Flexible loans

A Lean approach to customer engagement and service improvement at the University of York Library

Jackie Knowles
Customer Services Manager
jackie.knowles@york.ac.uk

Sue Elphinstone
Content Description Librarian
sue.elphinstone@york.ac.uk

Chris Ellwood
Assistant Director of Information (Strategic Programmes)
christine.ellwood@york.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper will outline how the University of York is striving to improve both satisfaction with library loans and customer engagement via the work undertaken by a recent loans review project. Radical changes have been made to the circulation of library stock at York with the introduction of 'flexible loans' from October 2012; this new loans model has created a simpler, fairer and more consistent approach to loans and aims to make items work harder and circulate in a more responsive manner. In particular the paper will highlight the Lean project management methodologies that were used, allowing a fast-track approach to making changes. The project team went from idea to implementation within seven months; the paper will also explore the impact of the ongoing shift of culture to one of continuous improvement and how the approach is inspiring other service developments within the library.

Background and context

The loans model at the University of York had been in existence for many years and, due to the number of rules and exceptions, had become difficult to apply consistently and complex to explain to users. Users had told us that they were dissatisfied with the current loans system and as higher student fees led to higher expectations, it became a priority to address the situation.

Like many UK higher education libraries, we used to have different fixed loan periods for different copies and formats: loan periods depended on user category and there were a lot of policies based on 'just because we always did it that way'. The fixed returns dates after vacations caused significant shelving backlogs. The policies had never been particularly fair or efficient: for example, we used to allow borrowing through the long vacations, and then pay to borrow material from other university libraries rather than asking for our own copy to be returned.

We were aware of good practice elsewhere, particularly at Sheffield University Library (Thrift & Sykes 2012). Sheffield's 'Dynamic Variable Loans' provided initial inspiration for the approach chosen at York, but we also built on the innovative approach to library circulation emerging across the higher education sector within the UK.

Key principles

Our key principles were to:

- develop a loans model that encapsulated the university values of excellence and inclusivity by emphasising the concept of 'community responsibility'
- provide a simple and responsive service to users
- stop taking money from students unless there was a clear purpose in doing so
- use the information we have in order to respond to demand.

We also knew from the outset that we wanted to achieve this by working in collaboration with our users, rather than deliver a model that did not take user feedback into consideration.

Applying a Lean methodology

Lean as a concept emerged in our institution at around the same time we were beginning the project and fitted nicely with the principles of what we wanted to achieve. We therefore decided to use Lean as a framework for the entire project.

The core principle of Lean is to maximise customer value while minimising wasteful processes. The various stages of a Lean process are identified as:

- project identification
- scoping to ensure goals are identified and the right people are involved
- planning
- testing
- review and redesign
- implementation
- feedback
- continuous review.

THE PROCESS AT YORK

We set up a loans review project team, which included thirteen library staff ranging from library assistants to an assistant director and from all sections of the library. The team was supported by the University Strategic Systems Programme Manager who advised on the Lean methodology, as this was a new approach to running projects internally.

We encouraged creative thinking and engagement from the start. Our initial proposition was that users could borrow as much as they liked for as long as they liked and our objective was to get as close to this as outcome as possible. This helped staff think differently and come up with all sorts of new ideas, which in turn created enthusiasm and engagement.

We also created and shared a lot of circulation metrics to provide evidence of the current situation. Project team members reviewed these and we produced new data in response to their requests.

The formal project began with a two-day blitz in March 2012; this was an intensive brainstorming meeting during which the team analysed the circulation metrics and scoped current practices. We also considered different stakeholder perspectives and debated a wide range of possibilities. As a result we had the draft of a radical new loans model within 48 hours.

After the two-day session, momentum was maintained through weekly action-based meetings and a range of other activities:

- set-up subgroups to explore specific issues in depth and carry out process reviews
- consulted users and refined the model
- tested our systems
- used metrics to inform everything
- created simple headline messages used in all communications (internal and external).

Throughout the process we were boiling down our thinking to the key elements of what we wanted to do and how to keep things simple so that they could be explained to users. The communications work was crucial to the success of the project.

FLEXIBLE LOANS EXPLAINED

The key elements of the flexible loans model are:

- four-week loans for all items regardless of format and for all borrowers throughout the year unless items are requested
- no fines are payable on any items unless they have been requested by someone else and are not returned on time
- the length of a loan adjusts automatically depending on the circumstances of the borrower (full-time or part-time attendance on campus) and depends on demand: requested items are issued for less time
- fast-track acquisition of items in demand
- a transparent fines exceptions policy
- a proactive approach to customer engagement actively encouraging borrowers to communicate with the library.

CONSULTATION AND FEEDBACK

The flexible loans model evolved as we worked. New ideas sprang up from staff, including from those not in the core project team. We also carried out a lot of consultation with users, much of it designed to get quick responses so that we could make changes before and during implementation.

Our consultation included:

- grab and go surveys on specific issues (the new library café helped with these!)
- online survey
- drop-in sessions for different user groups
- targeted liaison with student representatives
- briefings at department Boards of Studies and other meetings
- close consultation with York Students Union and Graduate Students Association
- consultation with our own staff.

An important example of how we revised the model before implementation was the level of fine charged for overdue requested items. We initially proposed £5 a day; student feedback led to a reduction to £2 a day. The benefits of this process included:

- the initially higher fine provoked a response, leading to engagement with the process from users
- students were able to claim a moral victory
- the library was seen as responsive, which facilitated later discussions; we had face-to-face meetings wherever possible, which enabled us to explain our thinking while demonstrating that we had an open mind.

ETHOS

Another important element that helped us with communication and persuasion was the ethos that we developed.

The key points which we always came back to were:
- positive
- pro-active
- personalised
- simple
- clear
- consistent.

We continue to return to these points when developing other new policies and services and in our interactions with users.

MEASURING SUCCESS AND GATHERING FEEDBACK

Flexible loans has contributed to a picture of overall improvement in the perception of library services at the University of York. National Student Survey (NSS) scores have increased from 74% in 2011 to 82% in 2012 and 87% in 2013. In addition our LibQUAL+ survey results have also seen an upward trend in satisfaction.
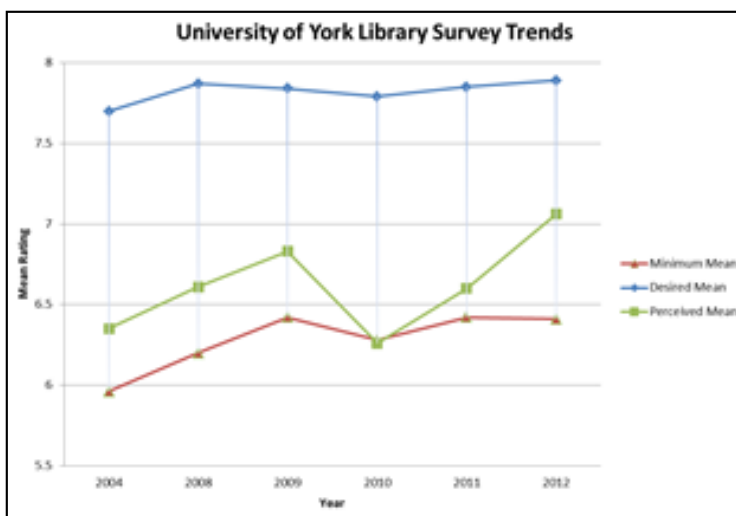

Fig 1 LibQual scores

It is also worth noting that we have seen some significant improvement in NSS scores from students in departments where satisfaction with the library has bumped along at a low level for many years. The following example demonstrates the difference that can result from engaging with users: we received consistent negative feedback from one humanities department (staff and students) before and after implementation of flexible loans; we spent a lot of time responding by email and face to face, engaging in wider discussions and developing other initiatives. This effort has been rewarded with the library satisfaction score for this department rising from 70% in 2012 to 90% in 2013.

In addition to monitoring the top-level measures of success we have carefully analysed and responded to a wide range of specific feedback since the introduction of the new model. For example,
'changes to the loan system are wonderful, a huge improvement'.

Common negative themes included some embedded issues such as the status of academic staff and questions surrounding our motivations for making changes.
'… it would be a good idea … to ensure that the library's policies towards academic staff reflect their status as professionals…'
'I believe that the main objective of this new policy is to raise funds from the student and staff fines – which I view as unacceptable.'

Our flexible loans model relied on creating a 'community spirit', but some of the negative feedback we received missed this point.

'… academic staff do not have time, during term, to go to the library at short notice. The library is poorly located. It's a 10–15 minute return walk…'
'… which I believe is discriminatory against PhD students who do not live close to the campus, particularly if they have other responsibilities (as I do), such as caring for a small child, making regular attendance difficult or impossible …'

Pointing out why the changes were needed and how the overall model benefited everyone resulted in most people having a moment of enlightenment. They began to understand the challenges facing libraries in making resources available for a large community of users and that we were trying to be as fair as possible. It was heartening to find that the policy made sense.

'I'd like to compliment you and all the library staff for the job you're doing as the system has worked very well for my module. I've been through the feedback forms and have asked within class and can report that no one has commented on problems accessing materials, so many thanks'

METRICS

Detailed circulation metrics formed an important element of the work on flexible loans. Our primary aim was for our metrics to tell us stories and add to the feedback picture of how things were working for our users. The key metrics that indicate the impact of our model are as follows:

Our fines income proves we have enabled a dramatic decrease in the amount of fines being paid by our users since the introduction of flexible loans in October 2012.
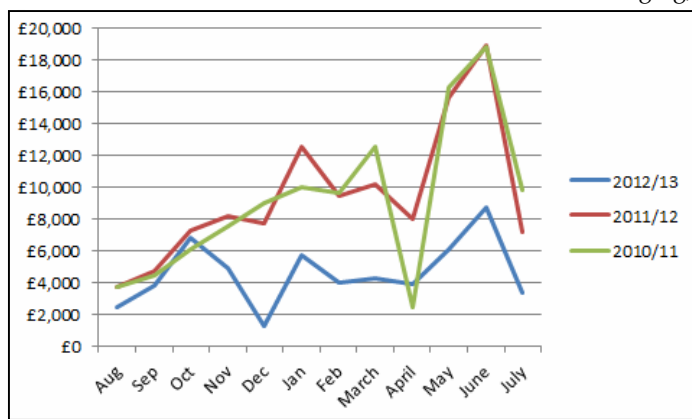

Fig 2 Fines paid

Percentage of stock on loan has proved that allowing users to borrow books for as long as they want has not led to empty library shelves, and we've
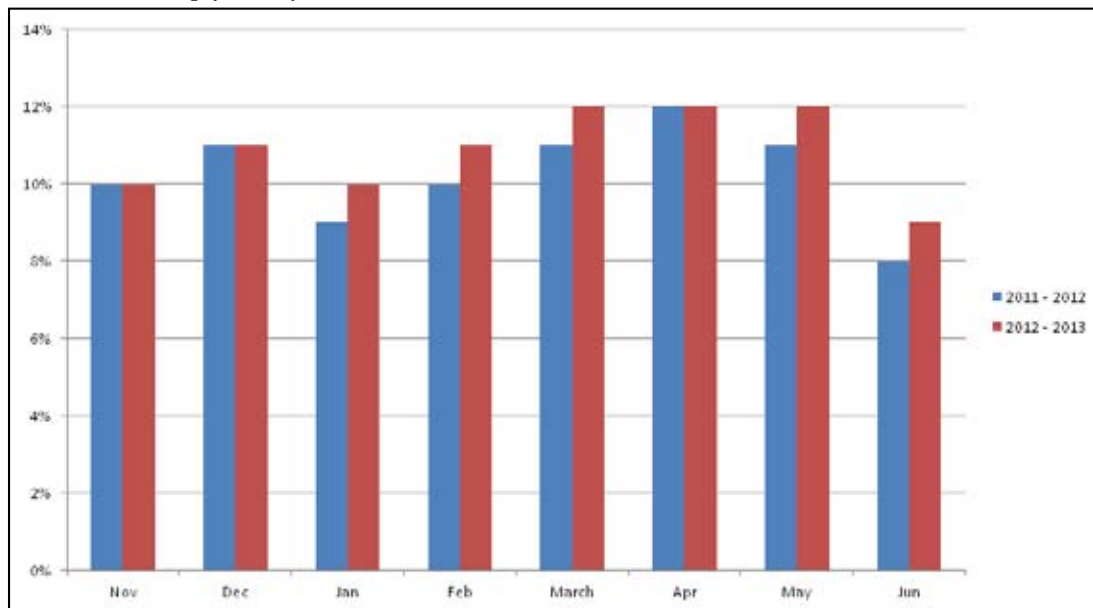
seen only a slight increase in the amount of stock out on loan at any one time. We do not see any trends that are a cause for concern.

Critically, the £2 a day fine on requested items (reduced from the proposed £5 in response to user feedback) appears to be working as an incentive for users to return items on time. Users are placing an average of 152 requests per day and 80% of those items are returned on time. The most common overdue period for the remaining 20% is only one day.

LESSONS LEARNED

Working on flexible loans has engaged and energised staff in all sections across the library; we have developed a different way of working together and learned that we can be radical! There is no doubt that it was also hard work and challenging; there are no similar loan models out there to refer to and no colleagues on hand to offer advice. However, everyone involved learned new things as the project progressed and many of the project group gained confidence from taking part in the decision-making process.

The engagement with users embedded in our approach has built relationships both internal and external to the department. The opportunity for users to come on board, helping to refine the model, problem solve, guide and criticise us has been very welcome on both sides and our approach has provided inspiration for a new way of working which is now permeating all our activity.

Fig 3 Level of loans

The speed with which we completed the work took everyone out of their comfort zone and in particular we found the university governance structure was not set up to travel with us at that speed - we took only seven months to move from idea to implementation. However, we did not allow bureaucracy to hold us back and we have demonstrated that it is both possible and productive to move more quickly.

In the early stages we lost focus on documenting our discussions, findings and decisions, and got carried away with being innovative.

There were also periods of doubt, which we named locally as our 'hold our nerve moments'. The immediate easy option would have been to concede to the demands of the vocal few (mostly academic staff), but this would not have been in the interests of the majority student population and would have made the model as complex and misunderstood as our previous loans system. Having the backing and support of senior management was critical during these moments.

It was worth it!

Flexible loans at York has made a notable impact on our student experience, in particular leading to improved stock circulation and increased user engagement. We have also received positive feedback from academic staff, with the majority understanding the rationale and the benefits.

It has provided us with an internal best practice case study that demonstrates how the release of staff creativity can lead to innovative service improvement. This has been acknowledged by the university, with the project team being recognised in two internal rewards schemes: we hold a University of York Vice-Chancellor's Gold Award for Excellence, and all the project staff received a 'Making the Difference' award.

Finally, we have had lots of interest in our model from across the sector, including invitations to present at the Northern Collaboration Conference and the national Lean Management Conference. Several institutions have visited us in person or arranged telephone conference calls to obtain more detail about our approach.

'@UoYLibrary: Always good to see my old home library pressing ahead with excellent ideas :)'

Conclusion

As a response to higher student fees leading to higher expectations and library customer dissatisfaction with library loans, the University of York has developed and implemented a loans model that encapsulates the university's values of excellence and inclusivity. By developing the concept of 'community responsibility' and by providing an innovative and responsive service to customers, the university has seen improved NSS results. Other quality measures are already indicating improvement, with the 2012 Library Survey results demonstrating a 7% increase in satisfaction on average.

Find out more:
http://www.york.ac.uk/library/borrowing/

Get in touch:
jackie.knowles@york.ac.uk
sue.elphinstone@york.ac.uk
christine.ellwood@york.ac.uk

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