

Organizational Analysis 2: Environmental Scan

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Environmental Scan

Political

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Little Free Library Ltd. (LFL) is beholden to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) regarding management policies, including a requirement to support a board of directors to guide the organization's vision and resources. According to the IRS' Compliance Guide (2018), three things may jeopardize a public charity's tax-exempt status: the public charity cannot excessively compensate internal employees, it cannot intervene in a political campaign, and it cannot lobby. This guide also specifies which tax forms the nonprofit must use, the records that must be kept, as well as other rules regarding governance and disclosure. For a public charity, governance is very important. The IRS outlines that a 501(c)(3) nonprofit must also have a mission statement, organizational documents, formal governance policies, financial statements, and above all, it must maintain transparency in all of its records.

To establish a certified Little Free Library book exchange center, a person must register their exchange center with the nonprofit and display a charter sign. The "Frequently-Asked Questions" (FAQ) section of the Little Free Library (n.d. -a) website notes that each city has its own rules and that applying for permits can take some time. Several tips are offered for dealing with local laws such as avoiding the need to ask for permission from the local government by placing the library on private property, consideration of the municipality's size may cause delays in government approval, and the need to be considerate of other people's rights such as space for daily activities like walking and right of way regulations. The Little Free Library FAQ section also addresses other common concerns such as liability issues and vandalism. Since the topic of zoning regulations comes up frequently, the site includes a document for tips on starting your library and receiving approval from your local government on the location. An LFL steward may

have to deal with city rules, city council members, homeowners' associations, and neighbors. The organization stresses that one must work with all interested parties and abide by all applicable laws and municipal rules (Little Free Library, n.d.-d).

Since the stewards of each exchange center are responsible for their little library and therefore must handle any issues with local laws and ordinances, the parent organization should address more thoroughly the various legal issues that stewards are likely to encounter when they set up an exchange center in their neighborhood and possible ways to support those stewards in handling those scenarios.

Economic

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit public charity, Little Free Library's financial forms are publicly available and can be found on the following sites: *Charity Navigator*, *Guidestar*, and *ProPublica*. Guidestar (n.d.) has awarded LFL a 2019 Platinum "Seal of Transparency." According to Guidestar, LFL has distributed 35,100,00 books, enlisted 75,000 volunteers, and is present in 50 US states and 89 countries. There were a total of 75,000 Little Free Libraries in 2018. The volunteer Board of Directors has a small majority of male members, while most of the paid staff members are women. ProPublica (n.d.) includes six tax filings for Little Free Library (EIN #45-4043708), from its founding in 2012 to 2017, and it has posted a summary of the financial health of the organization. Between 2012 and 2017, LFL had a negative net income for three out of these six years.

A deeper dive into Little Free Library Ltd's Form 990 reveals several trends regarding income and organizational spending. When looking at the tax filings from 2012 to 2017, there are several primary sources of revenue evident: fundraising events, grant support, income from registrations and the sale of signage, and sales of Little Free Library products (ProPublica, n.d.).

LFL receives most of its grant income from other nonprofits, libraries, and local institutions. The organization also raises money from the sale of books and book exchange centers. In terms of expenses, the largest portion of LFL's costs is for employee salaries and benefits. Other significant spending includes the costs of technology, office rent, staff travel, and payroll taxes: these expenses increased substantially from 2012 to 2017 most likely due to an increase in the Lindahl, 2018 popularity of the organization. According to LFL's 2017 Form 990, the organization has worked with two independent contractors to produce the Libraries' boxes: one contractor was paid \$532,472 and another \$137,29; also, \$426,813 was spent to ship these libraries via UPS. This same Form 990 reports that the highest-paid employee was LFL Executive Director Todd Bol, who was paid \$136,578 for that fiscal year (ProPublica, n.d. -a).

Little Free Library is to be commended for earning Guidestar's 2019 "Seal of Transparency" which should prove useful in inspiring confidence not only in those individuals and foundations who financially support the organization, but also among the general public who are the customers of Little Free Libraries. In addition the increase in expenses paid toward contractors and the executive director demonstrates how the importance of Little Free Library to society has grown.

Social

Social factors significantly affect the Little Free Libraries organization. In their critical analysis of Little Free Libraries, Schmidt and Hale (2017) assert that the organization reflects the corporatization of a grassroots phenomenon and that the organization has not yet been assessed to verify the impact that it claims to make in the world. The article also states that Little Free Libraries in Canada were often located in affluent neighborhoods with a highly educated population. Specifically, Schmidt and Hale claim that LFL has not yet addressed the needs of

people who live in the “book deserts” of Calgary and Toronto. A contrary view is offered by Olson Beal and Burrow (2017) who argue that local LFL books exchange center locations do provide accessibility in locations with no public library. These authors report that their local library also maintains a LFL book exchange center. Olson Beal and Burrow (2017) conclude that LFL has had a positive effect on community building in many places. In addition Little Free Library effectively employs social media to promote the arrival of new books and that one local exchange center even serves as a socialization center. They also report that one local Rotary Club International has sponsored a mobile LFL library for the area. Which shows the strong connections that Little Free Libraries create within their community.

Since the work of the stewards is done on a volunteer basis, the social capital and related prestige of the organization is an important incentive. Therefore any loss of organizational prestige could have a negative effect on this relationship in that it could decrease interest in establishment of libraries or abandonment of libraries to prevent negative response due to association with LFL. Little Free Library, therefore should strive to focus on these areas of possible social inequality to ensure they continue their high social standing.

Technological

The Little Free Library has both administrative and distribution functions and it utilizes various technologies to accomplish its work. The administration relies on technology to maintain its infrastructure and serve the various needs of the staff and the Board of Directors. For its website, LFL utilizes several outside services, including Shopify (for maintaining its online store) and FormAssembly (to support its contact webforms). Designed by Moonlight Designs Studio the LFL website is built on WordPress and uses WP Rocket, a WordPress plugin, to facilitate quick loading. A decentralized organization of this size needs a customer relationship

management (CRM) service of some kind, although it is unclear which service LFL employs. A CRM service would provide critical support if LFL was subjected to a data breach. If LFL is not currently using a CRM service they should invest in choosing one that would best fit their needs.

In its distribution work, LFL sells and automatically registers its many book exchange centers. The book exchange centers sold by LFL's online store are similar in design: they are built of wood, plexiglass, and metal, and therefore require a reliable supply chain of these materials. In addition, LFL needs to rely on various shipping services to deliver the exchange centers to its customers.

The increasing digitization of reading materials may affect local interest in LFL exchange centers. As more and more reading materials become available in digital formats and file sharing becomes easier, will such technologies make LFL's exchange centers obsolete? This is unlikely because digital items are not universally available and the modes of delivery raise problems such as copyright infringement, file type incompatibilities, and digital rights management (or DRM) software (Kozlowski, 2019). It is possible, however, that digital distribution technology may provide an opportunity for LFL to become a provider of digital materials to personal digital devices. Small, digital exchange centers are well within the realm of possibility, and in fact have already been developed by outside sources by creating a hotspot so members of the community can access a digital library (Griese, 2016).

Environmental

Environmental factors impact every organization and LFL is no exception. However, environmental factors weigh heaviest on the distribution side of LFL's organization, as the LFL exchange centers and books provided within are in a physical medium exposed to the elements. The natural materials that make up the LFL exchange centers are susceptible to deterioration

due to moisture and temperature fluctuations. As such, the increased weather extremes (Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, n.d; Fourth National Climate Assessment, 2018) perpetuated by climate change may contribute to shortening the lifespan of these exchange centers and may prompt more frequent replacements and repairs.

There are over 80,000 LFL book exchange centers already in place in a variety of climate regions, so it is clear that they endure a variety of conditions. In addition to degradation, exchange centers may also suffer from tangential issues relating to climate change such as increased fire risk and rising sea levels. (Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, n.d; Fourth National Climate Assessment, 2018)

As all LFL book exchange centers are considered the responsibility of their stewards upon their arrival or construction, it is the stewards who shoulder the burden for their maintenance and replacement. As such, any factor that shortens the lifespan of these exchange centers will incur a cost to the stewards. Even mitigation practices such as providing shelter to the exchange center will increase the investment cost. The possibilities of rising costs is an area that LFL should research to determine if they can help provide financial support to stewards. In addition changing climate conditions may also affect usage rates of exchange centers, as they are typically accessed outdoors. This may create opportunities for LFL to look into digital options for book sharing.

Legal

There have been several legal disputes to Little Free Library installations and these cases may indicate future challenges for the organization. In Los Angeles, CA and Shreveport, LA city officials attempted to pause, at least temporarily, the sharing of books at LFL book exchange centers. In Los Angeles, stewards were allowed corrective power by applying for a permit as

required by local law. In Shreveport, LFL book exchanges were put on temporary hold due to a zoning violation, but the city eventually removed this hold after community outcry (Friedersdorf, n.d.).

These two examples demonstrate that legal challenges are a real risk for the LFL organization and its work. While some of these issues might be solved by paying local permit fees, it is unknown how many communities are affected by permitting challenges. Paying local permit fees may be an avenue for LFL to explore and may be a prudent choice for an organization dependent on community goodwill. Other issues with local laws include a homeowners association in Loveland, CO removing a Little Free Library book exchange center from a homeowners property with no reason for its removal stated. (Johnson, 2018). There have also been trademark disputes over the name “Little Free Libraries” and instances of people erecting unregistered boxes with the Little Free Library name (Krug, 2019).

With founder Tod Bol’s passing in 2018, a schism has formed between the organization and the family members. After the death of Bol in October 2018, his brother Tony became interim director but soon left the organization. The following January, Tony started “Share With Others” (Krug, 2019), a for-profit company that sells library boxes similar to LFL exchange centers. In response, Little Free Library filed a trademark claim for the Little Free Library name. This contention has had a negative impact on the image of both organizations, and therefore should be a priority for LFL to resolve.

SWOT Analysis for Little Free Library

<p style="text-align: center;">STRENGTHS (Internal)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low overhead costs for the maintenance of the organization. ● Exchange centers are user-friendly and widely available: currently located in more than 50,000 neighborhoods in 70 countries – and expanding. ● Publishes an international map of LFL exchange centers. ● A well-regarded organization with high social currency and support from over 27 organizations. ● Significant positive media coverage of LFL. 	<p style="text-align: center;">WEAKNESSES (Internal)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Oversight of the book exchange centers is by the steward not LFL. ● Limited control over books and other materials placed in the exchange centers. ● LFL book exchange centers exist mostly in affluent neighborhoods. ● Some stewards have censored reading materials, which violates the core values of the ALA.
<p style="text-align: center;">OPPORTUNITIES (External)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● LFL stewards can be connected to the broader “Maker Movement”. ● Join with public libraries and other local institutions to support local community-building initiatives, such as offering support to the homeless. ● Provide book exchanges to people in “book deserts” - Impact Library Program. ● Potential for collaboration with other organizations to increase literacy levels and promote reading in the population. ● LFL Action Book Club brings book clubs to local neighborhoods. ● Possibility of adding books in digital formats. 	<p style="text-align: center;">THREATS (External)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Relies on social capital - needs to be cautious of controversies and negative press. ● Some book exchange centers have been found to lower the usage of nearby public libraries. ● Existence of for-profit competitors. ● Environmental factors can greatly affect stewards financially. ● Heavily reliant on stewards for their time and for provision of materials. ● Some local zoning regulations make it difficult or impossible to establish LFL exchange centers. ● Ongoing trademark lawsuit filed against LFL by relatives of deceased LFL founder Todd Bol.

Strengths:

- **Low overhead costs for the maintenance of the organization**

Due to the small staff of fourteen and the board of directors there is little organizational bloat. For the volunteers, there are provided plans for building exchange centers and they are encouraged to repurpose containers to lower costs (Little Free Library, n.d.-a).

Additionally, the company uses the online store to supplement its income (ProPublica, n.d.).

- **Book exchange centers are widely available**

There are over 100,000 registered Little Free Library exchange centers in 108 countries, a truly worldwide distribution (Little Free Library, n.d.-c). The Impact Library Program has donated more than 1,000 Little Free Library book exchanges to neighborhoods where there is little access to books, also known as “book deserts” (Little Free Library, n.d.-c; Megan, 2015)

- **Book exchange centers are user-friendly**

The exchange centers are unmanned and self-service only, which allows 24/7 access to books. Community book exchange centers can be easily located via a map published on the Little Free Library website (Little Free Library, n.d.-c).

- **Garnered significant positive social currency and prestige**

There is significant media support for the LFL movement. Large news outlets have been reporting on Little Free Library since 2012, providing a wealth of positive news coverage and brand name recognition. The company has received many awards; such as the Literacy Award from *The Library of Congress*, the Movers and Shakers Award from the *Library Journal*, and 2017 Top-Rated Nonprofit Award from *GreatNonprofits*. LFL

maintains a platinum rating with transparency organization GuideStar, and has a wide range of partnerships with both nonprofit and for-profit companies, with 27 advertised on their website (Little Free Library, n.d.-c).

Weaknesses:

- **LFL does not regulate books and materials in the book exchange centers.**

There are issues of censorship amongst stewards, who are not bound to LIS core values (Kozak, 2019). Additionally, materials might not reflect the diverse needs of the community but LFL acknowledges that “censorship is not the answer” (Little Free Library, n.d.-c) (Megan, n.d.-a). One criticism of LFL is that exchange centers might be used as “dumping grounds” for unwanted books (Cottrell, 2018).

- **LFL book exchange centers tend to exist mostly in affluent neighborhoods.**

Questions have been raised about LFL’s claims that it provides books in “book deserts” (Schmidt & Hale, 2017). One study of LFL exchange centers found that in Toronto they were placed mostly in white, medium-to-high-income neighborhoods with easy access to public libraries. The same study concluded that nearly all of the book exchange centers in Calgary and Toronto were placed in neighborhoods where more than ¼ of residents had college degrees (Schmidt & Hale, 2017).

Opportunities

- **Continue to connect stewards with the “Maker Movement”**

Through creating LFL exchange centers of their own, stewards can express their creativity, connect with fellow DIY-ers, and join the Maker Movement (Pierson-Cox, 2014). Design competitions among stewards in San Francisco illustrate this possibility (Pathi, 2017). Creative collaborations amongst high school students and union carpenters in Southern

California (Lindahl, 2018; Southwest Carpenters, 2018) also point to LFL’s potential to connect with the Maker Movement.

- **Bolster collaborations with public libraries and involvement with community-building initiatives**

Per LFL’s website, over 600 public libraries use LFL “as an extension of their services.”

This suggests potential formalized partnerships (Cottrell, 2018; Neeley, n.d.).

- **Expand upon efforts to support literacy**

LFL has collaborated with literacy-promoting organizations such as First Book to provide free book resources for qualifying stewards (Little Free Library, n.d-e.). The Impact Library Program is helping bring book exchanges to low income neighborhoods and “book deserts” (Little Free Library, n.d -f). Joint efforts with additional organizations would allow Little Free Library to further its vision of supporting literacy everywhere.

- **Creatively promote a culture of reading through community-focused programs.**

Initiatives such as the introduction of the LFL Action Book Club bring book clubs to local neighborhoods (Little Free Library, n.d.-c).

- **Increase involvement with social justice-focused organizations and projects.**

In Georgia, LFL partnered with HomeStretch, a nonprofit organization that helps connect people who are socioeconomically underserved with “supportive housing and programs” (Dixon, 2018). In 2018, Southwest Carpenters and El Monte Coalition of Latino Professionals jointly created 25 LFL exchange centers, working to improve equity of access to books throughout El Monte, California (Lindahl, 2018; Southwest Carpenters, 2018).

- **Possibility of adding books in digital format**

Digital distribution technology may provide an opportunity for LFL to become a provider of small, digital exchange centers. There have already been similar centers developed by outside sources by creating a hotspot so members of the community can access a digital library (Griese, 2016).

Threats:

- **Relies on social capital - needs to be cautious of controversies and negative press.**

As public libraries are typically businesses funded and provided by the government, LFL operates outside this realm because their libraries run on individual's contributions. In order for LFLs to exist in a neighborhood and to succeed there must be the existence of shared norms around literacy importance in the community (Schmidt & Hale, 2017).

- **For-profit spinoff company**

The brother of LFL founder Todd Bol, has established a for-profit competitor company called Share With Others. This new company creates profit selling items for LFLs such as book exchange centers (Kirch, 2019).

- **In some neighborhoods, there is a conflict of interest with local public libraries.**

Claims have been made that LFL boxes in Washington DC lower the usage of nearby public libraries (Prince of Petworth, 2019).

- **Stewards have little control over external variables and could face a financial burden.**

There are many cases in which exchange centers have not been adequately maintained. In addition, vandalism has caused severe damage to some exchange centers (del Arte, 2016). Extreme changes in weather, as well, can lead to deterioration of exchange centers' offerings (Little Free Library, n.d.-c; Megan, n.d.-b). These variables can place a

sizable burden on volunteers if they encounter extra material costs, and spend unforeseen amounts of time and energy on repairs.

- **LFL book exchange removal because permits were not secured from local governments**

Instances of LFLs in cities such as Los Angeles, CA or Shreveport, LA being targeted as not following the city codes. Owners were asked to take down their LFLs or face fines if they did not acquire proper local permits before establishing their LFLs (Friedersdorf, 2015).

- **Current trademark lawsuit filed against LFL by relatives of deceased LFL founder Todd Bol**

Bol's brother filed applications for trademarks for LFL in 2019. The rest of Todd's family disagrees with the applications, especially the one involving the wording "wooden boxes with a storage area for books." This is because LFL works in support of other movements to promote the creation of book exchange centers, and does not require each book box to be registered with LFL (Kirch, 2019).

Vision and Mission Statements

Vision Statement:

Exchanging ideas is a foundation of human connection. Our goal is to significantly increase the accessibility of Little Free Libraries, and support literacy and meaningful community engagement regardless of location or circumstance.

Mission Statement:

Our mission is to connect readers and neighbors through local book sharing centers curated by the community.

Memo

Little Free Library Ltd. is a nonprofit with a global footprint that touches the lives of many people around the world. With that idea in mind, our group developed achievable mission and vision statements that were not only practical, but also aspirational and inspirational.

Through our environmental scan and SWOT analysis, we found that while the Little Free Library was a positive force for good, it had some issues that needed attention. Using that mindset, we developed positive impact vision and mission statements that rely on the organization's effectiveness, while addressing critical objections we found through comprehensive research.

Our group has a variety of designated roles and is highly collaborative. We collaborate asynchronously and synchronously. We use these methods based on instructional recommendations gained from the information profession coursework and iSchool principles. With that background, we were able to collaboratively brainstorm ideas for the mission and vision statements, particularly knowing that we would confer and edit these statements live. We used Google Docs and Zoom throughout our project.

We had key concepts in mind when developing these statements. These concepts formed throughout the group process and began to take shape even from the project's earliest stages. During the mission and vision statements brainstorm session, collaborative discussion identified keywords and concepts. These keywords were the words we had identified as being the essence of Little Free Library's current work and the impact they will continue to make. With some deliberation, we shaped the concepts into statements. We made this collaboration possible based on our combined individual research and communicativeness throughout the project and in between meetings. This helped with thinking in sync during such sessions.

Our mission and vision statements encompass ideals from the American Library Association's core values. These align with our team's values which illustrates the importance of these concepts. Words in our newly crafted vision and mission statements such as "literacy", "connection", "curated", and "community" all reflect librarian ideals. The inclusion of ALA ideals within the mission and vision statements gives Little Free Library a future direction that librarians can embrace.

Our vision statement addresses the concern that Little Free Library book exchanges are overwhelmingly located in middle to upper class locations and less often in lower income neighborhoods who need more literacy access. This concern was identified in the environmental scan and SWOT analysis. The proposed vision statement addresses that concern and pushes Little Free Library to significantly increase their presence in needed locations.

In working as consultants for Little Free Library we found their actions to be inspirational which motivated us to craft mission and vision statements that were equally inspiring in addition to creating avenues to increase their positive growth.

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