Time out:
a summer staff development programme for library assistants in Dublin City University Library

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INTRODUCTION

Established as National Institute for Higher Education (NIHE) in 1980, Dublin City University (DCU) now has a user population of some 9,000 students. A feature of this new university has been a strong commitment to staff training and development. The library, which employs 60 staff, 28 full-time, the remainder part-time, has embraced this philosophy and commitment. A formal staff development policy has been produced. An induction programme and a mentoring system for new staff are in operation. In the summer of 1999 it was decided to further explore staff development opportunities by piloting an in-house programme specifically designed for all library assistants. This programme was initiated by the head of reader services, delivered by assistant librarians and co-ordinated by a senior library assistant. This article examines the framework in which this programme took place, the issues raised and the outcomes.

AIMS

The aims of the programme were:

- To provide short structured courses, which would be informative and impart skills.
- To offer participants the opportunity to gain work experience in a different library department.
- To expose staff to different types of libraries.

From the outset it was emphasised that the courses offered were not intended as in-depth training programmes. Rather they were meant to strengthen the existing high level of motivation and team spirit and to provide creative learning opportunities.

PROGRAMME DESIGN

The content of the programme was designed taking into account factors including:

- The popularity of earlier Internet courses and the recognition that in a rapidly changing information environment enhanced web skills were desirable.
- Availability of experienced staff to deliver courses.
- Time constraints: it was vital that the programme be delivered in such a way as to be available to all interested library assistants. To facilitate this, factors such as rotas (day and evening) leave arrangements, and departmental constraints had to be considered.
- Our changing user population: the number of disabled students in DCU has increased over the past few years. Staff were keen to receive training in how best to provide a quality service to this group.
- Available space: it was crucial that the programme was run during a period when the library's information skills training suite was not being used for user education purposes.
- Financial constraints: the programme had to be delivered without any significant financial investment. It was decided to approach library suppliers for prize donations. Excellent prizes were received.

CONTENT

The programme had three elements:

- Short courses
- Work experience
- Visits to other libraries

SHORT COURSES
- Exploring cyberspace (I day course)
- Disability awareness (1/2 day course)
- Information sources familiarisation (1/2 day course)

WORK EXPERIENCE
This was facilitated by job rotation, staff having the opportunity to select another area within the library in which to spend some time.

VISITS TO LIBRARIES
Visits were arranged to two libraries and the National Archive.

PARTICIPATION
Participation in the programme was voluntary. All twenty-four library assistants were invited to participate. Twenty-three chose to do so. This represented a 96% response rate, sixteen full-time and seven part-time library assistants.

Each respondent received:

- a list of short courses
- a list of work experience opportunities
- a list of visits planned to other libraries

Respondents were asked to prioritise their preferences and to indicate their availability during the summer.

Using an Excel spreadsheet, a chart/calendar of courses, events and visits was designed. Participants' names, preferences and availability were recorded. Courses were then scheduled. The objective was to offer each staff member a place on at least one of his/her preferred courses and events.

Each staff member was notified that a place had been reserved on a specific course(s). They were asked to confirm by e-mail that they could take up these options.

THE EXPERIENCE

EXPLORING CYBERSPACE
This course was the most popular of the three offered, with nineteen of the twenty four staff opting to attend. Each participant had his or her own PC, a factor that contributed significantly to the success of the practical sessions. Three librarians designed and delivered the course.

The aim of this course was to provide a comprehensive overview and introduction to the World Wide Web. Topics included the origins of the Internet; search engines; search techniques and an overview of the library web page.

Practical sessions were held in the afternoon and offered the opportunity to put newly acquired knowledge to the test by completing an Internet quiz.

DISABILITY AWARENESS
Ten of the 24 staff participated in this half-day course, designed by the librarian responsible for students with special needs. The course provided the opportunity for two staff who had previously undergone training by the National Council for the Blind (Ireland) to demonstrate the dilemmas faced by visually impaired students. Training on specialised equipment followed.

INFORMATION SOURCES
The aim of this course, which took the form of a quiz, was to give participants the opportunity to become familiar with the library's print reference collection. Based on material in the reference collection twenty five questions were drawn up. Twelve staff participated in this half-day quiz. Participants were divided into three groups. The winning team received prizes of book tokens.

WORK EXPERIENCE
While not all staff could be given their first and second preferences, every effort was made to ensure that each participant did gain work experience in an area they had requested.

VISITS TO LIBRARIES
Seven staff visited the Royal Irish Academy, a Dublin based learned society library dating from 1785. The opportunity also arose for one staff member to go on a one-week exchange programme. Following on from this exchange, recommendations for setting up such a scheme on a regular basis are being positively considered.

Six staff visited the Dublin Institute of Technology, a third level (higher education) business library where they had a detailed tour and saw another third level college in operation.

The visit to the National Archive offered the opportunity to examine many primary sources of historical interest. Indeed, one staff member completing her final degree programme availed of the resources and expertise of the librarians which led to her identifying a thesis topic.

EVALUATION OF THE COURSES

An evaluation form was distributed after each short course. Staff were asked to rate a variety of criteria including usefulness, content and time given to various areas.

The evaluation results for 'Exploring cyberspace' showed that the session on 'Searching the Web' was the most popular (96%), with practical sessions receiving the next highest score (91%). The evaluation form allowed participants to comment on any aspect of the course. Comments mainly included requests for follow on courses.

The evaluation of disability awareness rated the overall satisfaction with the course as 100%, with a 98% usefulness rating.

The 'Information sources' quiz received the most favourable comments, not alone for the interactive aspect, but also for knowledge gained, and levels of fun. There was a 95% level of satisfaction with the course/quiz, and the usefulness rating was 91%. A frequent comment made was that people would have liked more on the theory of using reference sources prior to the quiz. At a subsequent evaluation discussion the organisers clarified that the purpose of the quiz was to give an overview, not to provide in-depth training on reference service. This course gave an awareness to people of the specialised nature of the reference work carried out by the information desk team.

EVALUATION OF WORK EXPERIENCE

Feedback was positive. The experience provided a brief, but broad overview of the work in other areas within the library.

EVALUATION OF VISITS TO OTHER LIBRARIES

The main benefit of these visits was the exposure staff received to libraries very different to their home institution.

OVERALL EVALUATION

On the final day of the summer staff development programme, participants were invited to participate in an open discussion. The consensus was that the programme had been a very successful and enjoyable experience. It gave people opportunities to explore issues, gain knowledge and experience of librarianship, and above all to have a creative and fun learning experience with colleagues.

CONCLUSION

As a pilot scheme the programme was a success. Issues arose such as the time staff expended designing and delivering courses. Planning and co-ordinating, while crucial for the success of the programme, was extremely time consuming. However, in terms of staff motivation, morale and the learning opportunity provided it was extremely valuable both for the participants and those involved in the overall planning of staff development.

Library management now need to explore programmes such as this in the context of overall staff development. In an environment where employee retention has become an issue for all organisations, it is vital that job satisfaction levels are high. Non-monetary rewards can significantly contribute to levels of satisfaction and employee motivation. It is vital that library managers explore creative and innovative ways to develop their organisation's most valuable asset – people. However, this must be part of an overall commitment to staff development at all levels.

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