

Evidence-based Management  
as a  
Tool for Special libraries

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We'd like to start our presentation this morning with a brief description of evidence-based management (EBM) in a library setting – although in this example it is an academic library setting rather than a special library. There was an academic library in south-eastern Florida in the mid-1970s that extended its hours to midnight during the week. Upper management of this library believed that a reference librarian needed to be available while the building was open. Their rationale was the following: as a state-supported university, their service area extended in a 25-30 mile arc south toward northern Dade County, where another state school existed, to the west and to the north. Many of the students worked during the day and came to campus for classes between 4:00pm and 9:00pm, and since they were unlikely to come back to campus just to use the library, a reference librarian was needed to handle all the research-related questions that arose between 9:00pm and midnight. Reference statistics of questions answered (any question, not just research-related questions) showed little reason for a librarian to be there after 9:30pm or so. Of course, since the reference librarian kept these statistics, library management ignored them. So, the reference librarian who worked until midnight enlisted the assistance of the circulation staff, and during three weeks in the spring semester (including the week of mid-terms exams and the week just before final exams) they asked people where they lived as they exited the building between 9:00pm and closing. The library's "security system" was someone checking books, briefcases and bags as people left, so every one had to pass the monitor and this was the person asking the question. The evidence from these three weeks showed that the overwhelming majority of people in the library after 9:00pm either lived on campus or in the community where the university was located. The remainder lived within a 10-15 mile radius of campus and only a handful lived beyond 15 miles away. The reference librarian took the evidence to the library's management in late May as the semester ended. Since recognition of the evidence and an immediate change in the reference librarian's schedule would be an admission that their assumption was wrong, it wasn't until the end of summer that my work schedule was finally adjusted. This was my first professional position (my first 8 months in fact), and while I had no concept of this thing called EBM, I guess I have been interested in it for my entire career.

I tell you this story to demonstrate that gathering evidence to be used in managerial decision-making is not as difficult as it may seem. However, as Stanford professors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton tell us, EBM does require a change in attitude, a change in how a manager thinks about decision-making. EBM is a process and with any process the best way to begin is with small, incremental steps that will eventually culminate with change on an organization-wide basis. Pfeffer and Sutton (2006), writing in the *Harvard Business Review* last year, gave managers a few steps to follow in bringing about this change in attitude. First, demand evidence – the best way to get an organization to become evidence-based is for the organization’s leaders to ask for the evidence that supports decisions, recommendations and the like. The danger in this, of course, is the manager needs to address the evidence that is presented. This leads to the second step of examining the logic and critically evaluating any evidence that is presented. Pfeffer and Sutton cite a medical author who relates a joke among physicians: “If you want to have an operation, ask a surgeon if you need one?” (p. 65). As I mentioned in the opening example, I knew the library’s director would question any evidence I collected myself, like the reference statistics because I had a vested interest in the outcome, so I got a “neutral” party in the form of the circulation department to gather the data. Pfeffer and Sutton’s third point is to treat the organization as an unfinished prototype. Any organization that feels it has nothing to learn first of all has everything to learn, and second won’t commit any resources to trying to improve. Decision-making in an environment like this is all about maintaining the status quo. Try something new in a limited way, gather the evidence on how things go, and then adapt, revise and retry as needed. Finally, an attitude of wisdom needs to spread throughout the organization. We rarely feel we have all the information we need to make a truly knowledgeable decision, so while we need to act based on the most informed knowledge we have at the time, we also need to keep questioning what we know and the basis for our decisions to see if new evidence comes to light and to be in a frame of mind that is accepting to any new evidence.

I think we can agree that these are four worthwhile traits for any organization to have – public or private, for-profit or not-for-profit, library or non-library. Be that as it may,

EBM has not exactly swept through the business world or the business literature like total quality management, reengineering, the balanced scorecard or other management ideas of the past 20-25 years. While EBM may have a solid toe-hold on the rock-face of credibility, it is still just a toe hold.

Six areas of focus have been identified as being particularly relevant for the application of evidence-based practice in librarianship, with those six being: 1) reference, 2) collections, 3) information access and retrieval, 4) education, 5) marketing/promotion, and 6) management (Crumley & Koufogiannakis, 2002). This helps create a link between EBM and evidence-based librarianship (EBL) since libraries have been using general management theory and principles for as long as there have been libraries. That gets us to our topic for this session – the application of EBM in a special library environment. This becomes especially challenging as there is no single definition for EBM nor is there a single definition for what constitutes a special library. While every author seems to put his/her own special emphasis on a definition of evidence-based anything, the heart of the matter seems to center on two factors. First, the use of available evidence whether the evidence is raw data collected specifically to address the issue at hand (like getting me off work before midnight) or whether the evidence comes from someplace else and can be adapted to address the issue at hand. And second, an evaluation of the evidence to determine its value and usefulness to the issue at hand within a specific environment. As for a definition of a special library, for our purposes today, let's say it is a library that is part of an organization and characterized by the highly-focused nature of its collections, its services, and its customers and further characterized by a small number of staff.

From our perspective, it would be very beneficial for special librarians to apply the principles of EBM to their work environments for a number of reasons. First, since most special libraries are particularly vulnerable to reductions, downsizing, or even closure, demonstrating that your decision-making is supported by evidence can only help to substantiate the business-like nature of your operation. Remember, most of the environments where special libraries are found don't have to support those libraries, so

presenting an evidence-based focus can help minimize questions of the library's value to the organization. Second, adopting an EBM approach may not be an option if the parent organization utilizes EBM or just if your manager is a proponent of EBM. It is not surprising at all that medical and other health-related libraries have taken the lead with evidence-based applications in a library environment since the medical/health care field is far ahead of other disciplines in applying evidence-based practices. Third, the only thing we're aware of that special librarians have in excess is work to do, so being able to identify and eliminate functions that don't really help you accomplish anything is extremely useful. As a profession there are numerous things any library does because it is a library, but do all those really need to be done in every library in every organization?

However, when we look for evidence of EBM in the special library environment outside of medical libraries, we find very little there. Anne Brice, Andrew Booth and Nicola Benson, in a presentation made at the 2005 IFLA Conference in Oslo, took a social sciences viewpoint in identifying reason why we don't embrace evidence-based practice more fully. Among the items identified was the lack of an evidence base, and we found this to be true as we prepared for this presentation today. We found only two very relevant papers about using EBM in special libraries: one dealt with the use of information in decision-making in the banking industry in the UK (Reid, Thomson & Wallace-Smith, 1998), and the second was a meta-analysis of studies on the use of information in decision-making in six different environments in the UK and those were compared with one study from Canada and two from the United States (Grieves, 1998). As Brice et al. (2005) posit, this is partly a result of our reliance on anecdotal evidence and on our own experience, which leads to the numerous "how I done it good" type articles that fill the pages of our professional journals.

For special librarians, a couple of the other factors identified by Brice, Booth and Benson (2005) ring true. One of these is the lack of time many special librarians face due to staff size; there are too many things that need to be done for the staff available to do them. The irony here is the special librarian may not have the time to find evidence to help manage the library because he/she is busy finding evidence for others in the organization

to assist them in managing their operation. Another factor, again very prevalent among special librarians, is an emphasis on practical rather than theoretical knowledge. Every year at the SLA annual conference I hear attendees talk about how they need to find two or three practical things they can take back to their workplaces to demonstrate to their managers the value of attending the conference. While I have yet to hear anyone talk about finding that one good idea or concept to take back to their library and test out, at least they are attending the conference and coming in contact with new information as there are a number of venues for the presentation of research-related material during a typical SLA conference. Finally, there is the idea that we don't have the skills to critically appraise the evidence we find. Again, with our special librarians, even those who have the ability to analyze and evaluate the research they can access, they probably don't have the time or get any reinforcement to do so.

However, even with these hurdles to surmount, we believe that most special librarians would benefit from adopting some form of EBM.

As we have just heard and as we have read, there are identifiable reasons why information professionals and managers in general don't use evidence-base research. Often cited are time, the inability to generalize from specific case-studies or to apply general studies to local settings, and an emphasis on practice rather than theory. A study by Kathlyn Turner (2002) in New Zealand found that special librarians in government agencies were less likely to use research than their academic counterparts. That study also found that the smaller the library staff size, the less likely the librarians were to use research. Presumably, these smaller libraries were special, governmental libraries. Turner also found that attending conferences correlated with increased research use, as just pointed out by the SLA conference example.

Amazingly, though, the same study found that the second most-cited reason information professionals consult research, after personal professional development, is "to assist with

managerial activities...such as problem-solving, decision-making, planning and/or evaluation” (Turner, 2002, p. 4).

However, information professionals who work in the corporate or government sector are susceptible to the same limitations as other corporate managers. Denise Rousseau in her 2005 presidential address to the Academy of Management emphasized the problems resulting from not using research and from managers not having a systematic understanding of the principles governing organizations and human behavior. She asserted, “The reality is that managers tend to work in settings that make valid learning difficult. This difficulty is compounded by the widespread uptake of organizational fads and fashion...In such settings managers cannot even learn why their decisions were wrong, let alone what alternatives would have been right” (2006, p. 261) But, Rousseau concludes, “Evidence-based management leads to valid learning and continuous improvement” (p. 261).

Why should library managers use evidence-based management? Pfeffer and Sutton cite three questionable management practices that can be remedied by using EBM: casual benchmarking, doing what (seems to have) worked in the past, and following deeply held yet unexamined ideologies. They propose six standards for managers to use under EBM for “generating, evaluating, selling, and applying business knowledge”:

- Treat old ideas like old ideas.
- Be suspicious of breakthrough ideas and studies—they almost never happen.
- Celebrate communities of smart people and collective brilliance, not lone geniuses or gurus.
- Emphasize the virtues *and* drawbacks (and uncertainties) of your research and proposed practices.
- Use success and failure stories to illustrate practices supported by other evidence, not necessarily as valid evidence.
- Take a neutral approach to ideologies and theories. Base management practices on the best evidence, not what is in vogue. (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 41.)

Turning from these glib standards to more specific suggestions, let's first look at strategies recommended for applying EBM in the field of nursing for relevance to the field of librarianship. In a paper on EBM for nurse executives, Lauren Williams (2006) puts forth three groupings of strategies: strategies to establish an EBM culture, to create the capacity to change to EBM, and to sustain that change. Most of the recommendations in the first group have to do with making it clear that the leaders of an organization—large—or small—support EBM and actively encourage it. The second group spells out some ways—such as management research forums and leadership development programs—to integrate EBM into practice. The third group includes some specific ways—such as including EBM in performance plans—to ensure that EBM practices will continue. This third group of strategies echoes recommendations from other EBM proponents to establish collaborative partnerships between practitioners and the academic community and to create an EBM collaborative database.

These strategies are relevant to the practice of EBM in any field. In 2001, Joanne Gard Marshall and SLA's Research Committee (2003) put forth a prescription for applying evidence-based practice in special libraries. Their recommendations are similar to the strategies for implementing EBM amongst nursing executives, but on a more specific level. They concentrate on what an individual manager in an organization can do, rather than what Management with a capital 'M' should do to institute EBM. Beyond a personal professional commitment to using the best evidence, they recommend discussions with colleagues, participating in data collection and sharing evidence and analysis. They also suggest roles for researchers and associations, SLA in particular.

Now let's look at some resources that information professionals can turn to for help in applying EBM.

1. Pfeffer and Sutton's *Evidence-Based Management Website* (<http://www.evidence-basedmanagement.com/>). This is the de facto home for EBM. It includes an extensive bibliography as well as frequently updated columns, concrete examples of EBM in use, and examples of EBM being taught (primarily in business schools).

2. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* e-journal (<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP/index>). Familiar to most of you here, this is the first place to look for analytical summaries of the evidence-based literature in librarianship. It reflects our general finding that the majority of evidence-based information in our field focuses on operational issues--which can be used by managers—but not on management per se. More needs to be published on EBM in libraries.
3. *Libraries Using Evidence* (<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/library/gosford/eb/>), and especially its *EBLIP Toolkit* (<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/library/gosford/eb/toolkit/>). This Website is full of well-organized information, but it is the Toolkit that is a straightforward tool for carrying out and evaluating evidence-based research.
4. Lindsay Glynn (2006), “A critical appraisal tool for library and information research.” in *Library Hi Tech*. Glynn reviewed appraisal models in several fields and devised a tool consisting of a list of questions to ask about a research study to judge its validity, applicability and appropriateness. This kind of appraisal tool would work well for quantitative studies of library functions but would be difficult to apply to general management studies that deal with qualitative and prescriptive topics.
5. Graham Walton (2007), “Theory, research and practice in library management: new column for *Library Management*”. This new column reviews a different area of library management each time, beginning with the topic of “flexibility” (pp. 165-171). It provides guidance within an evidence-based framework, but it remains to be seen whether it will provide practical analysis relevant to special libraries.
6. Outsell, Inc. (<http://www.outsellinc.com/>). Outsell does market research for the information industry and provides consulting services to special libraries and their organizations. They have accumulated a large database of survey results from corporations and government agencies which can be used by subscribers of their service to apply to local special libraries. Outsell analysts periodically produce reports summarizing the data on selected topics and recommend steps managers

- can use to apply that evidence. They also specialize in performing needs assessments and strategic assessments. In a way, the Outsell database and analyses serve as a collaborative center for EBM for corporate and government information professionals, but the information is proprietary and the price is very high.
7. Special Libraries Association (SLA) (<http://www.sla.org/>). From the strategies identified by the SLA Research Committee for implementing EBLIP (<http://www.sla.org/content/resources/research/rsrchstatement.cfm>), to the SLA information portal on LIS Research (<http://www.sla.org/content/resources/infoportals/research.cfm>), SLA provides a variety of resources to use for evidence-based practice in special libraries. Other resources are dispersed among the Web pages and newsletters of the SLA subject divisions and the papers presented at the annual conference.
  8. Various compilations of evidence-based practice in other fields, such as the What Works Clearinghouse in education (<http://www.whatworks.ed.gov/>), the Campbell Collaboration in justice and social sciences (<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/>), and the Cochrane Collaboration in medicine (<http://www.cochrane.org/index.htm>), especially for learning how they do critical appraisals and systematic reviews. Another useful critical appraisal tool is the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme ([http://www.phru.nhs.uk/casp/critical\\_appraisal\\_tools.htm](http://www.phru.nhs.uk/casp/critical_appraisal_tools.htm)).
  9. Emerald Management First (<http://first.emeraldinsight.com/>) is a new Web site from Emerald Group Publishing, Ltd., directed towards managers in the corporate and government sector. It features articles by and about management gurus, executive summaries, case studies, and a variety of other resources on leadership, change management, human resources, and knowledge management. The Management Reviews section is a particularly relevant database of 200,000 summaries of articles from the management literature. An institutional subscription is required.

In conclusion, I'd like to relate my own example of EBM in my library. Several years ago, when the topic of metadata was just becoming hot, and Google had not yet become so widely-accepted, I saw a great need to improve the public's ability to retrieve relevant public health information on our Institute's Web site. The common wisdom at that time was that one should hire indexers—preferably librarians—to provide metadata for the Web pages. I sought the assistance of an academic colleague from right here at UNC, Jane Greenberg, and we devised a project to address the question, “Can Web page authors themselves create high quality metadata?” We set up an experiment and found that in fact the authors (content creators) could create useful metadata of most types, but not all types. Subsequently, we found that what worked best was for librarians to review the subject metadata created by the authors for consistency and for full subject coverage. These findings were then used for management decisions involving resources. The reason I give this example is that it shows they way practitioners and academic researchers can work together to develop evidence for EBM and challenge the conventional wisdom. While there is an extensive literature on both the pros and cons of practitioner-oriented research from the academic sector, this is not the place and we really don't have the time to pursue this further today. Suffice it to say for now, this is a highly relevant topic to the widespread adoption of EBM and will need further investigation in the future.

This example and the one challenging the need for late night reference desk staffing both substantiate the need for Evidence-Based Management. Anyone who manages anything in a library setting can and should make use of EBM, especially the aspect of it that says to question the conventional wisdom and to base your decisions on the best available evidence. This is especially true for those of us in the corporate or government sector where libraries are being downsized and information professionals have to develop new roles for themselves. It is only by incorporating the EBM principles into every aspect of

our managerial roles that we will be able to convince higher Management of our value so we can survive and avoid being thrown off the island.

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