).
    - pointing to further useful resources, not just in print but from stakeholders - if electronic delivery is appropriate, then building in hot links to relevant Net resources;
    - if clients are just looking for background rather than analysis, still synthesising complex issues rather than simply giving them large amounts of material to read for themselves;
    - adding clear conclusions and options if that is what they want;
    - briefing clients directly on projects - this can productively happen at both the start of a project to focus the questions and at delivery, to clarify and supplement the written report;

Building on Strong Skills

Identifying these deliverables as the standards for high quality research helps us think of the kinds of writing, research and analysis competencies needed. Being able to conduct reliable research means knowing how to thoroughly and quickly review large amounts of information, knowing where to go for the best data, learning how to work effectively with librarian colleagues, understanding how to interpret and evaluate diverse sources of data, and being able to analyse the essential patterns and issues within that information to the appropriate level. Thinking of such standards also helps determine what kinds of processes underlie being able to deliver quality projects. For example, one vital step is negotiating directly with the client to clarify the question being asked so the

answer will be what they need.

Adapting and thriving in the unique environment of a legislature and understanding the particular pressures and dynamics of our main client groups demand broader professional competencies: diplomatic and communication skills, tact and good judgement, and the ability to create and sustain positive relations between the Library and our clients. Related capacities and commitments support a positive and collegial work culture: good participation and leadership in teams, innovative ideas, willingness to share knowledge and experience, openness to others' ideas, willingness to support others' work, and co-operation and collaboration. I consider such characteristics and behaviours to be essential features of high-quality professional performance.

The goal here is a continually evolving, but directly useful set of best practices and guiding principles for doing research and reference work. The process is collective - building on the shared knowledge that everyone learns in doing their work - and that is why work culture is so important. But it also involves management leadership: identifying the driving or core principles, clarifying what is valuable in evolving best practices and boiling them down into actionable standards and expectations.

Product Development

Because they are not as unpredictable as day-to-day research questions, it is easier to develop explicit standards and criteria for the various generic special products that we have developed for Members. To start with, we use a planning checklist for the development of all new products: why the proposed new product is necessary and useful, how it will meet client needs, what resources will be required, how it supports our other strategic objectives, etc. When we do decide to proceed with a product, we then carefully pilot test it to ensure that it really does meet the needs that we have anticipated and to refine its structure and design before full implementation.

We also have checklists to assess whether particular issues should be worked up within our existing product series. For example, Issue Gateways include a brief analytical note to set context, links to stakeholders, carefully selected press stories, think tank and other reports, Ministry or other backgrounders, and are designed to be a one-stop source on hot issues. To decide if a particular issue warrants treatment we assess if it is topical, if it is likely to be relevant for some time, if it has sufficient Ontario angle, if the issue is covered adequately elsewhere, if there is enough material, and if we can do it without alienating part of our client constituency (in other words, how hot is too hot?).

At periodic intervals we conduct systematic evaluations of all of our products: are our clients using the products and what do they think of them? how does this compare to the effort it takes us to produce them? are we being efficient? The answers to such questions allow us to assess value added for clients against the most effective use of our finite resources. And this completes the planning cycle: for new products, initial idea à business case à pilot testing à refining and implementation if successful à and for all products, ongoing client feedback à systematic regular evaluation à ongoing improvements (or dropping if the need has passed or value added benefits are not high enough - we are not ruthless enough at dropping products and services that no longer support core priorities).

Client Feedback as the Ultimate Quality Check

This cycle applies not only to our generic products or the design of our Web site, but just as crucially to customized service delivery. The only way we can find out if we really are meeting client needs is to ask them. However, resources may

not always allow for expert consultants or comprehensive surveys and we may have to be modest with our methods. Cheap and effective ways of keeping in touch with clients include providing easy-to-use client feedback forms with our projects and on our site, small-scale but well-focussed interviews, encouraging and collecting informal anecdotal feedback, good service-use statistics, and simply talking to clients all the time in the course of our work.

However we do it, client service evaluation is the final check of our quality control process. We need to continually make sure that clients are satisfied with and use our services, and we need to feed what we learn from their suggestions and usage patterns back into ongoing service delivery improvement and product development. This also means responding decisively to any client concerns or complaints: we receive very few, but I always call the client back right, quickly sort out any service problems at our end, and follow up with the client later on how their concern was acted on.

WORKING CULTURE

So far, I have discussed how to make sure we are providing the right kinds of services for our particular clients, and various processes to ensure the services we do provide are of the highest quality. We also need to create a solid and responsive work culture: an environment that is driven by client needs, is innovative and responsive, and is flexible, fast and fun.

Building on our Knowledge
I have been emphasising talking to clients, but we also need to have staff talking to each other all the time. The constant informal interaction and focussed brainstorming and other discussions are all about knowledge sharing, about working together to build up our shared understanding of the kinds of services and products that really work for our clients.

While knowledge management has certainly become an overused concept, I think it is what researchers and librarians do every day. Building on our corporate memory and collective expertise is an essential underpinning of our work; for example, we can only do briefings on complex issues at short notice because we have staff who have analysed those issues many times before and colleagues who they can quickly draw on for help. Some of the knowledge management tools we use are:

- a text and document management system to be able to draw effectively on work we have already done in particular areas - so we aren't reinventing every project from scratch and can build on our accumulated expertise;
- a staff Intranet which serves as a discussion and exchange forum, a posting place for various short-cuts, information resources and research strategies, a repository for lessons learned and best practices as they evolve, and an easily accessible place for staff to find guidelines and practices we have solidified;
- a database to capture our own lessons learned on client services and the anecdotal feedback and suggestions we are getting from clients.

Human Capital
We all have to have the best information technology we can afford, well deployed to support what we do. But the most important asset of research

services and libraries is in fact our human capital; the skills, experience and attitudes of our staff.

As always, we start at the strategic level: what are the core competencies we need to be able to provide the identified services? We then hire people to fill the particular specialised niches to build up that full range of expertise and capacities. In addition to specialised expertise and overall research skills, we also look for the kinds of judgement, communication, diplomatic, innovation and team-building competencies discussed earlier. Finally, hiring strategies must also look ahead, to the skill sets we will need down the road. This means looking for new people with both specific expertise and the more general adaptability and flexibility to acquire new skills and capabilities to meet changing organisational requirements.

We then have to have a systematic training and mentoring process to help new staff come to understand the unique environment of the Legislative Assembly, and ongoing training and professional development so that people keep up and expand their skills. Of course, as well as ensuring core competencies, we need to ensure our staff are driven by certain core values central to a legislature: confidentiality, non-partisan performance, professional and non-biased analysis, and so on.

Looking for Innovation

I have been emphasising information sharing and exchange within the branch. The hope is that we create a culture of drawing on each other's experiences, strengths, and expertise.

We have a relatively flat management structure, considerable direct autonomy for researchers and librarians in how they deliver services, and a fluid and collaborative structure and culture. Our working structure may best be seen as a dense web of interconnections: some people work closely and consistently together (e.g. editing particular products), others may come together to address a specific issue (e.g. a group developed options for reforming our question intake and assignment process), teams will be assigned to major committee hearings, and other staff would work together only occasionally (e.g. a librarian providing reference components for a paper being prepared by a researcher)[1].

We are moving toward flexible but discernible clusters of researchers and librarians concentrating in the major policy fields. So we will have lawyers and librarians who specialise in legal research, the public administration specialists and social policy specialists working together, etc. The goal of this is to get the benefits of people being able to really get to know particular policy fields, and to capitalise on this expertise by assigning projects to the people best able to do them. These groupings will also take the lead on developing general products in their fields.

Our particular structure of an integrated branch of researchers and librarians is designed to support a smooth continuum of services from the clients' point of view. Clients after all don't care who is doing their project; they just want the best answer to their questions. Part of delivering this continuum is the considerable joint work discussed: most of the general products we develop involve both researchers and librarians, as do many customized projects. What is important is effective teamwork and collaboration, and assigning the right person(s) for every project based on their expertise, not making arbitrary or out-dated distinctions between what librarians do and what researchers do.

This team-based environment also involves considerable delegation of defined

leadership or co-ordinating responsibilities. For example, senior researchers assign and approve projects, teams or individuals co-ordinate particular products, and others direct client training. Drawing on many people for leadership, and giving staff lots of scope for autonomy in their day-to-day work, helps give everyone a stake in innovation. We also need to ensure innovation and ideas are recognised and rewarded.

Such collaborative work and team culture is common in the knowledge industry and is designed to encourage individual initiative and autonomy for front-line service providers and support flexible planning and continual innovation. What we are looking for here are the synergies and innovations that result from different people working together effectively to the same ends.[2]

Finally, these comments on process and culture apply to office and administrative as well as professional staff. How to organise and manage administrative and logistical functions in a team-based, non-hierarchical, knowledge-based environment is seldom addressed in the literature, but is an essential part of our corporate capacities. We have developed explicit standards for producing high quality documents and products: to deadline, to requirements, effectively formatted, etc. (this is one area where manuals are effective). But we need to pay equal attention to goals of innovation and skills development; office staff especially have to be able to adapt smoothly to constantly changing technology and their work gives them the best ideas on improving routine logistics.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, I have argued that ensuring high quality research services:

- takes place at both strategic and operational levels;
- is about informal collaborative processes and adaptability as much as editorial procedures and explicit standards;
- is far more about knowledge sharing, consensus building and teamwork than management edicts and monitoring;
- ultimately depends on a work culture of innovation, imagination and commitment to client needs first and foremost.

None of this can be prescriptive, and these particular components cannot be applied simplistically in the very different environments of our various legislative research and information services. Hopefully this paper will provide a few ideas, at best some starting principles; and I look forward to exploring these issues directly with you at the conference.

Notes

1. I have found Sally Helgesen, *The Web of Inclusion: A New Architecture for Building Great Organisations* (New York, Doubleday: 1995) particularly helpful.
2. Stephen Carter, *Renaissance Management: The Rebirth of Energy and*

Innovation in People and Organisations (London, Kogan Page: 1999) is a very interesting overview of how to organise and manage in knowledge and client-driven organisations.

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