

Aspects of Information and Perception in the Interrelationships between Public Libraries and Associated Library-Related Organizations in Israel / Alon Lea

Abstract

Public libraries and the library-related organizations involved in their activities, exist in an environment of constant and rapid economic, organizational, technological and social change, in which progress and evolution are vital for survival. The library-related organizations involved in the lives of public libraries in Israel are the following: The Department of Libraries in the Ministry of Science, Culture and Sport; the Council of Public Libraries; the Instruction Center for Libraries in Israel; and the Organization of Librarians and Information Scientists in Israel. These organizations' task is to formulate policy, supervise, budget, and provide professional support and other services to libraries and librarians. They have a significant role to play in the world of public libraries due to the very definition of their functions, their influence on libraries and librarians, their impact on the statecharting of libraries and the profession, and their perceived role of leaders of change and progress. The public libraries and the library-related organizations maintain a mutually-beneficial interrelationship. The present study attempts to examine and understand this interrelationship, in order to arrive at explanations concerning the way libraries as well as library-related organizations are able to function and survive in a changing environment. The study examines the knowledge which librarians possess about library-related organizations and the way in which librarians and library directors perceive these organizations, as a vital component of the interrelationship between libraries and library-related organizations.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the interrelationship between public libraries and the library-related organizations, and to identify and examine factors that

may promote this interrelationship and so be singled out as potentially helpful aids to improving the operation and survivability of libraries and library-related organizations. At the same time, we wish also to highlight factors that have a deleterious effect on the interrelationship, in order to identify them and determine how they may be neutralized or voided. We therefore examined how well public libraries know their organizational environment and how aware they are of the relevant library-related organizations in their institutional environment, their policies, their requirements and their ability to provide assistance. We tested the knowledge and perceptions of library directors and librarians concerning the library-related organizations and how the latter operated as promoters of change in public libraries. In addition, we checked whether librarians' and library directors' knowledge and perceptions have changed in comparison to findings from about a decade ago. The relations of public libraries with library-related organizations were examined within the framework of a number of theories that made it possible to investigate interrelationships between the professional supervisory and service-providing organizations, and the libraries. These theories were: Organizations as open social systems; the institutional theory; and the learning organization method. These are able to explain interactions in the organizational environment and how organizations adapt and survive in their environment.

The research hypotheses

1. There exist differences in knowledge about and perceptions of library-related organizations between different occupational statuses (librarians and library directors).
2. The way library-related organizations are perceived is affected by knowledge and occupational status.
3. The way library-related organizations are perceived depends on the depth of their involvement in change processes in the libraries.
4. Librarians' and library directors' level of knowledge about and their perceptions of library-related organizations today are greater than they were a decade ago.

Research questions

In addition to the hypotheses we posed a number of related and tangential research questions, the answers to which can imbue the quantitative findings of the hypotheses with more content:

1. What do librarians and library directors know about the library-related organizations?
2. How do librarians and public library directors perceive these library-related organizations and what do they think about them.
3. Which of the library-related organizations, if any, is perceived as affecting or leading change in libraries? If so, how?
4. In what way do librarians and library directors communicate with the library-related organizations? What is the direction of the communication, that is, which side initiates communication and plays the more active role?

Method

The study used both the quantitative and the qualitative methods. The quantitative data were acquired by means of a survey that used an online questionnaire. The qualitative research was done using in-depth interviews. The dominant method was quantitative. The quantitative data were analyzed using statistical tests applied by means of SPSS software. The qualitative interviews were analyzed through the qualitative method of content analysis.

According to data from 2007 public libraries in Israel employed 1,111 professional librarians at the time (*Public Libraries Strategic Plan*, 2009). These were the subjects to whom the study questionnaire was addressed. 168 replies were received, from 112 librarians and 56 library directors, together about fifteen percent of the entire subject population. The qualitative part of the study consisted of interviews with four library directors and twelve librarians (eleven women and one man). The population of the study was divided into two occupational statuses, librarians and library directors.

The main findings

Our findings show differences in knowledge about library-related organizations between library directors and librarians. Library directors were found to possess more knowledge. The subjects also evinced different levels of knowledge with respect to

different library-related organizations. It was found that the knowledge about the Department of Libraries and the Instruction Center for Libraries was quite good, while knowledge about the Organization of Librarians and Information Scientists and the Council of Public Libraries was poor. Familiarity with the Department of Libraries was mainly due to its role of providing the government subsidies to public libraries and its supervisory role. Knowledge about the Instruction Center focused on its role of providing professional guidance and organizing refresher courses and conferences. Knowledge about the Organization of Librarians and Information Scientists mainly concerned that organization's role in negotiating the salary and work conditions of librarians. Only a minority among the library directors possessed knowledge about the Council of Public Libraries; librarians possessed no knowledge about it, and most did not even know of its existence.

Our findings lead to the conclusion that library directors and librarians have a clear perception of the Department of Libraries and the Instruction Center as important and significant organizations that impact libraries and are involved in the processes of change that libraries undergo. Perception of the Organization of Librarians and Information Scientists and the Council of Public Libraries was found to be quite weak. The Organization of Librarians and Information Scientists is perceived as an ineffective body that makes no contribution to the lives of librarians or to public libraries. As for the perception of the Council of Public Libraries, the study came to no conclusions, owing to the fact that most subjects knew very little, if anything, about it. Differences were found in the perceptions of library directors and librarians with respect to both the Department of Libraries and the Library Instruction Center. It was found that differences in the perception of library-related organizations was knowledge-dependent. A positive significant correlation was found between assessment of library-related organizations' involvement in changes in libraries, and librarians' and library-directors' perceptions of these organizations.

It was found that knowledge about library-related organizations has been on the rise over the past decade, although a significant difference was found only with respect to the Department of Libraries. Library directors' and librarians' perceptions of library-related organizations today were found to be higher than they were a decade ago.

The study's main conclusions

1. There is a need to improve organizational learning in libraries. Knowledge about library-related organizations constitutes a fundamental resource for adapting to the environment. The more knowledge a library possesses, the greater will be its ability to adapt and survive. Therefore knowledge gaps must be reduced and organizational learning inculcated in libraries.
2. It is necessary to promote constant awareness of the interrelationship between libraries and library-related organizations. Such awareness is vital in cases where mutual relations are inadequate. Such relations are very important for both libraries and library-related organizations, for the prevention of organizational deterioration and loss of vitality.
3. The current passive relations between libraries and library-related organizations make a conceptual change among professional necessary. A more active and enterprising approach to the relations between libraries and library-related organizations will be of benefit to organizational interactions.
4. The Department of Libraries and the Library Instruction Center are not distinguished enough. This blurs the differences between them and raises the question of whether these organizations are in fact interested in remaining distinct.
5. From an overall perspective public libraries are experiencing a period of bloom in budgets, functions, and extent and variety of activities, thanks to resources made available by the Department of Libraries and the Instruction Center.

This study did not address the issue of the interaction between public libraries and library-related organizations. However, it can be useful as a stage that provides a picture of the system of interrelationships between libraries and the library-related organizations in Israel. Information concerning the way they are perceived in the field, and what the expectations of them in the field are, can be important for these organizations, which after all strive to have an optimal effect on what happens in the field. This study may thus provide some optional feedback to the library-related organizations on their operations and their status in the profession. The library-related organizations and the public libraries can also derive conclusions concerning their operation as organizations in their institutional environment.

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