Exploring Internal Communication in Public Libraries: Challenges and Opportunities for Library Leaders

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Abstract

Effective internal communication is essential to library staff being able to fulfill their duties, work together as a cohesive unit, and carry out the library's mission. However, there is often a lack of coordinated focus on clear internal communication that includes all staff members in libraries. This can create environments where there is disconnect among staff and library departments leading to rumor mills and lowering morale. This exploratory study looked at the current state of internal library communications in public libraries and ideas to improve internal communications. Library leadership has the potential to create environments and cultures where internal communication is effective and supports library staff, their work, and the effective functioning of the library as a whole.

Introduction

While the axiom that communication is key to the effective functioning of an organization applies to libraries as much as to any other organization, internal communication is often an afterthought when it comes to assigning job duties and daily workflows. This is evident in the lack of interest, research, and publishing on the topic of internal communication. Internal communication can be defined as communication within an organization, among all levels of the organization. Effective internal communication can improve relationships and employee outcomes, including advocacy, productivity, and general well-being (Lee and Yue, 2020). However, lack of attention to internal communication can have negative impacts on libraries ranging from misunderstandings and lack of awareness to more dire consequences on health and safety. With the outbreak of COVID-19, the importance of clear, direct, timely communication at all levels and for all audiences is undeniable. While crisis communication is not the focus of this article, the improvement of internal communication can only help improve overall communication in times of crisis as well (David, 2011).

Library leaders, by virtue of their positions of responsibility and authority within the organization, have the ability and obligation to ensure internal library communication is productive (Euster, 1981; Raymond, 1991). Libraries need to spend as much time on internal

communications as is spent on external communication. As libraries adapt to changes, they must be ready to implement new systems, which can include new systems of communications (Rodriguez, 2010). This exploratory research study looks at the current state of internal library communications at public libraries in the United States and examines how library leaders may use the results to consider improving communication at their libraries.

Literature Review

Internal communication has not been a well-researched domain in the field of library and information sciences, especially in recent years. While there have been studies looking at both the technology used in internal communications and suggestions for improvement in libraries, there has not been a sustained research program on internal communications. This is perhaps not surprising given how the field, in general, often rewards research into the newest technology and innovations rather than in fields such as library communications, which are more amorphous and more difficult to assess for impact over the short term (Rodriguez, 2010). Or perhaps it is because it is uncomfortable to admit that there is no perfect system for communication (Telling, 1987), only better systems and procedures, and that while technology is easy to implement, organizational changes are not (Chu, 2012). However, in the discipline of public relations, there has been growing interest and research in internal communications that can be applied to the field of librarianship.

While recent scholarship has posited internal communication as a sub-discipline of public relations (Lee and Yue, 2020; Men, 2014) or even emerging as its own domain (Verčič, Verčič, and Sriramesh, 2012), the research within this domain can be adapted and used by the library and information science field as well. Just as internal communications is interdisciplinary in its theories and practices, so too is library and information science (LIS). A review of internal communication research showed that the most researched topics were: describing internal communication practices in specific contexts, issue/crisis management, and the role of public relations in internal communications (Lee and Yue, 2020). These issues are very similar topics that appear to be of interest to librarians and library leadership, especially given the current coronavirus pandemic. The methodology of these internal communication studies will also be familiar to librarians. Most studies used survey methodology, followed by interviews. Surveys are also the most frequently used method of data collection in LIS research (Turcios, Agarwal, and Watkins, 2014). There is still a gap in the research surrounding understanding employee content needs (Ruck and Welch, 2012), even as some of this is being addressed in looking at internal communications as part of relationship building within an organization. Furthermore, internal

communication has been linked to organizational success and employee engagement (Men, 2014), which should be important to all leaders, regardless of their field.

Leadership can have an outsized effect on the effectiveness and employee satisfaction with internal communications (Men, 2014; Telling, 1987). In fact, the literature states that the responsibility for internal communication is dependent on the top leaders of an organization, including libraries (Raymond, 1991). Men (2014) showed that leaders, specifically transformational leaders, have an impact on positive employee-organization relationships, employee advocacy, and symmetrical communication. Furthermore, to be effective communicators, leaders must understand employees' preferred communication channels (Verčič and Špoljarić, 2020) as well as what employees want to know (i.e. the content of the communications) (Ruck and Welch, 2012). Through transformational leadership—leadership that creates a joint sense of purpose and motivates employees via this vision to high performance—leaders can invite dialog and create positive relationships that will benefit the employees and organization (Men, 2014). In the business world, this usually translates into focusing on how employee advocacy can increase sales or how improved relations can increase employee productivity (Men, 2014). While libraries are not businesses that seek to create a monetary profit as their primary focus, creating positive relationships among employees is important for employee well-being and the productivity and effectiveness of serving the library's communities.

Library and information science (LIS) literature has also shown the importance of management and leadership on improving communications and affecting change, which has been consistent over the decades (Chambers, Liedtka, and Bednar, 2006; Euster, 1981; Haycock, 2011; Raymond, 1991). Effective internal communication, within a functional communication system, can be used to balance the concerns and goals of frontline library staff and administration. And, library leadership can have a large impact on creating functional systems of communication and library managers and leaders themselves need to have superb communication skills to be effective in their work (Euster, 1981; Haycock, 2011; Jordan, 2015). Unfortunately, the research about internal communications in LIS has not shown the broadening and deepening of the scholarship that has been shown in public relations.

In the field of library and information science, much of the literature on internal communication focused heavily on the technology used, especially on intranets in the first decade of this century. Dahl (2010) wrote a case study on using Microsoft SharePoint to create a departmental intranet. While intranets have appeared to go out of favor in the research, their function—to collect, maintain, and share information among employees—is still necessary in libraries today, regardless of what technology is used. And, while some libraries may choose a

different platform to create an intranet now, his conclusions about the need for transparency in implementing change, as well as the importance of training to increase comfortability with a new system, are still relevant today. Chu (2012) and Battles (2010) also noted that time for training and support for new communication technologies is imperative for the success of new intranets.

Envisioning the changes in workflows and tools used for internal communication as a long-term process rather than a one-time project is critical for success. Dahl (2010) and Etches-Johnson and Baird (2010) noted the importance of maintenance and promotion of a new intranet, which is crucial for the success of any internal communication channel or technology change. To ensure that new communication channels do not go dormant, integrating them into daily workflows is essential (Battles, 2010; Etches-Johnson and Baird, 2010). Creating a new intranet or other communication channel has to be seen as a process and not a one-time project (Bottazzo, 2005). If seen as a one-time project, then interest and effort in maintaining such a channel will inevitably wane with time. However, if changes in communication channels are seen as an ongoing process and integrated into daily workflow, then there is a better chance that the changes will be sustainable and contribute to improved communication. Other technologies, such as blogs and various social media platforms, have also been used to improve internal communications within libraries to varying levels of success (Costello and Del Bosque, 2010; Haya, Lind, and Janzen, 2020; Rodriguez, 2010). Interestingly, Costello and Del Bosque (2010) noted that even with introduction of a staff wiki and blogs, library staff still preferred email for communication as it was seen as the easiest to access and post information and most effective method of communication.

Before changing internal communication strategies and tools, it is necessary to get a baseline of current communication practices. This can be accomplished through a communications audit which enables a library, or any organization, to collect this information and determine data-driven recommendations for improvement. Chalmers, Liedtka, and Bednar (2006) published a case study of developing, implementing, analyzing, and reporting out of an internal communications audit at their library. Perhaps unsurprisingly, email was the most common form of communication found in their study. More concerning for library leadership is the finding that many library employees felt they could do their work better if they understood the priorities of the library better (Chalmers, Liedtka, and Bednar, 2006). This is clearly a situation where library leadership needs to communicate priorities better to all levels of the organization.

As Euster (1981) noted, studying internal communication in a library can have a positive effect on morale, in and of itself, but that if the report was "shelved" it was devasting to staff and the loss of trust and willingness to do subsequent studies in this area were diminished. This means that administration needs to follow through on using these self-studies rather than only doing them

as a "one-off" project. This is also supported by Chalmers, Liedtka, and Bednar (2006). The literature review shows agreement with Chu (2012), who noted that there is both an absence of and a desire for "open communication in the workplace" (p. 136). There is also an overall absence of studies on internal communication within the research literature, as well as a lack of reporting on internal communication ideas and projects in non-research periodicals and monographs in the LIS field.

It is therefore possible to argue that this is a gap in the research literature that should be filled. Communication is always an issue, but it does not appear to be a current focus of study in the research literature and the more recent studies have focused on technological tools for communication rather than the human aspect of communication, which is the more difficult part to change. This study then is one small step toward understanding internal communication within libraries and analyzing how communications research from other fields can be applied within libraries to assist library administration and leaders in improving internal communication. This, in turn, has the potential for positively impacting library operations and improving the morale and empowerment of the library staff.

Methodology

This exploratory study used a mixed method approach, employing an online survey and follow-up semi-structured phone interviews. The survey was created in Google Forms and collected both quantitative and qualitative information from the participants about the channels they use for internal communication in their libraries, what they considered effective communication, examples of both effective and ineffective communication, and ideas for improving communication (see Appendix A for survey questions). This research received Institutional Research Board (IRB) clearance from the author's university on January 21, 2020.

Participants were recruited from the Publib listserv at the end of January 2020. The last question of the survey asked if participants would be willing to be contacted for a follow-up phone interview. The interview was semi-structured and more detailed information about internal communication procedures, strengths, weaknesses, and ideas for improvement were discussed (see Appendix B for phone interview questions).

After data collection was completed, the author analyzed the data from the surveys and the phone interview recordings to determine recurring themes. The recordings and qualitative survey data were reviewed several times to increase familiarity before coding was completed, as is standard practice for qualitative coding. The qualitative survey data and the interview transcripts were analyzed using structural coding (Saldaña, 2009). This type of coding allowed the author to

determine recurring themes, also known as categories, from the data and determine frequency counts for recurring themes among the respondents. This then allowed for discussion of how these recurring themes could be addressed by library leadership in order to improve internal communication.

Results and Discussion

The responses to the survey and follow-up interviews allow for an initial understanding about the current state of internal communications in public libraries in the United States. Survey respondents who noted that they did not work in a public library were excluded from this study. Twenty-two public library employees completed the survey and two completed follow-up phone interviews. The average number of years the respondents had worked in libraries was 22.875 years with a median of 25 years. The average number of years they had worked in their current library was 15.1 years with a median of 11 years. Library employees from administration, access/circulation, reference/research/public services, collection management, programming, training and development, and technical services/cataloging completed the survey. Results are discussed across job titles/duties as there are not enough responses to do cross-job comparisons. The survey also asked for respondents to record the number of library employees at their library. While the number of employees ranged from a low of six employees to a high of 600 employees, the same themes appeared regardless of size. Therefore, as with the job duties, the results are discussed in the aggregate.

While this is a small sample and there are the attendant limitations, which are discussed in a following section, there are enough overlaps in responses that themes began to emerge. This section begins with reporting and discussing what communication channels are preferred and used, as well as which channels are seen as most effective for communication. Themes around how effective communication is defined by the participants and what leads to effective communication or challenges and breakdowns in communication are then reported and discussed. Throughout, the findings of this study are compared to previous studies and articles on internal communication both within the LIS field and in the field of public relations. The themes may be useful for library administrators and leaders to consider as they begin their own processes to improve internal communication. To protect confidentiality, quotes from survey respondents and interviewees are followed by a number in parentheses.

Preferred Communication Channels

By far the preferred communication channel from the survey respondents was email followed distantly by meetings, and face-to-face conversations (see Table 1). This finding is similar to previous studies such as Verčič and Špoljarić (2020). One respondent noted that their preferred channel depended on what was being communicated and if discussion was needed. This follows the idea that communication cannot be only top-down or bottom-up or only in one channel, but should be tailored to the message and goals of the communication and that preferences can change depending on the type of needed information (Verčič and Špoljarić, 2020). As noted by one survey respondent it is best to have a "multi-prong approach; not all employees have organization emails" (21).

Preferred Communication Channel	% (# of respondents)
Email	68.2% (15)
Meetings	18.2% (4)
Face-to-face conversations	9.1% (2)
Depends	4.5% (1)

Table 1. Preferred communication channels for internal communication.

Communication Channels Used

While there was a clear preference on using email to communicate information, survey respondents used a variety of channels to communicate information within their libraries. Email was used by all respondents to communicate internally. All but one of the respondents noted that they used word-of-mouth (i.e. grapevine) to transmit information. These results are similar to those by Chalmers, Liedtka, and Bednar (2006). The next most common channels were department meetings and all-staff meetings. The other communication channels such as an online newsletter, Slack, and printed newsletter were much less commonly used. Two respondents noted they used an internal website or portal, one noted the use of a place to check for written information, similar to a bulletin board, and one used Yammer (see Table 2).

Communication Channels Used	% (# of respondents)	
Email	100%	(22)
Word-of-mouth	95%	(21)
Department meeting	68.2%	(15)
All-staff meetings	63.6%	(14)
Online newsletter	31.8%	(7)
Slack	91%	(2)
Printed newsletter	9.1%	(2)
Internal website/portal	9.1%	(2)
Bulletin board	4.5%	(1)
Yammer	4.5%	(1)

Table 2. Communication channels used for internal communication. Note that percentages add up to greater than 100 as respondents could choose multiple channels.

Most Effective Channels for Distributing Information

For distribution of information, email was seen as the most effective way to convey information by 12 respondents (54.5%). One respondent noted that written communication, like email, was necessary to prevent gaslighting. This suggests far greater issues than simply a need to improve internal communication, though having written communication is always useful as a reference tool. Staff and department meetings were also seen to be effective channels by seven respondents as there could be discussion and everyone receives the information at the same time. This difference in distributing information or needing to have a dialogue shows that the communication channels should be tailored to the message. Also using multiple channels of communication to ensure that all library staff receive the information in a timely manner is important, even critical, during times of emergencies. As one survey respondent noted "We were closed because of snow yesterday. Email, text and phone were used to notify all staff. Not everyone checks their work email when they are off work, so that could cause trouble" (1).

Effective Internal Communication

The survey respondents had many ideas about what constitutes effective communication and there were some recurring themes. Clarity was the characteristic that came up most often on the respondents' free text responses. They also noted the need for openness when asking for clarification and sharing of ideas. Timely, respectful, accurate, and concise information were also recurring in the responses. As one survey respondent wrote, "Respectful, clear, concise for instruction and policy. Two-way dialogue for communication requiring decision making" (5). This quote demonstrates that effective internal communication always should be clear, but that the most effective mode for communication may differ, as noted previously. Some communication is simply information distribution, such as sharing policy documents. Other communication requires dialogue, such as a process of collective decision-making. While some of the characteristics of effective communication noted by respondents would need to be more defined to make them actionable, these recurring themes provide a type of checklist that library leaders can begin to use to create more effective communication.

As seen in the literature, the leader is a weathervane for the rest of the organization's communication and the success of any change initiatives (Euster, 1981; Men, 2014). Communicating in multiple ways, consistently over time, especially for large projects like strategic planning, is important. As one interviewee said, "They [library administration] have asked for our input. They have in every email that they've sent out, in every staff newsletter they have explained how this applies to us and have made it so we know how we can implement this plan on a day-to-day basis" (24). Making communication timely, relevant, and welcoming, as well as using feedback are crucial for effective communication.

Communication Challenges and Breakdowns

Even within an organization with effective communication, there will be challenges and potential for communication breakdowns. The most common challenge reported by survey participants was other people within the organization not reading email. Other challenges raised included: difficulties reaching colleagues/staff with different schedules (especially part-time employees), and middle managers and the directors not sharing out information. Both of these issues can be addressed by changes in communication by leadership. Effective communication is difficult and, as one survey respondent noted when replying to the question about what is working well for communication, "evidently not much since people are always complaining" (3). This is a clear signal that internal communication needs to be improved. Information hoarding and information silos were also noted as challenges. Not communicating needed information to all

library staff members is a major challenge and is exemplified by one respondent writing, "the belief by some that telling ONE employee constitutes effective communication with all staff" (14). To quote one interviewee, "no one [is] responsible for internal communication consistency" (23). This is a challenge and opportunity for library leaders to provide support in changing the communication culture, ensuring responsibility for communicating, and leading by example in ensuring all library employees have the information they need.

Respondents also shared examples of breakdowns in communication. The most common example of a breakdown in communication given by survey respondents was gossip. Gossiping arose when not everyone in the organization was given the same information. One respondent noted how rumors can significantly decrease morale. This is especially problematic surrounding layoffs of staff with no explanation or contradictions in information received. Or, as another respondent wrote, "It can be very demoralizing to be the last person to learn of a change in your own duties" (19). A situation like this should never occur in a library, or any organization. While no leader can stop all gossip and differing interpretations from being spread through the grapevine, there should never be a breakdown so a staff member is the last to know of a change in their job duties. One survey respondent explained that "This [communication breakdown] happens frequently—I'll hear one thing in person from a supervisor or the director and then either someone else will contradict it or there is no follow-through or update" (22). This situation leads to confusion and ultimately to the inability to effectively complete tasks as well as the potential for low morale. Further examples of breakdowns were noted when one department made a change that impacted another library department without any discussion, as well as changes not being communicated that led to issues for library patrons.

Ideas to Improve Internal Communication

The survey respondents and interviewees suggested many ways to improve internal communication among library employees. These ideas fell into the main themes of: increasing the frequency of communications, ensuring that staff read emails, having more interaction and ability to provide feedback, especially around decision-making that impacts a department, and having a centralized location for posting information. These ideas are all ways of breaking down silos and ensuring that there are not information blockages throughout the library's hierarchy. As one respondent wrote, "Don't rely on the 'supervisors list' to disseminate information" (15). Creating more levels of information filtering than necessary simply creates more work and does nothing to encourage communication across the library and can impede efficient work. Fortunately, there are many steps library leaders can take to improve internal communication.

Considerations for Library Leaders to Improve Internal Communication

While each library and library staff have a unique context and makeup, there are general themes that appeared in this exploratory research that may help library leaders who want to improve internal communication. As with many aspects of librarianship, the most important aspect of communication is not the technology, but the people—specifically cultivating the relationships and developing the procedures that will allow everyone in the library organization to communicate effectively and efficiently. As one survey respondent wrote, "effective communication comes from the top down" (22).

While trying to improve internal communication, there are several ideas from the literature that library leaders could use in order to have a better chance of success. Library leaders who understand the human aspect of communication, rather than trying to implement a new technological solution, will most likely have a better outcome. Library leaders need to understand organizational lag, resistance to change, and how those factors affect how change should be implemented. Changes to internal communication will impact the entire library. Therefore, leveraging what is known about change management, library leaders can ensure the changes will be transparent, sustainable, and accepted by the library staff (Euster, 1981; Rodriguez, 2010). There is not one "silver bullet" to improve communication, but rather multiple information channels that are good for different types of information (Erzinger, 1995) and should all be integrated into a robust communications strategy. Furthermore, library leaders should look outside of LIS literature for ideas to improve internal communication because, as noted previously, there has not been much published on the topic in LIS in recent years while there has been increasing focus on internal communication as a distinct sub-discipline in public relations.

While changes in management or leadership are often a catalyst for change (Euster, 1981), this does not mean that leaders who have been in their position for a number of years should not try to improve their libraries' internal communication. There are a number of actions that may be useful for any library leader looking to improve internal communication.

First, before changing any workflows and procedures, every library employee needs to have an understanding of the current state of communication in the library. A communications audit can assist with this data gathering (Chalmers, Liedtka, and Bednar, 2006). This will allow discovery of preference for communication channels, which should be respected instead of changed when at all possible (Verčič and Špoljarić, 2020). Studies, such as Verčič and Špoljarić (2020) have shown staff still prefer traditional media, such as email and meetings rather than

social media for internal communication. This is another reminder that improving internal communication relies on people, not the latest technology.

Second, from the results of the communication audit, the library staff and administration can work together to create a strategic plan for improving internal communication. This can lead to buy-in from all staff members. Clear communication of this planning process and its outcomes can serve as the first actionable step to better internal communication. This also gives library leadership the opportunity to model clear, respectful, and responsive communication behavior.

Third, recommendations from the internal communications strategic plan need to be integrated into daily workflows with clear accountability measures and concrete support for staff training in communication strategies. Euster (1981) suggested creating objectives and assigning responsibility to managers for effective communication, along with providing training to support success. Creating such objectives also provides another avenue to check in with staff and gather feedback in order to create a continuous cycle of improvement for internal communications. Furthermore, creating a position or reassigning a staff member with relevant skills and talents to lead changes in internal communication can also be an avenue to ensure such changes are integrated into daily workflows (Cunningham, 2016).

Fourth, there should be regular opportunities for library leadership and staff to reflect on and discuss feedback around these new internal communication processes. As improving communication is not a one-time project but an ongoing process, library leaders need to build in opportunities to reflect with all library employees about the process. This reflection can also serve as an opportunity to revise new procedures, as needed. It is important to check in with both managers and frontline staff to ensure everyone is satisfied with the communication (Welch, 2012) or it cannot be considered successful.

Limitations

This study was exploratory and therefore not necessarily generalizable or transferable to the whole of the public library field in the United States. While the sample size was low, as is often the case with online surveys, the themes are worth investigating further. The data collection period for the survey and the interviews were scheduled pre-pandemic; however, in the middle of the interview period, many states came under shelter-in-place orders, which may have decreased the number of interview participants. Because of these issues, it would be useful to repeat the study once the pandemic is over, especially the interviews, to have more robust, generalizable results for the public library community to use. A larger sample size may also surface differences in communication among different sizes of libraries and different job classifications. A comparative

study of communications in public libraries internationally would also contribute greatly to the field and create a broader generalizability of the results and could provide librarians in the United States a better understanding of cross-cultural functioning of internal communication. Future research could also look across different types of libraries to compare internal communications needs and functions. Also, as the pandemic made clear, more research is needed to focus specifically on crisis communications.

Conclusion

Communication is key to library success and effective internal communication is an essential part of any library's communication strategy. Improvements in communication will not happen without concerted effort and the support of library leaders. Good internal communication supports relationships and engagement at work and leaders can ensure that library employees feel like a part of the organization and community (Cunningham, 2016; Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, and Lings, 2015). Library leaders are key to creating expectations and supporting an environment where everyone communicates respectfully and has easy access to the information they need to do their work. This in turn has the potential to improve relationships and engagement of everyone who works in the library.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

What type of library do you work in currently?

Academic

Public

Special

Government

Other

Have you worked in another type of library?

Yes (if yes, next question)

No (in no, skip next question and go to job title question)

What other type(s) of library have you worked in?

(select all that apply)

Academic

Public

Special

Government

Other

What is your current job title?

[free text response]

Are you currently classified as a librarian at your library?

Yes

No

Other [explain]

Which category most accurately describes your main job duty?

Administration

Web services

Access/Circulation

Reference/Research Services

Instruction/Information Literacy

Outreach/Promotions/Marketing

Technical Services/Cataloging

Special Collections/Rare Books

Other [please list]

How long have you worked in libraries in total?

[please enter a number]

How long have you worked in your current library?

[please enter a number]

How do you define effective communication?

[free text response]

What types of communication channels does your library currently use among library employees to share news and updates about work, policies, services, events, etc. at your library?

Note: library employees are defined to include all persons who work for the library regardless of classification as staff, faculty, administration, management, etc.

Email announcements

Intranet

Slack

Online Employee Newsletter

Printed Employee Newsletter

Word-of-mouth

All-staff meetings

Department meetings

Other [please list]

What is your preferred communication channel/way of receiving news and updates at your library?

[free text response]

What do you believe is the most effective way to distribute information among employees at your library and why?

[free text response]

What works well in the current communication channels/strategies used at your library for communicating among library employees?

[free text response]

Please share an example of a time when there was effective communication among employees at your library.

[free text response]

What are the current challenges you face with communication among employees at your library?

[free text response]

Please share an example of a time when there was a breakdown/ineffective communication among employees at your library.

[free text response]

How could internal communication among employees be improved at your library?

[free text response]

Is there anything else about communication among employees at your library that you would like to share?

[free text response]

Are you willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview about communication and library employees?

If so, please enter your name and email below:

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your experience working in libraries.
2. Would you please tell me about your current library position?
3. How do you define good communication?
4. What works well with the internal communication in your library?
5. What changes to internal communication would you like to see and why?
6. How would you improve communications in your library?
7. Anything else that you would like to share?

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