

People Matters No. 7

When economic circumstances are challenging, university administrators often talk more frequently about needing to do more with less, productivity dividends, continuous improvement, and operational efficiency and effectiveness. In the case of publicly funded institutions, there may also be talk about improving the stewardship and accountability of public funds.

Something else that is often mentioned as a means of achieving similar outcomes with fewer resources (or, at least, the same level of resources) is process improvement or enhancement. That is, through deliberate and systematic review, actions can be taken to identify, analyse, and improve existing business processes to deliver more efficient ways of working, improved quality, and/or reduced costs.

This has relevance to library leaders because so much of the operating cost of an academic library is tied up in the salary and benefits paid to library employees. At the University of Saskatchewan, for example, approximately 96% of our library operating grant goes to pay employee salaries and benefits.

Over the last year, the university has run an institutional-wide Service and Process Enhancement Project (SPEP), which has involved an assessment of the university's administrative functions for improvements in quality and efficiency.

Within the library, we also turned our attention to learning more about process improvement methodologies. An investigative team, working on an action learning challenge as part of our Library Leadership Development Programme, reviewed the literature to help us all get a better understanding of the concept and methodologies and presented their findings to library employees. Their work was impressive.

The team's investigations found there are a range of methodologies available. Many of them are reviewed in the literature and come with background information about their application in a variety of situations. Many are directly relevant and transferrable to academic library contexts. For example: Kaizen, Six Sigma, Lean and Customer-Inspired. Our team then practiced some of the key steps from these methodologies on a process we currently have in place to report and resolve e-access problems reported by library users.

The results of our local experience included an improved understanding about methodologies, an opportunity for some shared action learning by a team of staff, and a realisation that methodologies developed outside of higher education can be both applicable and appropriate within an academic library setting.

[CV Box]

Dr Vicki Williamson is Dean of the University Library at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada.

vicki.williamson@usask.ca