



Evidence Summary

Hands on Digital Information Literacy Training from Peers is Preferred by Public Service Library Staff

A Review of:

Robertson, R. (2014). Reframing ourselves: Digital information literacy skills of frontline public library staff. *New Zealand Library and Information Management Journal*, 53(3).
doi:10.1080/00048623.2011.10722203

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Received: 9 Sept. 2014

Accepted: 8 Oct. 2014

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Abstract

Objective – To explore how and where public library employees acquire digital information literacy (DIL) skills.

Design – Qualitative study using semi-structured interviews.

Setting – Two public libraries in New Zealand.

Subjects – Nine front line public library staff members.

Methods – A convenience sample of nine library employees was interviewed about their existing DIL skills, how and where they learned them, any barriers to this learning, and

how they defined DIL in others. Interviewees ranged in age from 40 to 64 and included both those new to libraries and those with over 25 years in the profession. The interview transcripts were analyzed for key themes and placed in the theoretical framework of Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Robertson, 2014).

Main Results – Five participants described their own DIL skills as average or below average. The remaining participants classified their skills as above average. Participants recounted acquiring DIL skills in the course of their work through formal workplace training sessions, peer support, or individual exploration; through personal exploration of tools on their own time; or through a mix of work and personal learning opportunities. The

barriers they identified to their learning included insufficient time to train and practice the skills learned and the lack of access to relevant technologies. Participants noted problems such as accessing key hardware and insufficient Internet connectivity at work because of issues with organizational infrastructure and at home due to personal financial constraints. Participants largely preferred informal hands-on training by peers to formal training sessions, which were described by some as too general or held too far in advance of the implementation of new technology. The data suggested participants largely fell into Kolb's accommodating or diverging learning styles because of their preference for "concrete experience" (Robertson, 2014).

Conclusion – Libraries may improve staff acquisition of DIL skills by increasing hands on learning opportunities and providing dedicated time to review and practice skills learned. Other suggestions included identifying potential digital peer mentors among staff and providing them with the necessary resources (time, money, and a defined role) to support their colleagues, breaking training into parts allowing time for practice, creating training plans tied to performance evaluation, and using incentives to encourage staff to participate in self-directed training.

Commentary

The large body of research studies and professional literature that exists on maintaining the currency of digital/technical skills among library staff suggests that it is a challenge shared by all types of libraries. The author's decision to approach this question qualitatively through interviews sets it apart from most previous studies and creates a rich data set around employee training preferences and barriers to learning.

While the small sample size is appropriate to the method chosen, the sampling technique used bears scrutiny. The use of a convenience sample is identified by Greenhalgh (2010) as

an area for concern when evaluating qualitative studies. In this case, the fact that none of the participants were under the age of 40 may mean that a significant group of frontline library employee training needs and experiences with DIL outside of work were not captured by the study. This issue should have been acknowledged along with any other limitations of the study, and the resulting data and conclusions framed appropriately. It is also unclear how large a pool of possible participants existed, as the total number of front line staff was not provided. The discussion of results refers to a questionnaire administered to participants, but no mention is made of this aspect of the data gathering in the too brief methodology section nor is the questionnaire itself included. Further detail on the process of data analysis or how the data was validated would have strengthened the study and clarified what role, if any, Kolb's theory of experiential learning, identified as the study's theoretical framework, played in the study design.

Most of the conclusions drawn by the author flow clearly from the findings presented, with the exception of the recommendation to provide incentives to staff who engage in self-directed learning programmes. Lack of motivation did not emerge as a key barrier among those interviewed, and incentives did not appear to have been raised by participants. The suggested incentives to participate in self-directed learning are unlikely to significantly address the impact that the lower wages and underemployment experienced by front line staff has on potential DIL skill acquisition, an issue that the author has flagged elsewhere.

The study does offer some concrete suggestions for improving staff digital information literacy training that will be of interest to those in both public and academic libraries, although the narrow demographic represented will limit its applicability to groups such as student employees. The study also serves as an important reminder that those individuals who are the most visible to patrons are often the lowest paid. Library

managers and supervisors cannot assume that opportunities to practice DIL skills outside of work will be available. If staff DIL is a priority, it must be appropriately resourced in terms of dedicated work time and resources.

References

Greenhalgh, T. (2010). *How to read a paper: The basics of evidence-based medicine* (4th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell/BMJ Books.