

Talent Management Strategy as a Catalyst at Singapore Management University (SMU) Libraries

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Abstract

Introduction

With almost no natural resources, Singapore's knowledge-based economy is dependent on its talent. The government has been advocating the critical importance of on-going upskilling of its citizens to become a smart nation in an increasingly Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) world. Its recent SkillsFuture agenda was launched in 2016 to provide Singaporeans with the opportunities to develop their fullest potential throughout life. Universities are expected to support this initiative and provide industry specific education to build a competitive workforce that is based on a tripartite collaboration between government, industry and universities. Singapore Management University (SMU) too, has responded and developed Vision 2025, a roadmap for a transformative education. Within this changing learning ecosystem, how has SMU Libraries been responding? SMU Libraries has been exploring a variety of strategies and creating opportunities to realign its strategic direction and contribute to the overall success of the university.

How has SMU Libraries' Talent Management Strategy become a catalyst to add and demonstrate value to all its stakeholders, including its staff whilst supporting Singapore's SkillsFuture initiative?

Methods

SMU Libraries' Talent Management Strategy was developed to focus on the following: workforce planning, capacity building, succession planning, career paths and leadership development. One of the strategies in place is the 'First Year Experience' (FYE) initiative where a team of relatively new librarians was formed to plan and implement activities involving a variety of roles across the library. One of the objectives of this initiative was to minimise 'silos' across departments and to curate special programmes for freshmen collaboratively. The evolution and assessment of the FYE initiative within the context of SMU Libraries' Talent Management Strategy will be presented as a case study to illustrate both skills development and changing roles of librarians in order to create an agile talent pool to be able to add value to SMU and to contribute to Singapore's SkillsFuture initiative.

Conclusion

The presenters will advocate that a talent management strategy in a learning organisation needs to be organic, sustainable and nurtured through a compendium of creative and innovative learning programmes involving all team members, not just the management team. Participants will take away easy to implement ideas from SMU Libraries' Refresh! Week and Learning Circle. An initiative such as the FYE

programme has not been without its challenges and the presenters will conclude by sharing some of these such as culture change, stakeholder engagement and sustainability.

Keywords

career development; academic libraries; professional development; leadership; learning programmes

Introduction

Singapore is a small island city-state with a vibrant knowledge-based economy and works hard to stay competitive in the global economy, playing the role of a broker in many industries such as finance, technology, shipping, aviation, pharmaceuticals, oil and gas amongst others. The education sector is both big and small. Singapore's education sector may be perceived as being small because the population is only 5.6 million (June 2017), but big in the sense that Singaporeans invest in their children's education, including the government in its support of lifelong learning for its citizens. In 2016, the government established a Committee on the Future Economy (CFE) with the vision "to be the pioneers of the next generation" (Committee on the Future Economy, 2017, p.1). One of the strategies (#13) stated in the executive summary of the report highlights:

"In the future economy, our people should have deep skills and be inspired to learn throughout their lives; our businesses should be innovative and nimble; our city vibrant, connected to the world, and continually renewing itself; our Government coordinated, inclusive and responsive" (Committee on the Future Economy, 2017, p.4).

The major drivers for setting up the CFE and various related initiatives and strategies are not very different from similar approaches adopted by other developed countries such as Australia, and some in Europe. The drivers, are (as indicated in the CFE Report) the unexpected changes in the global order, significant political and economic uncertainties as well as the concerns about global productivity, value chains, rapid technological changes, anti-globalisation trends and the aging

population in Singapore. One initiative the Singapore government has put in place is SkillsFuture, an offshoot from one of the recommendations of the CFE:

“SkillsFuture is a national movement to provide Singaporeans with the opportunities to develop their fullest potential throughout life, regardless of their starting points. Through this movement, the skills, passion and contributions of every individual will drive Singapore's next phase of development towards an advanced economy and inclusive society.

Investment in human capital through education and training has been at the heart of Singapore's progress, and has also helped Singaporeans develop and maximise their potential. By enabling a highly-skilled and competitive workforce, it has allowed Singaporeans to secure better jobs, higher incomes and enjoy higher standards of living” (About SkillsFuture, 2017).

As skills needed for new jobs and industries change rapidly, employees are expected to have a balance of job-specific skills as well as more universal skills such as strategic thinking, communication and problem solving. Libraries and librarians all over the world, being an integral part of this ecosystem, have been making efforts not only to keep up with the changes, but also to stay ahead and be prepared for both the challenges and opportunities.

This paper will discuss Singapore Management University (SMU) Libraries' strategies to align itself to its parent institution's priorities and expectations in terms of talent management and skills development, which are in turn aligned to Singapore government's SkillsFuture initiative to inspire individuals to learn throughout their lives and to develop their fullest potential. The authors will elaborate upon the First Year Experience (FYE) Team that was recently renamed the Engagement Team

(ET), as a case study to illustrate the implementation of a talent management framework at SMU Libraries.

Changing Roles of Libraries and Librarians

The roles and responsibilities of libraries and librarians have been going through major changes in recent times. Expectations of their parent institutions and governments have made libraries rethink what they do and respond to the challenges and opportunities brought about by the complex and rapidly changing ecosystem in which they operate and provide their services. Libraries are no different from other organisations and librarians being members of their work and social communities need to renew and reinvent themselves to stay ahead, as indicated in the CFE Report. Advocacy, marketing, promotion, communication, outreach, stakeholder engagement, innovation, creation and the demonstration of value to stakeholders have never been more critical and urgent.

SMU Libraries has been undergoing reviews, realignment, re-skilling and restructuring using a number of different strategies to keep ahead, respond to and be prepared for the changing external and internal environment. It is not sufficient to attract and hire the best person for a position, but to ensure the staff are continuously engaged, motivated and able to contribute to the organisation's strategic goals.

Talent Management Strategy as a Catalyst for Change

The contribution of talent to the success of an organisation has been recognised for many years now. Organisations have been moving away from being merely transaction oriented to those where success is built on relationships, engagement and collaboration internally and externally, as libraries seek to inspire, grow and retain staff. Marcum (2015, p.5) discusses the concept of 'talent mindset' in her Ithaca Issue Brief, 'Talent Management for Academic Libraries' and states that "In an organization possessed of talent mindset, managers and colleagues are creative in building candidate pools".

SMU Libraries has long had a successful reputation amongst its stakeholders as a service oriented and customer focused library. However, no organisation can take its past and even current successes for granted and be complacent about those successes. Organisations with 'talent mindset' focus not only on attracting the best staff, but also retaining, retraining and building pipelines for new talent for the kinds of activities and services they plan for the future. Building a pipeline "requires moving out of the day-to-day managerial operations for a period of time to meet new people, learn about how they are applying their skills, and thinking about what kinds of new skills will be required in the library over the next several years. These are excellent steps to take also in thinking about how best to reposition the library in terms of new services and overall strategy" (Marcum, 2015, p.7).

One of the goals in SMU Libraries' strategic plan is "to nurture an engaged and highly skilled team that excels in a dynamic global environment" (SMU Libraries

Strategic Plan 2016-2018, 2017). Singapore has had challenges with talent pools in different industries due to economies of scale for many years. The library industry is no exception. It is critical for SMU and SMU Libraries to stay on top of its game, be competitive and attract and retain the best talent available in the industry for both its survival and future growth.

SMU Libraries' management team as part of the regular review of its strategic goals, environmental scanning and feedback from staff, decided to develop a Talent Management Strategy and Framework to articulate both what is in place and also what its aspirations are as a learning organisation for future planning. This led to consultations with different groups of staff to understand their unmet needs and resulted in the consolidation of various talent management activities under one umbrella to act as a catalyst about continuous learning, teamwork and culture change. One of the objectives was to create a platform for all staff to see how the different activities were connected, for example the upskilling of student assistants, leadership development for middle managers and emerging leaders, recruitment and development of new graduate librarians, succession planning, career paths and future skills programmes for para-professional staff amongst others. In the next section of the paper, evolution of the First Year Experience (FYE) Team will be discussed to illustrate the implementation of one aspect of the talent management strategy in SMU Libraries.

Evolution of the Team

New Librarians' Programme

Originally known as the New Librarians' Programme, the objectives of this initiative were to provide new or recently graduated librarians with the opportunity to gain experience through immersion in different areas within the library. Furthermore, to understand the activities within other departments and to learn about the interdependencies of teams across the library with the overall goal being creation of pipelines, career paths and succession planning. In the design of the programme, other similar programmes were examined, such as the University of Melbourne Library's Professional Cadet Programme that was designed to attract new graduates of specific disciplines to undertake library qualifications whilst working at the library and the Graduate Trainee Librarian programme at Flinders University which "provides newly qualified and inexperienced professional librarians the opportunity to work in a university library" (Cations, 2008). The strategy at Flinders was to re-design vacant positions for talent recruitment whereas the focus at SMU libraries was on equipping the librarians with enhanced understanding of and participation in library-wide activities.

Leong and Vaughan (2010) noted that the New Professionals' Group at RMIT University Library was formed to encourage early career professionals to be more proactive, move away from 'silos' and develop ideas in the workplace as part of becoming leaders. Oud (2008) surveyed new librarians at Canadian universities about their pre-existing expectations and knowledge as they transitioned into the

workplace and their real experiences and provided recommendations such as coaching and mentoring to guide them. These examples were helpful when planning the New Librarians' Programme at SMU Libraries.

The programme commenced in 2014 with three librarians, one of whom was more experienced and the other two were fresh graduates. A few months later, another new graduate librarian joined. They each had a 'home base' or department, for example Learning and Information Services and Information Access and Resources and were scheduled to work 1-2 days in another department on a four-month rotation. The programme was designed to be flexible and meant to benefit all parties. The participants were assigned a mentor. After the first cycle, participants shared during a focus group session that the tasks undertaken in different departments varied and a few perceived some of the assigned projects as not being meaningful and sometimes had limited guidance. They commented that juggling their duties and time between their 'home base' and the other department was at times challenging. They also indicated that the title, 'New Librarians' may be confusing in the future stages of the programme. The coordinators used this opportunity to review the programme after consultations with both the participants and their managers.

The First Year Experience (FYE) Team

The library started recruiting more new graduates and the number of existing staff completing their Masters in Library and Information Science (MLIS) increased as part of its talent management strategy to create a talent pool for the future. Activities involving first year students used to be the responsibility of Research Librarians

(equivalent of subject/liaison librarians) in the past. As the Research Librarians began to assume a wider research support role involving graduate students and an increased emphasis on faculty engagement, it was timely for a separate group to coordinate various activities for first year students. This was also aligned to the library's strategy of being more externally focused to foster collaboration both within and outside the library. The team composition grew to its present size of nine members. To articulate the team's role across the library, a terms of reference document was created with inputs from the expanded membership and the library's leadership team. The programme was rebranded as the First Year Experience (FYE) Librarians with the aim of developing a library-wide team to focus on first year students. This demonstrated the library's commitment to developing teams that were agile, self-organising and taking responsibility for library-wide activities. Two senior staff, namely the Heads of Information and Learning Services were tasked to coach and mentor the team and facilitate collaboration across the library.

The scope and responsibilities of the FYE team were reviewed to include the development of competencies to support a range of activities for first year students such as:

- Information Literacy and Learning Programmes
 - Library Orientation during Matriculation (e.g. LibQuest and LIB001 Library Research Skills)
 - Programme in Writing and Reasoning (PWR), a university core writing course offered by the Centre for English Communication (CEC) (e.g. teaching classes, conducting research consultations, liaison with instructors)

- Conducting Workshops (e.g. generic bite-sized research skills training)
- Content creation (e.g. online learning objects for Research Guides)
- Services
 - Rostered desk duties (e.g. Fulfilment, Reference, Teachable moment activities, communication and escalation etc.)
 - Research consultations (e.g. small group assistance)
 - Tours and briefings (e.g. external visitors and SMU community)
 - Projects (e.g. Chat, User Experience, Pilot projects for new services and products etc.)
- Other strategic initiatives

A customised continuous professional development programme was put together for the team which included both face-to-face and online training such as Reference Interview 101, Introduction to Instructional Design for Librarians (sourced from the American Library Association's (ALA) Reference & User Services Association (RUSA) section), User Experience (UX), Leadership for New and Emerging Library Leaders and other professional organisations. Some members of the FYE team attended their first international conferences which contributed a great deal to their professional development. Some of them along with other library staff have been participating in a number of training and development courses (for example design thinking, service marketing, data science) offered by the SMU Academy and other institutes funded by the Singapore government's SkillsFuture initiative to upskills themselves.

The confidence with which the FYE team began planning and delivering various information literacy activities for first year students demonstrated higher levels of value and impact in terms of the library's contribution to programmes for them. Members of the FYE team began liaising directly with other university units, such as the Centre for English Communication (CEC), Wellness Centre, Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE) and the IT Services to plan and organise activities mentioned above independently. Their journey is an example of a combination of group and peer mentoring as well as action learning amongst team members, some with varying levels of experience and expertise. During this phase of the programme, some FYE team members successfully applied for vacant positions in the Library at higher levels which indicated that the programme had achieved one of its aims, by creating a talent pool for succession planning along with providing opportunities to develop people to their fullest potential.

The Engagement Team (ET)

At a review and planning meeting in 2017, members of the FYE Team were invited to reflect on their experiences and provide input to the team's terms of reference, including coming up with a new name. They renamed themselves as the Engagement Team (ET) which represented their evolving roles and membership as some of them had earlier expressed their concern that the group now included staff who had already acquired a few years of experience and were no longer new graduates. The team further highlighted their interest to expand the scope of their roles beyond first year students within the Learning and Information Services. Library leadership agreed that it was important for the ET team be involved in cross-

departmental projects e.g. Information Access and Resources (collection curation, electronic resources evaluation), Scholarly Communication (e.g. faculty research publications, institutional repository), Library Analytics (e.g. QlikView dashboard, data analysis) and Communication and Outreach (e.g. displays, library events). Given the team's diversity, emerging leadership opportunities in conducting user experience studies, leading small groups and projects were also included in their portfolios.

Members of the ET team were invited to complete an anonymous survey with four open-ended questions that required them to reflect on their journey, opportunities, challenges, and the future direction of the team. The survey results are expected to be used as part of a study to understand their journey, support the ET team and follow up with any issues. The boxes below represent a selection of responses to the question about their journey, which one notes as being enriching:

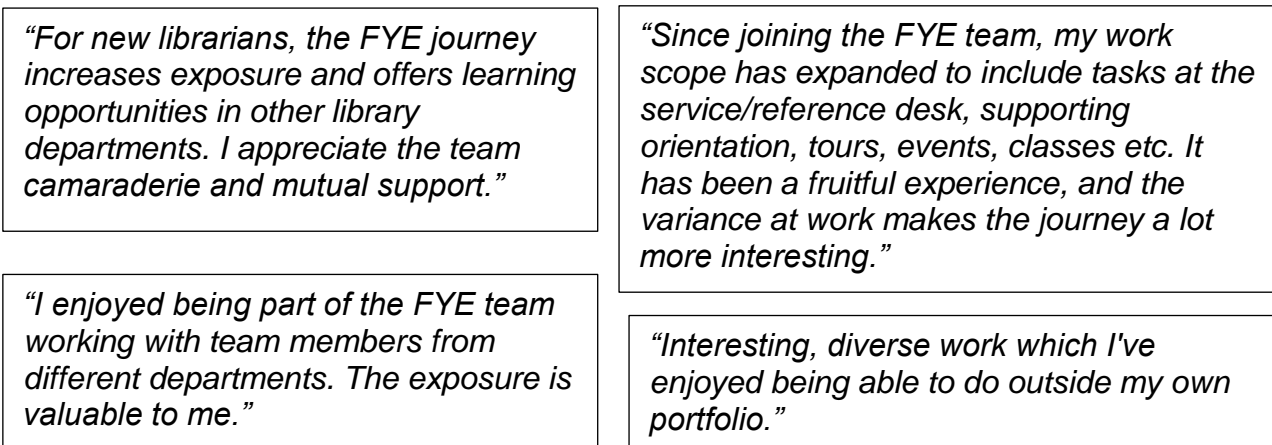


Figure 1: Voices on the FYE/ET Journey

Members also acknowledged the training opportunities afforded to them where they picked up new skills as noted by one member who stated, “The role created opportunities to cultivate or enhance various skills such as teaching, public speaking and interpersonal communication with customers. In addition, it increases my knowledge in different library operations”. These comments demonstrate that the members benefitted from the exposure, variety, scope and cross-departmental team work.

Reflections

It became apparent that members of the ET team understood that there were many opportunities for learning and have been able to gain new experiences and perspectives. Some of the initiatives they took part in and/or led involved externally focused high profile projects such as the creation of a learning object/game to teach students about plagiarism and a couple of User Experience (UX) studies in different areas of SMU Libraries namely the Investment Studio and Kwa Geok Choo Law Library. These initiatives and projects enabled them to plan, execute and present the results to the library leadership team and the entire library staff and to take on board suggestions and inputs for future stages of each initiative.

Whilst the ET’s voices on the future may have looked promising, the journey had the usual challenges. As with any organisational change, however small, the journey involved change management and culture shift, not only for members of the FYE/ET team, but also for their reporting officers and the rest of the library team. The main challenges articulated by some team members were: the initial title of the team

implying that the members were new or graduate librarians, the duration of the programme, the balance between their 'core duties' in their 'home base' and FYE/ET activities, involvement of/ and approval from their reporting officers, team composition, and recognition of their efforts as noted by this feedback in the survey:

“The team comprises experienced and new librarians. Different competency level of members sometimes lead to unequal distribution of workload. All members have their respective core functions, when FYE work clashes with peak operations. We need the support from managers that under such circumstances, there is a need to prioritize our work which may result in the shift in schedule or delivery of assigned tasks. The contributions of individual members are not tracked for performance appraisals.”

During the extensive discussions and consultations with the FYE/ET team and the library leadership team, it became apparent that there was a need for systematic dialogue through constant messaging, communication, consultation and agreement to and from the reporting officers. The coach and mentors were encouraged to use various platforms such as the leadership and staff meetings to share the contributions and involvement of the ET in the projects undertaken on a more systematic basis. An appreciation of the critical importance of everyone working across the library and seeing the library as one team, rather than the priorities of one team or one department needed to be reinforced on an ongoing basis using different strategies.

Bringing it all Together

This paper has highlighted the initiatives by the Singapore government in futureproofing its citizens to remain globally competitive through education and deep learning skills. The staff working in SMU Libraries are Singapore citizens or residents and therefore government policies and initiatives have impact on their attitudes, aspirations, decisions and career paths. It is important for SMU and SMU Libraries to make the most of the governmental and societal opportunities to benefit both SMU and the country as a knowledge-based economy where the future lies on developing skills and creating learning organisations.

The ET's journey as part of SMU Libraries' Talent Management Strategy reflects one aspect of the continuous effort towards being a learning organisation "... where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (Senge, 1990, p.3). In-house continuing professional development programmes such as the Learning Circle (a curated list of activities including conference attendance sharing by staff, invited faculty and guest talks, learning journey visits to other libraries etc.) and the Refresh Week! (a series of bite-sized updates before the start of the academic year by key campus partners in the library's ecosystem that support faculty and students in their teaching, learning and research needs) are two other examples of the initiatives to facilitate the learning organisation journey at SMU Libraries.

The SMU Libraries' Talent Management Strategy and Framework includes a number of other initiatives to strengthen the learning organisation, such as leadership development activities where there are continuous efforts to upskill lower and middle level managers as well as senior librarians in areas ranging from strategic thinking, mentoring and coaching, storytelling to team building amongst others. Harland, Stewart, & Bruce (2017, p.307) discussed the strategies and processes for building an agile and engaged culture around cautioning against complacency by future proofing the workforce using the tenets of being customer focussed and building a learning culture, team culture and creative culture. Development of an agile and engaged culture is possible with collaboration and communication with internal and external ecosystems on an on-going basis, mentoring, coaching, recognition, empowerment and rapid decision-making, execution and response to environmental changes.

The evolution of SMU Libraries' Talent Management Strategy and Framework and the case of the Engagement Team (ET) illustrate this journey. We began with one model and adopted another; we ran a pilot, we reviewed, we sought feedback and refined along the way. Through the voices of the team members, we heard their stories as summarised in this reflection:

“I get the opportunity to engage and provide service to undergraduate students through PWR and other projects, which is usually outside my job scope. I also get to participate in projects. Another great thing is that FYE is a very energetic and enthusiastic team. The members are open and straightforward and always have great ideas. The exchange of ideas is inspiring too.”

Members of the ET team will assume different portfolios on their journey as the library's needs and requirements change and members move in and out of different projects acquiring new skill sets. Futureproofing not only the ET members but all library staff are already part of the library's talent management strategy and this supports both SMU's and the national agenda of SkillsFuture and lifelong learning to build learning organisations that creates future ready employees with future ready skills.

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