Are best practices really best? A review of best practices in library literature

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EBLIP6, University of Salford, June 27-30, 2011
Best practices – history and definition

• Benchmarking – began in manufacturing - process of identifying the best practice in relation to products and processes
• Goal – to measure the performance of one’s own organization against another organization(s)
• Best practice – a practice that has been shown to produce superior performance
Purpose of research

• Determine if there is a shared definition of “best practices” in library literature
• Determine if claims about best practices are evidence-based
• Is there a predictable and reliable set of methods being used to establish that a process is a best practice?
Methodology

• Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA) searched for “best practice” or “best practices” in the title – November 1, 2010
• 362 articles were retrieved
• Book reviews, articles dealing with specific technology issues, articles announcing publications were eliminated
• Articles that dealt with substantive issues were used in the study – 88 in total
Methodology

• The 88 articles were then carefully read and the following was recorded – is best practice defined, methodology for determining best practice, and the path towards calling something a best practice

• articles were categorized according to the methodology used to determine best practice
Methodology used

n=88

Mixed Methods
Survey/Interview
How we do it
My opinion
Other
Literature Review
Experimental

Series 1
Methods

1. Literature review
2. How we do it in my library
3. Survey / Interview
4. Empirical / Experiment
5. My opinion
6. Other
7. Mixed methods
Mixed Methods

What topics are studied?

Is Best practice defined?

How is Best Practice Identified?
Discussion

1. What do we mean when we say “Best Practice”

**Number of articles that defined best practice**

- Articles with definition
  n=14
- Articles without definition
  n=74
Discussion (cont’d)

2. Standards, guidelines and best practices ....

3. Papers that are well done include assessment/measurement of the best practice.

4. Policy environment ...
Conclusion

1. Claims about best practice are not evidence-based in the library literature we sampled.

2. No predictable and reliable set of methods being used to deliver information and advice on best practice.

3. “Best Practice” may reduce us to merely replicating practice, both good and bad.

4. A Caution and a Call