

Ahead of the game: developing academic library staff for the 21st century

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**AHEAD OF THE GAME:
DEVELOPING ACADEMIC LIBRARY STAFF FOR THE 21ST
CENTURY**

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For those of us working in libraries and information centres the job is, to a degree not suspected by those outside the profession, about people. Libraries are full of people's voices, libraries are about people's concerns and beliefs and lives. A library is an investment in humanity, in its progress and its struggles and its traditions. I and my colleagues are involved with students who are busy turning information into the kind of knowledge and skills which will inform the rest of their lives; we also assist senior scholars striving to extend the boundaries of their discipline and add to the sum of human knowledge. Debate, discussion, argument, disagreement, the hunger for knowledge, the hope or anxiety for the future, the search for objective truth and the construction of individual perspectives - all these human dramas take place in the library every day.

The title of my paper refers to people, but most particularly to the people who are a key *resource* of the library - the library staff themselves. These human resources, as they are often referred to now in management terminology, are the people without whose skills information would not be discovered nor gathered together nor made widely accessible and intelligible - without whom the library would become chaos. Library directors recognise this, as do the communities for which they provide a service, which is why a little over half my budget is spent on staff. For a British academic library this proportion of total spend going on staff is quite typical - the national average for university libraries is just under 50%.

So we can say that we are investing a lot on staff salaries every year. But we are also investing in people's careers, in the personal development of individuals. We are employing people who (at one extreme) may be with us as trainees for as little as a year but who will be the future of the profession, while at the other end of the spectrum are staff who may have been with us for twenty or thirty years and who need to continue to develop as effective librarians in a period of great changes.

These changes are social, economic and technological, and there are some local variations. Thus in British higher education we have had to manage an expansion in student numbers, with a greater number of mature, part-time and distance students. This we have done with decreasing funding from government, at a time of the availability of more information in more various electronic formats. These have been my challenges - summarised in the phrase *more with less*.

Other changes are global, for example the doubling of scientific knowledge every ten years, of computing power every eighteen months, of the Internet every year. This is the situation we have in mind in Britain when we talk about the hybrid library, which is an evolutionary stage we're all reaching, a mixture of the traditional and the new in skills and media. Print culture is still very much alive and we have to use a familiar blend of professional techniques to sustain this. At the same time, the building blocks of the electronic library - the virtual library - begin to fall into place and we have to make decisions about the balance of traditional and new services.

What does this mean for library staff? It means that we still need our full range of librarian skills, but that we are also resembling more our colleagues in the computer unit and our colleagues in academic departments. We need an ever-growing IT expertise. We are taking on an increasing role in training our users, indeed teaching core modules in information skills. We have to undertake research, to establish the best way of doing things as well as the degree of satisfaction with which our services are received by our users. We have to raise money through consultancy or the organisation of seminars. We are becoming expert in electronic licences, in creating World Wide Web pages, in negotiating digitisation rights with commercial publishers. We are becoming more explicitly managers of information rather than custodians of books, with emphasis on the word "manager".

Library directors therefore need a vision of the future and a mental model of the type of organisation which can ride, rather than be swamped by, change, helping colleagues develop the cast of mind which turns daily experience into a learning process. Here the organisational culture can make a crucial difference.

So when I'm sometimes asked how I can justify, in a busy and under-resourced operation, the costs of training, I repeat the saying: "If you think training is expensive, try the alternative". The alternative is the hidden cost of inadequate or non-existent training programmes - dwindling competence, dismal morale, high staff turnover, absenteeism, avoidable accidents, complaints, information that is wrong or incomplete or too late in arriving.

Building a learning organisation for the 21st century begins in the perception of the importance of training I've just described, leading to a commitment from the top of the organisation downwards to the importance of training. Next comes a training budget which of course is never as large as could be wished but which allows a reasonably continuous flow of activity. Sometimes in larger organisations such as a university there is also a staff training unit which puts on free courses for all staff, some of which (e.g. time management or stress management) may be of general relevance to library staff.

Much good training can also be delivered inside the library, and numerous British university libraries now set aside one hour per week as a training hour. This time may be dedicated to professional areas such as aspects of online information or some general account of the way in which the university is developing and how this is affecting library objectives, an understanding of the context in which their work takes place being very important to people. Over the year, systematic programmes can be planned and then acted upon; lengthier, more concentrated events take place in and around university vacations.

In Britain there is also a constant stream of professional training events and conferences organised by professional bodies. Exeter staff who gain permission to go on these will be required to write up a report distributed to colleagues by email.

In British universities, in addition, all staff are now subject to review meetings – usually annual - with their managers, appraising the effectiveness of the work they are doing and agreeing the training required to maintain or improve their standard of work. Thus the library director has a map of training needs, allowing for more focused planning. Learning in the most formal sense, for qualifications, is also enabled at all levels, in terms of financial support, release of time and coaching.

This is the structure. The question remains, is the training effective and does it really address the basic goals of the organisation? I'd like to talk about an experience of my own at the University of Exeter.

In 1991 in Britain a new government-introduced award called Investors in People, essentially "a *national quality standard for effective investment* in the training and development of people to *achieve business goals*", was introduced. In 1995 I was persuaded, along with colleagues in the University of Exeter's IT Services and Staff Development Unit - all the academic services - to try to qualify for the award, which no British academic library had then attained. The attraction to me was the chance for an objective external assessment by consultants from a business background of whether we measured up to the requirements of a true learning organisation.

The method of assessment involved a lot of documentation, some of which was developed for the process - for example, individual training records and training application forms which required a statement of expected benefits. Comprehensive portfolios of evidence were gradually prepared, both generic (the University) and individual (each service). We started looking quite good on paper.

But anyone can look good on paper, so an anonymous questionnaire was administered to all staff; a representative sample of staff was also chosen by the external assessor and then interviewed by him over 2 days, sometimes singly, sometimes in pairs, sometimes mixing representation of the services. The interviews lasted 20-30 minutes and it was stressed that it was the organisation, not the individual, which was being scrutinised; all remarks were anonymous so that comments about training structures, morale and management style could be made without fear.

The principles of assessment were four, each breaking down into a number of indicators, each of which in turn needed to be satisfied to earn the award. And we had to prove, through paperwork confirmed by interview, that we were doing what we said. This was challenging. We had to demonstrate:

1. ***Commitment***

- The commitment from top management to train and develop employees is communicated effectively through the organisation
- Employees at all levels are aware of the broad aims or vision of the organisation

- The organisation has considered what employees at all levels will contribute to the success of the organisation, and has communicated this effectively to them
 - Where representative structures exist, management communicates with employee representatives a vision of where the organisation is going and the contribution employees (and their representatives) will make to its success
- 2. Planning**
- A written but flexible plan sets out the organisation's goals and targets
 - A written plan identifies the organisation's training and development needs, and specifies what action will be taken to meet these needs
 - Training and development needs are regularly reviewed against goals and targets at the organisation, team and individual level
 - A written plan identifies the resources that will be used to meet training and development needs
 - Responsibility for training and developing employees is clearly identified and understood throughout the organisation
- 3. Action**
- All new employees are introduced effectively to the organisation and all employees new to a job are given the training and development they need to do that job
 - Managers are actively involved in supporting employees to meet their needs
 - All employees are made aware of the training and development opportunities open to them
 - All employees are encouraged to help identify and meet their job-related training and development needs
 - Action takes place to meet the training and development needs of individuals, teams and the organisation
- 4. Evaluation**
- The organisation evaluates the impact of training and development actions on knowledge, skills, performance and achievement of goals and targets
 - Top management understands the broad costs and benefits of developing people
 - Action takes place to implement improvements to training and development identified as a result of evaluation
 - Top management's continuing commitment to training and developing employees is demonstrated to all employees

So the road, from commitment to evaluation, is an increasingly hard one, definition of indicators which show the operational benefits your training is having being most difficult of all. The process is also cyclic: evaluation feeds back into planning and action.

Investors in People judgement came by written report and a debriefing session with the assessor, who made it clear that there were one or two cloudy areas but that the positive attitude of staff had carried a deal of weight. We were gratified to hear of the commitment of all staff and their high estimate of current morale, especially given the University of Exeter's restructuring which would shrink budgets by around 9% over

the next three years. The morale reading seemed higher than elsewhere on campus, while positive remarks about the directors boosted our own morale.

Beyond this, the exercise focused minds at all levels on the problem of professional skills and knowledge, provided a framework for analysis and action, encouraged better measurement methods for performance improvement, demonstrated the value put on staff effort by management and offered a snapshot of morale, communications, perspectives at all levels. All of which moved us down the road towards an ultimate goal - becoming the kind of organisation where learning is habitual and where, crucially, people are empowered to invest in themselves as the hybrid library goes through its changes.

A later assessment of organisational culture carried out within the whole university probed questions of morale, relationships with managers and individual development. This institutional cultural assessment proceeded through anonymous questionnaires, responses to which build into four different pictures (organisational, personal, management style, communications) based on different bundlings of nine discrete factors (identification, equity, equality, consensus, commitment, rationality, development, group dynamics, internalisation) in an organisation as experienced by employees.

The overall results showed the levels of anxiety and confusion you would expect from a traditional organisation thrown into flux, forced into restructuring and facing the unpredictabilities of change. It was possible however to plot the survey results against Investors in People processes, showing the responses of staff in the library and other services which had gained the award to be more positive than the rest of the university, and indeed above the average for all organisations which have used this cultural assessment methodology. The feeling of being assisted with relevant training and encouraged to take individual responsibility for development came across strongly. The total survey interpretation is a complex one, but seems to suggest that we are better placed than other segments of the institution to face future challenges.

Having spoken of training everyone else, finally, what about me? A Library director is allowed to think about his or her own development from time to time, even if (or especially because) the job seems to be more and more about developing others. But how do you learn what a director does, and how do you go on learning? My own experience, which is not untypical, has seen a variety of challenges and huge changes in the business of information, through which I have gradually assumed more and more responsibility for my own learning while moving to levels where fewer and fewer formal learning situations are available.

There is certainly the necessity to develop in oneself and one's colleagues the cast of mind which consciously turns daily experience into a learning process. This should be career-long. Indeed, learning the skills necessary to lead an organisation has for me been largely the result of workplace experience, in two categories.

Being thrown in at the deep end is a rather brutal learning environment but also a very urgent incentive to learn. "With insufficient preparation, with little warning, you are propelled into the swimming pool out of your depth and have to improvise and learn very quickly. It is not perhaps meant to be as random or Darwinian as it seems, since

the managers who push you in at the deep end have usually seen a potential they think will "cope with the challenge". At times in my working life I have found myself struggling to stay afloat while a voice rings in my ears telling me that I should see it as a compliment. And many of these challenges have involved learning to lead. " (1)

Next to Nellie is a phrase we use in Britain for the most basic way of learning a new job, a new skill. "Sit the employee next to someone who does the job or has the skill, a person supposedly always called Nellie, and by some magic a transfer of knowledge takes place, though not always a very sound transfer of knowledge; this still has a place in organisations, though ideally as part of a whole panoply of training and developmental opportunities." (2) I have been lucky enough to sit next to some very good teachers in my career, including chief librarians and deputy librarians. Indeed, it is enlightened to see coaching and mentoring as key to the process of building a learning organisation, and look for some of our greatest successes in the career progress of colleagues, even if this means that the best leave to become directors themselves.

Beyond that, if the director's job is leadership, then such a person has much to learn from other kinds of director, in business and industry. Some library high fliers have looked for a degree in business administration to give them a framework of generic skills. Less formally, it pays dividends every so often to step aside and attend courses not aimed specifically at library and information workers. The translations into one's own context involve effort but the insights are often what is needed to unlock creativity.

British library organisations such as SCONUL (Standing Conference of National and University Libraries) have also been increasingly aware of the lack of professional training focused on becoming, or being, a director. This has led to a number of initiatives, notably in running seminars and intensive courses for potential leaders. Subsequently, a large number on these have reached top positions. They have done so because the working lives of directors in British libraries are getting shorter, 5-10% of chief librarian posts becoming vacant each year (out of a hundred or so British universities). A large element of succession training, deliberate or otherwise, is evidently underway – and perhaps the realisation that the ultimate leadership skill is knowing when to stop!

References

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2. Paterson, A. Op. cit.