

How Intrapreneurship Enhances Existing Organizational Structures: A Holistic Case Study from a Large Academic Library

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The concept of entrepreneurship has motivated people across a variety of disciplines to leave traditional workplaces in search of a different type of employment. At its best, entrepreneurship provides professional autonomy, faster product and service innovation, and necessary disruption to industries that have become complacent or stale.

This model seems far removed from libraries where we often organize ourselves in traditional, bureaucratic structures along functional lines (e.g., reference, cataloging, circulation). This arrangement makes sense for libraries; our funding generally comes from large parent institutions, so we are more stable than sales-based businesses. Does this mean we are doomed to miss out on entrepreneurship's benefits? Not at all.

Like entrepreneurship, *intrapreneurship* offers organizations opportunities to innovate. Batthini describes an intrapreneur as “an employee of a large organisation who has the entrepreneurial qualities of drive, creativity, vision and ambition, but who prefers, if possible, to remain within the security of an established company.”¹ This informal process is born of the employee's analytical skills and passion for their clients or organization. Intrapreneurial employees take initiative to solve problems with an organization's products or services from within the existing organizational structure.

Intrapreneurship in Libraries

Intrapreneurship offers libraries an organic approach to structural change. Reflecting on Stoffle, Renaud, and Veldof's seminal 1996 essay "Choosing Our Futures,"²

Neal proclaims that "we must dismantle traditional organizational structures

to create more agile advancement and more robust internal and external communications and collaborations."³ It seems that even 20 years after the initial call to arms for organizational change, libraries are still struggling to become more flexible and agile.

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Intrapreneurship offers an opportunity to alleviate some of this tension through lightweight initiatives that can work within the existing structure. Organizations can address emerging areas of customer need that may not fit into existing portfolios. Indeed, one of Batthini's definitions of intrapreneurship was the "internal start-up" model: establishing a joint venture, a new subsidiary, a new outlet, or a new business unit.⁴ In a library context, intrapreneurship's internal start-up model is often seen in holistic librarianship: cross-departmental, project-based collaborations. This can begin an intrapreneurial culture shift in an organization that breeds flexibility and resilience.

Library technology, too, is ripe for intrapreneurial innovation. We all struggle to meet users' growing expectations of online services and products with our limited budgets and resources. It is a challenge to keep library staff members' technology skills up to date when low turnover minimizes opportunities to add staff members with new skill sets to the team. Providing quality professional development in this area can be expensive and hard to deliver at scale. Library leaders in charge of training-fund allocation may not be aware of these skill deficits or fully understand the impact they have on service delivery, making it difficult to direct development opportunities.

Benefits of Intrapreneurship

To the Organization

Intrapreneurship is budget friendly. It makes use of existing staff and does not require structural changes to the organization that may involve administrative departments like Human Resources or Finance. The lightweight nature of the process encourages temporary and informal arrangements that can be assessed for usefulness and impact early and often. This feedback loop can provide excellent insight into staff satisfaction, user needs, and service-delivery levels.

Cross-departmental collaboration is a common element of intrapreneurship in large organizations. Assembling new teams or adding members with complementary skills and knowledge to long-standing teams is an opportunity to address problems with a new perspective, share skills across department lines, and bring departments closer together. Timely collaboration allows teams to acquire needed resources more quickly than hiring and fewer training resources are required. Collaborative arrangements born of intrapreneurship can delay the need for a new hire and can work as a proof of concept for job posting and hiring decisions, helping the organization become more innovative, flexible, and responsive to user needs.

To the Librarian

The intrapreneurship framework encourages leadership at every career stage. As long as the employee is empowered to identify problems, gather the right resources, and build solutions, they don't need any particular title or authority level to practice intrapreneurship. Working in cross-functional teams builds empathy and allows team members to share their knowledge and collaborate effectively.⁵

For early-career librarians, this is an opportunity to connect with new teams, departments, and administration. Contributing to an intrapreneurial project within the library can provide a sense of ownership often lacking in entry-level positions and a platform to demonstrate their value to the organization. Intrapreneurial work also helps early-career librarians develop new skills outside formal professional development opportunities and practice leadership and project management skills that will be useful as their careers progress. Early-career librarians bring fresh eyes to an organization and its opportunities; intrapreneurship offers an outlet for their perspective.

For mid- or late-career librarians, intrapreneurship offers an opportunity to build capacity in new areas of the field, and emerging or previously unfamiliar areas of the profession. Embarking on an intrapreneurial project outside of their department can be an opportunity to reignite a passion for their work, avoid stagnation, and provide a change of pace. Working with new team members allows experienced librarians an opportunity to mentor and share the knowledge and skills they have developed over many years at their organization. Flat hierarchies may also limit opportunities for established librarians to advance their responsibility level; this is a means to address that gap.

To the End User

Libraries exist to serve communities. Our users trust that we have their best interests and needs in mind. We therefore have a responsibility to ensure we are using our resources—both financial and human—in the most efficient and practical manner possible. This requires us to experiment and assess continually.

When new user needs emerge, a culture of intrapreneurship encourages teams to assemble to develop new products or services, or add features to existing products to address the needs. Intrapreneurship's lightweight nature means that new products or

services can be delivered to users faster, then improved on iteratively for better and more consistent service both in the short and the long term.

Case Study

Organizational Context

The University of Toronto is large: 88,766 students enrolled on three campuses around the Greater Toronto Area.⁶ The university has a sizable undergraduate population, but also has a strong research focus, with over Can\$1.1 billion awarded in research funding in 2014–2015.⁷ The Times Higher Education’s World University Rankings puts us 22nd in the world with a score of 91.9% for citations and 86.3% for research.⁸

The University of Toronto Libraries (UTL) supports the university’s mission of “fostering an academic community in which the learning and scholarship of every member may flourish”⁹ with 44 libraries across three campuses staffed by around 900 people, including 500 librarians and professional staff. Our collections budget was Can\$31,449,135 in 2016, and we ranked fourth in the Association of Research Libraries’ Library Investment Index for 2014–2015.¹⁰ Our largest library, John P. Robarts Library, welcomes 18,000 visitors a day at peak term while our main website handled 9.1 million page views in the last academic year.

UTL departmental structures have been relatively static since the early 1990s. Standing committees are the primary way that staff of different libraries and departments come together to consult on common functions like reference, website management, cataloging, or mentorship. Occasionally these standing committees form smaller working groups to address specific issues that require expertise from several libraries or skill sets, but these groups are generally investigative in nature. Secondments, where a staff member temporarily takes on a new position in another library unit, are infrequent but not unheard of.

UTL's central Information Technology Services (ITS) is responsible for most of the library's web spaces and services. Before the arrangement described in our case study began, the ITS web team included one programmer, one graphic designer/information architect, and two librarians: one focused on library systems while the other, Lisa Gayhart, focused on the field of user experience (UX). Public services library staff could report issues or suggest improvements to the web team, often through the Web Advisory Committee, but they were not actively involved in the development or maintenance of the website. Web content was a grey area. Individual units provided and maintained the content for their functional areas, but major sections of the site were not owned and no one supervised content creation and maintenance as a whole.

The Opportunity

In winter 2014, the web team was preparing for a complete overhaul of the main library website, one of our web space's biggest properties. As plans for the redesign developed, the web team realized that they did not have the time nor the public service expertise to fully revise the website's content. This piece was crucial, however, to the website's overall usefulness and usability.

A large percentage of our LibQUAL+ respondents stated that they only use the library website and never use a physical library for their work,¹¹ making the redesign project tantamount to a physical renovation. It wouldn't make sense to put new paint on a building without making sure the foundation is sound. Similarly, we didn't want to redesign the website without overhauling the content.

Our Solution

We were concerned about this situation and decided to do something about it. Judith Logan, a public services librarian, had web writing

experience and formal training. Lisa's UX portfolio meant that she understood the importance of web content to users. Lisa and Judith proposed a part-time, temporary placement for Judith in ITS. Judith would devote one day a week to the website redesign project for four months to focus on the website's content and contribute to the overall process. Our supervisors and library administration accepted the proposal and the placement began in July 2014. ITS provided a desk for Judith and she was physically present in the department during her placement day. Her home department redistributed some of her duties.

Judith's work in ITS began with a content audit of the main library website and roughly followed Rebecca Blakiston's content strategy best practices.¹² As the months progressed and the team became more integrated, Judith developed her skill set to increase her usefulness to the project. She learned to use Drupal, the library website's content management system, allowing her to both edit content and complete more advanced content-related tasks. She also helped with user research and the usability testing Lisa was performing on alpha and beta versions of the site. Due to the early successes of the project, Judith's time on the project was extended a further six months.

Short-Term Outcomes

The new website was better. We produced a beautiful website that was selected as *Usable Libraries'* "Usable Library of the Month."¹³ Our collaboration wasn't the only reason the website redesign was successful, of course; this was one of the first projects to implement structured UX research and methodologies at all stages of the project. The collaboration did, however, ensure that the user-focused, evidence-driven design included a content redesign. Our team received a UTL Staff Team Appreciation and Recognition (STAR) award in the Innovation category.

We developed more technical skills. Our new skills freed up the developers and systems librarian to focus on the more challenging

aspects of the development. This increased our capacity and confidence; we later led projects that previously could have only been done by other people on the team.¹⁴ Now there are more staff members at the organization that can perform certain tasks, all without requiring a formal professional development program.

We learned to speak each others' language. Information technology is technical by nature, so it could sometimes be difficult for public services staff members to know how to bring up issues with ITS staff in the most effective ways. Likewise, ITS staff members did not always understand the impact of the issues public services staff were reporting, making communication more difficult. Judith's role on the web team allowed her to translate for both groups.

Our units became closer. Librarians in Judith's home department are highly skilled in research assistance and public service. This placement gave the department a way to share their collective insights into user searching and web browsing behavior and influence the website's design to benefit users. ITS staff now had a colleague with public-service expertise embedded in the department to whom they could turn when they needed a quick, informal opinion on design or functionality development.

Other UTL public services librarians now had an insider on the web team. We did not anticipate that having a public services librarian on the web team would embolden other librarians to get more involved with the redesign process. Judith frequently fielded calls from colleagues curious about what was happening and looking for ways to share their insights. She helped encourage and direct their feedback.

Longer-Term Outcomes

We made this interdepartmental placement indefinite. Encouraged by the new website's success and Library Administration's support of our project, we proposed an ongoing collaboration.

Judith now devotes 25% of her time to ITS projects that touch on the library's core web services: the website, catalog, and article-discovery tools. She still reports only to her home department's unit head. This arrangement will continue only as long as it makes sense for all parties. We did not want to enshrine it in a job profile for fear of betraying the placement's flexible, lightweight, and adaptable tenets. We also wanted to leave it open in case another librarian wants the chance to participate in the future.

The collaboration changed our approach to our work. We have come to see public service as an early warning indicator for UX problems that need attention. Public services staff pass issues on to the web team with concrete examples and test cases for both small and large fixes without waiting for a standing committee meeting or formal opportunity. Lisa has noticed that the web team is more receptive to these suggestions than before the collaboration began. They now see public services staff members as a key user group, and make sure to test specifically with them when developing or refining a web product. This benefits public services units as a good user experience of library tools reduces the work a user needs to accomplish a task, thereby eliminating unnecessary mediation from library staff.¹⁵ In addition, Judith's home department now frequently uses UX methodologies to approach designing their services and activities.

We increased interest in interdepartmental placements and cross-functional teams. ITS had been using agile and collaborative working styles before, but the placement allowed them to spread that model outside the department. We showed that a collaborative work arrangement could be fruitful for the staff members involved, their home units, and the organization as a whole. Library Administration circulated a set of guidelines for proposing placements that largely drew on our experiences. Cross-functional teams have become more and more important to UTL, so much so that "collaboration and team orientation" is now a category in our yearly professional assessment template.

We brought the user into the tool-development workflow.

Information technology is often a “backroom service” whose staff do not have much contact with front-end users except under controlled conditions like a usability test or focus group. Although we did not use Judith’s presence as a substitute for user research, she helped us make educated guesses that we could later test with users, maximizing the time that we had with our testers and speeding up the development process. To build on this, Lisa works on a public service point once a week to see for herself how people are using the web spaces and how they describe their use in their own words. Her time there is lightweight, flexible, user experience research when documented correctly.

How to Use Intrapreneurship to Promote Holistic Librarianship at Your Institution

Signal that you are open to intrapreneurship. Let your staff members know that you are interested in experimenting with your institution’s organizational structure and are open to their proposals. This could be as simple as an agenda item at a high-level meeting or an all-staff e-mail. You might be surprised by the proposals you get; your staff members undoubtedly have a different perspective on how to meet your users’ needs. We have noticed that this is great for staff morale.

“**Signal that you are open to intrapreneurship.**”

Look for likely projects. Time-limited projects are a promising way to get staff members working together in new ways. Are you implementing an important new service or technology? Allocate more focused staff time to new initiatives for a limited amount of time. Team members will have the time and mental energy to devote to developing their skills and knowledge. They’ll get more out of the experience and grow their skill sets faster. This also helps build staff buy-in for these projects since the team members will become champions for it in their home departments.

Identify your skill bottlenecks. There's always someone at an institution who knows how to do something important that no one else does. What happens when that person retires or goes on leave unexpectedly? Cross-functional teams disperse important skills within an organization, helping with succession planning and institutional memory. Look for opportunities to get these specialized staff members working on a project or collaborating with others so they can share their skills and knowledge. Perhaps there is a small piece of their job that other members of team could be trained to do. Both staff members benefit from such an arrangement; the specialized person now has help when the workload gets heavy and the newly trained person has an additional way to contribute to the team's success.

Upskill existing people *before* you hire a dedicated position.

The American Library Association job list is littered with functional specialist job postings like Digital Preservation Librarian or Scholarly Communications Librarian. Before you post one of these, try asking an existing staff member to “test drive” the role on a full- or part-time basis for a few months. This will give you a better sense of what skills are required for the portfolio and ensure that someone else in the organization is familiar with it, preemptively eliminating a skills bottleneck. This kind of testing can also provide an opportunity to demonstrate how the role brings value to your organization so you can help secure funding for the position, if necessary.

Conclusion

Our case study demonstrates an intrapreneurial pathway to holistic librarianship. Recently hired librarians saw an opportunity to approach a project in a non-traditional way, growing their skill sets and breaking down organizational silos in the process. Leadership can occur at all levels of an organization, but it takes vision and flexibility at the highest levels to shape its growth in the most useful direction.

Endnotes

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