



**The evolution of library  
public services from the  
staff point of view -  
*The Italian Case of the Bocconi Library***

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## **Abstract**

*In the history of Italian libraries, public services have developed very late since -from an historical point of view - acquisition and preservation of materials were libraries first priorities. Nevertheless, in recent years the quality of library public services in Italy has emerged as a critical problem to solve. An example of solution is represented by the case of the Bocconi University Library in Milan. The Bocconi Library has developed an organizational model to improve both the efficiency of public services and the working conditions for the staff. This work first discusses the principles that inspired the model such as the factory model – the library as a factory – the job modification and rotation and the training of the staff. The model itself is then illustrated. It is presented how the whole process has been applied successfully to reshape the tasks both of the permanent staff of the library and of the part-time staff, such as non-permanents or students. Finally, this paper describes how this experience has been shared in four courses of AIB (Italian Libraries Association).*

## **Introduction**

In recent years, in Italy a process of gradual change in the managing of library public services has started. The work is still in progress but it gradually seems to be completed. The focus is mainly on human resources: the role of knowledge resources as the engine of organizations has become widely recognized. Successful organizations tend to be those that continually innovate relying on skills and knowledge of their staff. An important aspect of that is the interrelationship between knowledge being created, captured and stored at the key points.

How can a knowledge management perspective help librarians in the public services? Can the incorporation of ideas about knowledge processes lead to greater effectiveness both for the library (the organization) and operating processes? Bocconi University librarians tried to answer to these questions through the creation of an organization model applied to the access department of the library.

## **The Italian context**

From an historical point of view, acquisition and storage of books were libraries' first priorities in Italy. Early libraries provided limited access to bibliographical collections, and almost no assistance. For instance, all collections were located in closed stacks and users were discouraged by librarians to read books, because the preservation of them was the most important goal for libraries. During fascism -in the 1930s- the most important Italian handbook about public services (Camerani 1938) suggested to librarians at the circulation desk to evaluate the moral and ethical content of books, and to discourage the checkouts of those collections which did not fit with the culture of that dictatorship.

It is only in 1984 that the Associazione Italiana Biblioteche (Italian Libraries Association) (AIB) organized a national congress whose aim was to study the services offered by the libraries to their users, but no paper presented took into consideration the professional training of the staff in the access department. Italian librarians usually evaluate and assess the number of books, staff and users; facts and figures that are certainly useful and functional to understand the value of a library however till 1990 they didn't examine the users' and staff's satisfaction.

So, even if librarians knew the importance of all activities that form the public services, these traditionally have been considered less important than the other departments in the library. Concerning professional literature – for instance – it is quite difficult to read Italian articles about daily activities such as stack management, circulation or overdue policies. Even the professional training for librarians in Italy, has been devoted to cataloguing and other technical matters, so that librarians in public services learnt how to do their job only by practicing. The staff members themselves were often recruited without the appropriate skills and, usually, to be selected for public services in a library was a sort of penalty. Will taking a knowledge and knowledge management approach help to fill the gaps and open up new possibilities?

## **A problem to solve in the Bocconi Library (facts and figures)**

Bocconi University Library - founded in 1903 - holds a collection of about 750.000 books and 12.000 academic journals, but from my point of view it is significant to point out that the library is open 81 hours per week from Monday to Saturday. In 2008 it was open 268 days and 129.609 circulation transactions were carried out and 480.706 users came to study in the library (about 2.200 users per day). The department that keeps the library open and serves these users is organized as follows: 11 clerical staff and 4 supervisors (permanent staff), 7 employees (non permanent staff) and 43 students (a student works for the library only for 150 hours in a year). It is quite difficult to manage such a complex situation inheriting the Italian modus operandi described in the previous paragraph.

Therefore in 2002 Bocconi University Library carried out a review of the organization of the staff and procedures of this department. A number of problems were identified:

- the number of staff members at the front office was insufficient in specific hours that were particularly crowded -- in some cases, the users had to stay in line for 15 minutes to check out a book;
- the back office activities (for instance book shelving) were badly organized, or not organized at all;
- non uniform workload for the staff;
- no job description;
- no standard procedures for problem situations.

The question was: how to deliver a better service to users and, at the same time, to improve the working conditions for the library staff?

The re-organization strategy was planned with the help of a consultant in work organization. The analysis began by taking into consideration the distribution of the workload among the staff. First, every day of a typical week was divided into three sections - red, yellow and green – the red corresponds to the maximum number of circulation transactions and the green corresponds to the minimum activity (see figure 1).

11,30-12,00	149	12,30-13,00	140	11,30-12,00	108	11,30-12,00	103	11,00-11,30	111
10,00-10,30	131	15,30-16,00	133	16,30-17,00	105	17,00-17,30	99	10,30-11,00	110
11,00-11,30	114	11,00-11,30	129	11,00-11,30	101	15,30-16,00	93	11,30-12,00	108
15,30-16,00	112	11,30-12,00	124	17,00-17,30	97	10,30-11,00	88	10,00-10,30	92
12,00-12,30	110	12,00-12,30	121	12,00-12,30	92	12,30-13,00	88	14,30-15,00	87
12,30-13,00	107	10,30-11,00	113	15,30-16,00	90	17,30-18,00	88	9,30-10,00	79
15,00-15,30	105	16,00-16,30	106	17,30-18,00	88	12,00-12,30	85	12,00-12,30	78
13,00-13,30	100	14,00-14,30	101	16,00-16,30	85	11,00-11,30	83	12,30-13,00	73
9,00-9,30	94	13,00-13,30	88	18,00-18,30	85	16,00-16,30	83	16,30-17,00	71
14,30-15,00	88	13,30-14,00	87	10,00-10,30	78	13,00-13,30	82	18,00-18,30	71
16,00-16,30	88	17,30-18,00	85	12,30-13,00	72	9,00-9,30	77	13,00-13,30	70
14,00-14,30	86	15,00-15,30	81	13,00-13,30	71	15,00-15,30	68	14,00-14,30	61
13,30-14,00	78	16,30-17,00	75	9,30-10,00	68	14,30-15,00	67	15,00-15,30	61
16,30-17,00	73	9,30-10,00	73	14,30-15,00	63	9,30-10,00	65	16,00-16,30	61
18,00-18,30	73	18,00-18,30	69	14,00-14,30	62	13,30-14,00	59	15,30-16,00	54
19,00-19,30	67	18,30-19,00	68	15,00-15,30	54	14,00-14,30	50	19,00-19,30	50
17,00-17,30	64	9,00-9,30	66	9,00-9,30	52	20,00-20,30	47	13,30-14,00	49
17,30-18,00	62	14,30-15,00	64	21,30-22,00	50	8,30-9,00	44	17,30-18,00	47
9,30-10,00	61	17,00-17,30	60	13,30-14,00	45	19,00-19,30	40	18,30-19,00	43
18,30-19,00	57	21,30-22,00	50	18,30-19,00	42	18,30-19,00	35	19,30-20,00	37
19,30-20,00	39	8,30-9,00	40	8,00-8,30	33	18,00-18,30	29	20,00-20,30	34
8,30-9,00	36	8,00-8,30	37	19,00-19,30	28	8,00-8,30	23	21,00-21,30	30
21,30-22,00	35	19,30-20,00	34	8,30-9,00	23	19,30-20,00	21	8,30-9,00	27
8,00-8,30	27	19,00-19,30	33	19,30-20,00	17	16,30-17,00	14	8,00-8,30	26
20,00-20,30	26	20,00-20,30	16	20,00-20,30	16	20,30-21,00	8	21,30-22,00	21
20,30-21,00	20	20,30-21,00	7	20,30-21,00	7	21,00-21,30	0	9,00-9,30	16
21,00-21,30	11	22,00-22,30	6	22,00-22,30	6	21,30-22,00	0	20,30-21,00	14
22,00-22,30	4	22,30-23,00	2	22,30-23,00	2	22,00-22,30	0	22,00-22,30	2
22,30-23,00	0	21,00-21,30	0	21,00-21,30	0	22,30-23,00	0	22,30-23,00	0

Figure 1 - Circulation transactions per day and hour (from Monday to Friday)

Then, the same approach was applied to the analysis of users' habits and identified the peaks in accessing the library (figure 2).

14,00-14,30	444	14,00-14,30	506	14,00-14,30	504	16,00-16,30	397	12,00-12,30	381
13,00-13,30	411	13,00-13,30	455	13,00-13,30	404	10,30-11,00	392	10,30-11,00	329
12,00-12,30	403	16,00-16,30	439	12,00-12,30	403	12,30-13,00	382	12,30-13,00	329
16,00-16,30	395	12,30-13,00	425	10,30-11,00	384	13,00-13,30	375	13,00-13,30	329
12,30-13,00	377	12,00-12,30	404	12,30-13,00	373	14,00-14,30	375	14,00-14,30	328
10,30-11,00	348	13,30-14,00	390	10,00-10,30	344	12,00-12,30	369	15,00-15,30	320
13,30-14,00	338	10,30-11,00	333	13,30-14,00	324	14,30-15,00	345	14,30-15,00	286
10,00-10,30	330	17,30-18,00	326	16,00-16,30	319	13,30-14,00	304	10,00-10,30	268
15,30-16,00	295	18,00-18,30	305	14,30-15,00	298	10,00-10,30	289	13,30-14,00	267
11,30-12,00	294	10,00-10,30	293	17,30-18,00	284	18,00-18,30	254	11,00-11,30	248
18,00-18,30	289	14,30-15,00	289	18,00-18,30	284	17,30-18,00	253	16,00-16,30	246
17,30-18,00	255	15,30-16,00	281	18,30-19,00	256	11,30-12,00	241	11,30-12,00	238
11,00-11,30	249	11,00-11,30	277	11,30-12,00	249	16,30-17,00	227	15,30-16,00	233
18,30-19,00	240	11,30-12,00	261	17,00-17,30	236	18,30-19,00	222	17,30-18,00	210
14,30-15,00	234	19,00-19,30	219	11,00-11,30	231	15,00-15,30	205	18,00-18,30	206
16,30-17,00	218	15,00-15,30	215	16,30-17,00	223	15,30-16,00	202	19,30-20,00	191
15,00-15,30	215	19,30-20,00	213	15,30-16,00	215	11,00-11,30	189	9,30-10,00	190
19,00-19,30	204	9,30-10,00	190	15,00-15,30	193	9,30-10,00	183	19,00-19,30	190
17,00-17,30	203	18,30-19,00	190	19,00-19,30	187	17,00-17,30	180	17,00-17,30	186
9,30-10,00	197	16,30-17,00	180	19,30-20,00	182	19,30-20,00	175	18,30-19,00	185
19,30-20,00	192	17,00-17,30	168	9,30-10,00	174	19,00-19,30	172	9,00-9,30	177
9,00-9,30	177	9,00-9,30	163	9,00-9,30	162	9,00-9,30	170	8,30-9,00	175
20,00-20,30	152	20,00-20,30	157	20,00-20,30	157	8,30-9,00	131	16,30-17,00	166
8,30-9,00	128	8,30-9,00	129	8,30-9,00	155	20,00-20,30	75	20,00-20,30	143
20,30-21,00	121	20,30-21,00	111	20,30-21,00	111	8,00-8,30	0	20,30-21,00	108
21,00-21,30	80	21,00-21,30	63	21,00-21,30	63	20,30-21,00	0	21,00-21,30	48
21,30-22,00	64	21,30-22,00	51	21,30-22,00	51	21,00-21,30	0	21,30-22,00	48
22,00-22,30	22	22,00-22,30	19	22,00-22,30	19	21,30-22,00	0	22,00-22,30	19
8,00-8,30	0	8,00-8,30	0	8,00-8,30	0	22,00-22,30	0	22,30-23,00	7
22,30-23,00	0	22,30-23,00	0	22,30-23,00	0	22,30-23,00	0	8,00-8,30	0

Figure 2 - Visits per day and hour (from Monday to Friday)

Finally, the staff shifts were verified to point out the key problems concerning the scheduling of the shifts themselves.

	A	B	C	N°	dip	A	B	C	N°	dip	A	B	C	N°	dip	A	B	C	N°	dip	A	B	C	N°	dip		
8,00-8,30				5					5					5					5						5		
8,30-9,00				5					5					5					5						5		
9,00-9,30				5					5					5					5						5		
9,30-10,00				5					5					5					5						5		
10,00-10,30				11					11					11					11						11		
10,30-11,00				11					11					11					11						11		
11,00-11,30				11					11					11					11						11		
11,30-12,00				11					11					11					11						11		
12,00-12,30				11					11					11					11						11		
12,30-13,00				11					11					11					11						11		
13,00-13,30				11					11					11					11						11		
13,30-14,00				11					11					11					11						11		
14,00-14,30				11					11					11					11						11		
14,30-15,00				11					11					11					11						11		
15,00-15,30				11					11					11					11						11		
15,30-16,00				11					11					11					11						11		
16,00-16,30				5					5					5					5						5		
16,30-17,00				5					5					5					5						5		
17,00-17,30				5					5					5					5						5		
17,30-18,00				5					5					5					5						5		
18,00-18,30				5					5					5					5						5		
18,30-19,00				5					5					5					5						5		
19,00-19,30				5					5					5					5						5		
19,30-20,00				5					5					5					5						5		
20,00-20,30				5					5					5					5						5		
20,30-21,00				5					5					5					5						5		
21,00-21,30				5					5					5					5						5		
21,30-22,00				5					5					5					5						5		
22,00-22,30				5					5					5					5						5		
22,30-23,00				5					5					5					5						5		
	7	7,5	7			7	7,5	7			7	7	7			7	7	7			6	8	8		4	0	0
	7	7,5	7			14	15	14			21	22	21			28	29	28			34	37	36		38	37	36

Figure 3 – Shifts of the permanent staff

The re-organization has been based on quantitative data, since our first target was to achieve the most effective use of the resources and capabilities of the staff to improve efficiency. The term capabilities emphasizes the key role of strategic management in adapting, integrating and reconfiguring internal and external organizational skills, resources and functional competences to match the requirements of a changing environment.

As a matter of fact, the Bocconi University Library had to face some structural changes in its organization. First, it was necessary to increase the number of opening hours of the library. Second, it was not possible to increase the permanent staff. The evolution of the structure is therefore toward an open organization where the permanent staffs have to work with non-permanents, sharing skills and knowledge.

The purpose of the re-organization was, thus, to improve efficiency and – at the same time – to make knowledge, information and skills circulate among the permanent and non-permanent staff. Moreover, the aim was to improve the quality of working conditions of the staff through a better distribution of the activities of front office and back office and a weekly schedule for all of the members of the staff.

### The organizational model

What kind of organizational model was the most appropriate for the public services of an academic library? The management theories offered different solutions, no one of them completely fit with our needs. What was done, therefore, was to take some features of three of these models, and to combine them together.

The first organizational model taken into consideration is the factory model. The “Ford model” in which the most important elements are the standardization of activities (all the pieces must be equal to one another), the presence of a supervisor for every shift and the temporary job.

The second model recommends job modification and rotation. To adopt this technique we started by asking the staff members what they like to do best and what they enjoy doing least. No guarantees should be made that staff will never have to do work they dislike but, when an organizational model is possible, preferences should be considered. Job modification includes redesigning any part of the content of the job, including tasks, functions, and responsibilities, to match the individual’s needs, as long as the needs of the organization are also met. It also included job rotation, which is a way to more equitably distribute the most stressful work duties, but also to provide equitable time for more

desirable and variable professional tasks. The model suggests a changing in the activity every 2 hours to avoid stress and burnout of the staff. So every 2 hours staff members change from the front to the back office and *vice versa*.

The third model we have implemented, adopts communication and listening to improve the general environment. Meetings and written manuals helped the staff members to share the knowledge of how to do their job and to evidence their importance in the library. In fact, access services positions typically involve clerical tasks that cause some to perceive their roles as unimportant. Reality clearly points to the contrary. In access services, the performance of front-line and public services staff represents the library to its users. In-house training, interdepartmental training, coaching and mentoring have been used to improve professional development of the staff and, at the same time, to increase their job satisfaction.

The elements that compose the Bocconi Library organizational model are: first for every work shift, there are different paths, each path assures the rotation between activities and the job rotation every two hours. There are front office desks to occupy and back office activities to do.

### How to make knowledge visible

Figure 4 is an example of the daily schedule. This schedule is prepared for every day of the week by a supervisor. There are two main sections: front office and back office. For instance, the shift A1 it can be seen the rotation between front office and back office. The staff changes the activities every two hours. This schedule can be - at a first glance – very rigid but, on the contrary, it responds to the need of visualization of knowledge. (I know what I do today, I know what my colleagues do today, I know what my organization requires).

Making knowledge visible makes it easier for employees to locate and use it. Knowledge developments, roles, relationships, dynamics and conceptualizations can all be represented in visual form often far more effectively than in words or lists. There is an increasing realization that visualization can be an extremely potent tool and method of working with knowledge.

Time	Front Office		Back Office			Lunch Time Dinner Time
	Reception	Circulation Desks	Stack Management in the Reading Rooms	Stack Management in the Central Storage	Shelf-Reading	
8:30-9:00	A3	A2	A1	A4		
9:00-9:30	A3 B1	A2 B2	A1 B3	A4	B4	
9:30-10:00	A3 B1	A2 B2	A1 B3	A4	B4	
10:00-10:30	A3 B1	A1 B2	B3 A2	A4	B4	
10:30-11:00	A4 B3	A1 B1	A3 A2	B4	B2	
11:00-11:30	A4 B3	A1 B1	A3 A2	B4	B2	
11:30-12:00	A4 B1	B2 B3	A3 B4			A1 A2
12:00-13:00	B1	B2 B3	B4			A1 A2 A3 A4
13:00-13:30	A1	A2 B3	B4			B1 B2 B3 B4
13:30-14:00	A1	A2 A3	A4			B1 B2 B3 B4
14:00-14:30	A1 B2	A2 B1	A3 A4	B3	A4	
14:30-15:00	A1 B2	A2 B1	A3 B4	B3	A4	
15:00-15:30	B1 B2	B3 A2	A1 A4 B4	B2	A3	
15:30-16:00	B1 A3	B3 A2	A1 A4 B4	B2		
16:00-16:30	B1 A3	B3 B2	A1 A4 C3	C1 B4	C4 C2	
16:30-17:00	B1 C1	B3 B2	B4 B3	C4 B4	C4 C2	
17:00-17:30	C3	B1 B2	B4 B3	C4	C2	
17:30-18:00	C3	C1 C2	C4		C2	
18:00-18:30	C3	C1 C2	C4		C2	
18:30-19:00	C3	C1	C4		C2	
19:00-19:30	C3	C3	C1		C2	C4
19:30-20:00	C2	C3	C4		C2	C1
20:00-20:30	C2		C4		C2	C3
20:30-21:00	C2	C1	C4		C2	
21:00-21:30	C2	C3	C1		C2	
21:30-22:00	C1	C3	C4		C2	
22:00-22:30	C1	C3	C4	C2		

Figure 4 – daily schedule

## **Standardization: procedures and checklists**

The organizational model is supported by procedures and checklists method. The main purpose is to share knowledge and information among the staff. Identifying a library's best practice and translating it into a procedure is not easy for a couple of reasons. First, there's a large gap between what a task looks like in a procedure manual and what it is in reality. Second, there's another gap between what people think they do and what they really do.

Procedures are the direct consequence of the application of the Ford Model. The questions were how do standards influence the work of the staff in the library? Do standards contribute to organizational learning processes? Standardization has reached its climax in the Ford Model. Standards regulate the sequence of tasks the worker has to perform and based on time and motion studies, a one-best way standard dictates the worker how to perform these tasks. Does standardization kill the creativity? The answer is no because in the Bocconi Library procedures and checklists are written and often revised according to suggestions from the staff. They are a useful guide to do the job.

The theories of learning propose that standardization offers an opportunity for workers to contribute their know-how and experience, thus tacit knowledge become transferred into organizational standards. These in turn are disseminated and shared throughout the library, a process which then drives organizational learning. Each procedure has been named with a number (there are about 23 procedures for the whole department) and it is divided into different steps (all steps have been numbered). An example of a step-by-step checklist is represented by how to open and close the library.

## **Non permanent staff and students**

The evolution of organizations – in general – and of libraries – in particular shows that staff of different composition (permanent, non permanent and part time) has to work together. It's a continuous change in the relationship between the individual, the working group and the goals. The organization has always to define itself.

Another challenge is to know how and when to open the boundaries of the library, to share learning with users. An example is represented by the student employees. Students are hired also to know their points of view on the library itself. Bocconi students receive the job description and they have to fill in an acceptance form, where they have to indicate their availability for shifts (day and night shifts). The Bocconi Library schedules the shifts and arranges a professional training with different members of the library staff. The training consists in the explanation of the job, and at the same time, students learn all library procedures. Finally, the students are strongly encouraged to comment these procedures.

The advantages are evident: the library has shared the knowledge of the procedures with its main users, the procedures handled by students have been changed in a better way, and the library staff members improved their professional performance. Student employees fit into both categories, employees and customers. As a result, they have much to offer in terms of insight and feedback from their perspective, as users of, and staff of the library.

To summarize, the progress achieved by Bocconi University Library after this re-organization is twofold: first, the whole Access Department has been re-engineered to gain in efficiency, second, a process of knowledge management focused on the effectiveness of service has become a standard. The dilemma that means the organizational tension between process – the way matters are formally organized – and practice – the way things actually get done – is then answered.

## **Sharing the model**

AIB – Italian Libraries Association – asked me to share the Bocconi University Library experience and organization through a national course. The Association realized that in Italy there was a gap to fill. The title of this course was "Organization and management of public services in a library: from shelf-reading to reference." The main purpose of the program was to present all activities expected for library public services according to professional literature. After that I illustrated the organization model as a way to better arrange the staff employed in the different activities.

The model itself has been presented during 4 editions of AIB courses to about 110 librarians from all over Italy, from 2007 to 2008. The success of this course shows that Italian librarians had problems in organizing the services offered to their users. They need professional training and tools to manage activities to avoid the job frustration that emerged during the courses as a direct consequence.

And also the courses evidenced that the quality of the services offered was very poor.

During the courses I distributed a survey taken from professional literature to analyze the status of access departments in the Italian libraries. The outcomes of the 110 surveys were quite exemplifying for the national situation: no standards procedures, no job description and even the activities were different from one library to another; the name itself of the department was a problem (the unnamed department).

But there is also good news that came out from the courses such as the awareness of the problem; Italian librarians know that they have to improve the public services of their libraries. And that there is a new generation of trained librarians who are emerging. Finally, despite the Italian tradition more and more librarians are putting our users' needs first.

## **Future directions**

The AIB (Associazione Italiana Biblioteche – Libraries Italian Association) has realized that the choice of the topic (public services and knowledge management) has been necessary to fill the need (and the gap) that Italian librarians felt. The Association is very concerned about it and it is still considering the possibility to spend more time and resources to go on with the discussion of these themes. Furthermore, there is the intention to focus to the professional training of librarians through specific courses; the Association as a matter of fact is now considering the hypothesis of lifelong learning.

The idea is that it is not valuable to limit the learning experience to lessons and classrooms but it is important to extend the professional growth through the sharing of teaching materials and the opening of an online forum where it can be possible to discuss and work together. The idea of a forum as a teaching method responds directly to the knowledge management practice where librarians can share their knowledge and experience with their colleagues. In this case the knowledge management would be then the main tool of a national project for the AIB to disseminate to the Italian librarian community experiences and practices for the management of the staff in the library public services.

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### Brief biographical information:

Manuela D'Urso was born in Milan, Italy in 1968. She graduated in foreign languages and literatures (summa cum laude) from IULM – University Institute for Modern Languages, Milan, Italy in 1994. From 1993 she has been librarian at the University of Pavia, then from 1996 the Politecnico of Milan and from 1999 to 2001 at the University of Trento. In 2001 she joined the Bocconi University Library as head of Access Department. In 2000 she has been granted with the European fellowship "Leonardo Da Vinci". In this framework she has spent two months working at the "Bibliothèque Cujas" of the Université Paris 1, in Paris. From 1996 she is a member of the AIB (Italian Libraries Association) and since 2007 she has taught several courses for the AIB. She has presented four works in different congresses of AIB and published four papers, related to the topic of public services.