Stretching the Training Dollar in Stringent Economic Times

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Abstract
This article provides suggestions on ways in which the library can engage in staff training even on a very stringent budget. Three strategies are suggested, and these are (a) each one teach one, (b) leveraging the knowledge of faculty and library staff, and (c) utilizing the power of the webinar.

Keywords
staff training, library training, library budgets, webinars, training budgets

The sharing of knowledge and information is important for the development of any organization. Training programs are one of the important means by which knowledge is communicated to staff members, but unfortunately, while it is a small step that can help the organization to remain current, it can also be regarded as one of those activities that are low on the list of priorities in which to invest finite and ever-shrinking funds in challenging economic times. Continuing education programs for librarians are even more important now, at a time of rapidly changing technologies that have the potential to enhance library services and products. It can be a challenge for librarians to keep abreast of new ideas and developments in the various areas of library work even as they do recognize the importance of, and are often at the forefront in, embracing new ideas and technologies to adapt to changing needs of library users. Continuing education programs offered to librarians and other staff via conferences, workshops, seminars, internships, etc. help to ensure that the librarian maintains an awareness of best practices, cutting-edge technologies, and new products in general that can stimulate improvements in the delivery of quality services and products to library users.

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Staff training is therefore not a luxury even in times of economic hardship when libraries experience significant cuts in their overall budgets. The unfortunate dilemma which administrators often face is the choice to be made between spending needed funds on training of staff versus the many other practical emergent needs of the library. What can library administrators do to ensure continuity of staff training without compromising the long-term quality of other library programs? This challenge becomes even more poignant in those cases where there is no specific allocation in the budget for staff training. It may be the case that in these instances, training is funded as the need arises, on a case-by-case basis, and often from contingency or miscellaneous funds. Whatever the financial constraints or budgetary circumstances, library administrators should ensure that the needs of the library’s clientele are met and that the services are provided by well-trained library professionals. Suggested below are three strategies that can be implemented to ensure that investment in training library staff is maximized.

Each One Teach One

An important policy direction which libraries, both public and academic, can adopt is to ensure that any training received by a staff member that is paid for by the organization gets passed on to other library staff. In other words, in those instances where the library pays for individuals to attend conferences, workshops, seminars, and internships, this is done with the understanding that trainees must return to train/teach/share the information they have learned to their colleagues. This becomes a part of the library’s policy. It is a simple measure, but how often do library administrators do this in a systematic way? Is it a mandatory requirement in our libraries? The benefits of this kind of activity would include the following:

1. Promotes greater accountability—this helps to ensure that employees not only attend the seminar to which they are sent but also that they give their undivided attention and concentration to the training at hand. The employee would know that they have to first understand the material in order to share the information with their co-workers. The employee would be required to submit a copy of the proceedings of the training event to the organization which should be placed on the employee’s file. This helps the organization know what their employee is supposed to have learned.

2. Maximizes the use of resources—this can lead to an exponential increase in the numbers of people who actually end up with a greater level of awareness, exposure, and understanding, as it relates to the particular subject or topic. Not only will more staff members be trained, but resources such as brochures and other handouts received at the initial training event can also be disseminated among library staff. Maximum return on investment can be realized in other ways as well. In a culture where there is an entrenched policy of information sharing, the library can save money by sending fewer members of staff to the initial training event and therefore use scarce resources to send other staff members to other relevant and
important courses and increasing the total pool of knowledge coming back into the library.

(3) Provides an opportunity for reflection—this causes the librarian or other staff member to first of all reflect on what they have learned in preparation for passing on this information to others. Reflection allows the trainee to:

(a) Clarify issues they have learned;
(b) Make important connections with other relevant areas of knowledge, thereby deepening their understanding of what was passed on; and most importantly,
(c) Place the information in the context of their own libraries by use of examples and comparisons and by asking themselves questions such as what would and would not work for their library and how they would apply what they have learned to their own institution.

If more than one person was sent for training, then the reflective experience is enhanced as each participant expresses his/her understanding of the knowledge from their own perspective. All of this potentially makes for a richer presentation to other library colleagues who did not have the opportunity to attend the original training event.

(4) Leveling out of knowledge across the organization—this means that more people will know what you know. Apart from the specific expertise librarians gain in fulfillment of their various roles and functions, other bodies of knowledge will develop across the organization and not just in the heads of any specific individual. It may also be the case that the librarian(s) or staff member(s) who applies the knowledge they have gained in creative and meaningful ways may not necessarily be the same person or persons who were selected to receive the initial training. The imperative here is that new knowledge should be passed on to other staff who can benefit from the ideas being shared. Where the institution pays for staff training, there ought be some mechanism or program for the staff member not just to report on the training but to teach their colleagues what they have learned.

Not all persons are comfortable imparting information in a formal way. However, with coaching, practice, and a nurturing environment, in time, it may become less daunting to the individual.

**Tap the Knowledge of Campus and Other Library Staff**

The academic library is well placed to tap the knowledge of the faculty and seek their assistance in passing on important information to library staff. Soft skill areas especially are areas in which the library can benefit from the repository of knowledge in the wider campus community. Current issues and trends in areas such as ethical behavior at the workplaces, harmonious work environments, self-awareness, health and wellness, communication skills, and etiquette are just some of the topics that faculty and other professional staff across various disciplines can help impart to library staff.
Libraries can also look within their own staff complement when seeking persons to provide training and knowledge sharing. We may well be surprised by what our coworkers actually know, or can do and are doing, whether in the professional or personal spheres. Library 2.0 and 3.0 technologies have allowed librarians to unleash their creativity and to experiment without having to learn the technical languages that were once the hallmark of creative content in a web environment. Software programs abound that help libraries to market products and services, and librarians have and are taking full advantage of these opportunities and are able to experiment as often as they can, both at work and at home, and to fine tune their skills in many areas. Technology is just one area. Many library staff have received some kind of training throughout their career. In some instances, they may have received training in a specific function or activity on more than one occasion, and without even realizing it, may have developed some level of “expertise” in that area. It is these individuals whose knowledge needs to be documented and harnessed for the benefit of the library. Human Resource expert Chris Dressel explains it this way:

“…employees have knowledge and skills within and often outside of the scope of their job. This knowledge and these skills can be shared with other employees and the organization when needs arise. But these talents can’t be tapped if no one knows about them. Easily locating an employee to cross-train another on a specific skill, to help act as an interpreter when language barriers arise, to participate on a project team because of the skills they can contribute or to fill a new need, is dependent on having this internal resource tool that all employees can access.” (2001).

This internal resource tool to which the author refers is the creation of a skills bank or inventory for employees. This tool is designed to capture the formal and informal training gained by employees from workshops, seminars, and other continuing education programs, as well as those skills one may have learned from other colleagues, friends, self-taught online tutorials, and experimentation.

Creating a databank of staff skills would begin with the knowledge and abilities needed to perform core functions within the library. These could be drawn from the individual job descriptions. In addition to these, skills necessary for executing library projects and programs as the need arose, would also have to be ascertained by means of a survey. Staff members could be asked to indicate their particular skill sets and to rate their own level of competence in the particular area as either basic, intermediate, or expert. These are then arranged in broad categories such as foreign language skills, accounting, information technology, customer service, grant writing, social media, project management, reprographics (photography and digitization), and the list goes on.

The challenge, of course, is getting employees to be willing to share what they know. Some employees may be shy to speak and would need some coaxing and coaching. The process however begins with knowing the skills that your employees have.
Utilize the Power of the Webinar

Online meeting software has been a very common tool used by librarians for information sharing. Professional associations, publishers, library vendors, and other stakeholders have utilized the power of the webinar to share information which they think may be of value with their members and customers. The COVID-19 pandemic, which stymied the ability to travel around the world, has no doubt inevitably cemented the importance of online meeting software in our history. Many librarians have now become more familiar with online meeting software like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, and many others. For libraries in developing countries, it is a life line for continued organization renewal, sharing of ideas, teaching and learning, problem solving, etc. The economic effects of the pandemic may also have forced many institutions to rethink overall operations relating to staff travel for meetings or training in the future.

The main benefit of web conferencing is that it allows participants in different geographical locations to benefit from training presentations, workshops, seminars etc. without the expense of travel to a particular venue. The library can take utilize software that may already exist within the wider institution. More importantly, library administrators and trainers can take full advantage of free webinars that are available to all members of the library community worldwide. Library trainer Marianne Lennox, who regularly pushes free webinars to her staff, says of the webinar “they’ve now got access to some of the brightest minds and the latest trends in Librarianship and beyond” (2010). This is the enormous potential the webinar can provide—knowledge from experts worldwide without having to leave your library.

The onus is also on the library staff to take advantage of programs that are available, especially those that are free. This process is likely to begin with a certain amount of self-motivation and knowing what are the gaps in one’s own knowledge, skills, and abilities that may impede successful performance on the job. The greater the gap in my knowledge and the subsequent impact on my performance on the job, then the greater will be my motivation to seek out the kind of training that can address this issue. Here are some strategies that a staff member can use when selecting a pre-packaged online webinar:

(1) It is likely that you will choose based on a topic of interest or need. Ensure that you register for the webinar and enter it in your calendar or other file even if the date or time of the webinar may not be suitable at present. Many webinars are often archived by the training institution and made available to participants for on-demand viewing for a period of time after the event.

(2) Share webinar links with your colleagues who can also benefit from the session. Viewing a webinar as a group is often better than viewing alone. The greater the number of participants, the greater the value for money for the receiving institution, as this results in a greater pool of knowledge in the particular area. The post-session discussion and sharing of ideas can also be quite invaluable.

(3) If the webinar is live, do not hesitate or be shy to ask questions relevant to your particular need or issue. Your questions will help you to get the most out of it,
especially if it is a paid webinar. You can also raise issues in the chat box and benefit from advice from the presenters as well as the other participants.

(4) Take note of the presenter’s contact information. If you are a library trainer or manager, you may want to invite the presenter to make a presentation your organization if the topic is relevant to your current organizational/department needs.

(5) Where possible, the participant should request a recording of the training. As a library manager, or training librarian, this is important for creating a library of training material which can be used multiple times during orientation of staff.

The following is a list of some library webinar sponsors who host various kinds of webinars throughout the year.

- ALA online learning—provides courses on a number of topics including, management issues, diversity issues, service delivery, and collection management. These are offered as either full courses, webinars, or recorded webcasts. [http://www.al.org/educationcareers/elearning/](http://www.al.org/educationcareers/elearning/)
- OCLC’s Web Junction—“...builds the knowledge, skills and confidence of library staff to power strong libraries that are the heart of vibrant communities. A program of OCLC Research, WebJunction is free and welcome to all libraries to use, regardless of size, type or location” [http://www.webjunction.org/about-us.html](http://www.webjunction.org/about-us.html)
- ALCTS—Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (a division of ALA). Their webinars provide training on issues related to cataloging, purchasing, serials management, collection development, preservation, etc. [http://www.al.org/alcts/confevents/upcoming/webinar](http://www.al.org/alcts/confevents/upcoming/webinar)
- EDUCAUSE—“EDUCAUSE is a nonprofit association whose mission is to advance higher education by promoting the intelligent use of information technology.” [http://www.educause.edu/](http://www.educause.edu/)
- Library Journal—“Library Journal’s dynamic and informative webcasts span a wide spectrum of topics and audiences to help viewers improve their libraries, build collections and better service patrons. We cover a wide range of topics including collection development, technology, publishing and author interviews and each webcast is available free for both live and archive viewing.” [http://lj.libraryjournal.com/category/webcasts/?ref=menu](http://lj.libraryjournal.com/category/webcasts/?ref=menu)

In tough economic times, libraries have to find creative ways to maximize the training dollar. Foregoing training is no longer an option in an era of rapidly changing technology and competing sources of information, all of which impact the use of the library’s resources. Librarians, like most other professionals, recognize the need to keep up with the changing information landscape if they are to respond creatively to the challenges facing their institutions. Adopting these simple measures which embrace the sharing of knowledge and information in ways that cost very little, is but a small step that can help libraries to remain current.
Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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