

"Too Much Change in Too Little Time": Maintaining Professional Competence in a Public Library

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of a pilot survey of professional development of reference librarians in a large urban public library. This pilot is part of a larger study of the processes and strategies used by reference librarians to maintain professional competence in the face of rapid change in the workplace. Fifteen librarians answered a questionnaire survey and participated in interviews and the organization's training policies and programs were examined. The librarians in this study are active participants in learning activities, both formal and informal, which help them update their knowledge and skills to maintain competence in their profession. They are encouraged by the intrinsic rewards that result from updating: increased personal satisfaction as a librarian and better service to patrons. However, they are discouraged by the lack of quality in the updating programs and the inconvenient locations or times of the programs. They acknowledge that the organization encourages and supports their updating efforts but yet does not provide enough time for them to update their competencies. They also recognize that valued extrinsic rewards for updating (increased pay, promotion opportunities) are not forthcoming from the organization.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude présente les conclusions d'un sondage pilote du développement professionnel des bibliothécaires des ouvrages de référence dans une grande bibliothèque urbaine publique. Quinze bibliothécaires ont répondu au questionnaire et ont assisté aux entretiens et les politiques et les programmes d'entraînement de l'organisation ont été examinés. Les bibliothécaires dans cette étude sont des participant-e-s actif-ve-s dans les activités d'apprentissage, non seulement protocolaires mais aussi décontractées, et sont encouragé-e-s par les récompenses intrinsèques qui résultent de l'actualisation : de la satisfaction personnelle augmentée comme bibliothécaire et de meilleure service aux client-e-s. Cependant, ils-elles sont découragé-e-s par le manque de qualité dans l'actualisation des programmes et les emplacements et l'heure des programmes. Ils-elles admettent que l'organisation encourage et approuve leurs efforts d'actualisation mais encore ne fournit pas assez de temps pour l'actualisation de leurs compétences. De plus, ils-elles reconnaissent que les récompenses extrinsèques précieuses pour l'actualisation (l'augmentation du salaire, les occasions de promotion) seront disponibles de l'organisation.

INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are in the forefront of the development and implementation of technologies to deliver information, programs and services in a knowledge-based economy. In addition, the expectations placed on public libraries are very high. Libraries are expected to be many things to many people: key facilitators and centres of lifelong learning; economic development sites for the new economy; distribution points for government information and services; enablers of community and/or municipal networks; and, information navigators (Skrzeszewski and Cubberly 1996). Networked systems and

the Internet, in particular, have changed the tasks librarians carry out and the knowledge and skills needed to perform these tasks competently.

Libraries and librarians have experienced rapid changes in the technologies and resources used in their work. Information technologies in use in libraries include integrated library systems, CD-ROM, electronic reference services, the Internet, networks and imaging systems. A survey of academic and public libraries in Canada found that 92% of public libraries had implemented integrated library systems, 88% used CD-ROMs and 65% offered electronic information resources (Harris and Marshall 1998). To all intents and purposes, Internet access is universal in public libraries in Canada. Libraries are developing their own websites, making their catalogues available for searching and instituting a reference service via e-mail or web forms. In the networked environment of large library systems, librarians must be familiar with local, remote and networked electronic resources.

New technologies facilitate the evolution of new practices, new services and new roles. The library literature is replete with anecdotal evidence of the changing roles of professional and paraprofessional librarians (Abbas 1997; Johnson 1996; Kelly and Robbins 1996). New roles for librarians envisaged for the future include net navigator, information technology gatekeeper, information consultant, information manager and educator (Library and Information Commission 1998, Chapter 11). These new roles require new knowledge and skills in addition to the traditional competencies of librarians. Certainly, in the electronic information environment, enhanced competencies related to computers are needed. However, it has become clear that competencies related to traditional skills such as instruction, information organization and information management are becoming more important than ever (Garrod 1998; Library and Information Commission 1998; Sherrer 1996; Summey 1997).

What is not clear, however, is the state of training in libraries and the rate of participation of librarians in continuing professional development. The "shelf life" of a professional degree in librarianship is estimated to be less than five years (Weingand 1994). This suggests that libraries should be providing training for staff to update their knowledge and skills and that librarians should be doing their utmost to maintain their professional competence. Studies of training in libraries have been descriptive for the most part, with little evaluation of the quality of training. In academic libraries, there seem to be few formal training programs in place and the budgets for training are small (Messas 1997; Sudduth and Livingston 1994). In one study, the average length of time that staff spent in training on information technologies was only one or two days and the main method used to train library staff was informal coaching by co-workers (Hallmark and Garcia 1996). Librarians seem to prefer informal methods of professional development. Reading the professional literature, attending professional meetings and conferences and self-directed learning activities have been found to be important for professional development (Parson 1988; Stone 1969; Varlejs 1999). In this paper, we use the term "updating activities" to refer to the types of information seeking and educational activities, both formal and informal, undertaken by librarians to enhance professional competence (Willis and Dubin 1990, 5).

The aging of the workforce has been cited as a reason for concerns about the obsolescence of skill and the resultant loss of productivity and competitiveness (Rix 1996). Negative stereotypes about the ability of older workers to keep up-to-date may account for some of these findings (Hassell and Perrew 1995; Rosen and Jerdee 1977). While physical and cognitive abilities may start to decline in middle age, age itself is a poor indicator of an individual's capabilities due to wide variations at the individual level (Salthouse and Maurer 1996). As a group, librarians are older than members of most comparable professions, such as social workers, teachers and nurses (Wilder 1995). A recent study of the 27 member libraries of the Canadian Association of Academic Libraries found that over 70% of the professional librarian staff were 45 years and older (Auster and Taylor 1999). Although there are no comparable data for public librarians, it is expected that they would show a similar age distribution.

Therefore, it is critical that librarians update their competencies in the face of the rapid changes in the profession, but little is known about the motivation of, and processes used by, librarians to maintain professional competence. This paper describes the pilot phase of a study of reference librarians in public libraries in Ontario which is designed to explore the process of maintaining professional competence. A review of previous research in this area and the conceptual framework guiding the study are presented. The data were collected from a small group of reference librarians working in a large urban public library system. The results are presented and the findings are discussed.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, participation in updating activities is theorized to be determined by barriers to participation and motivation. Individual characteristics (age, professional commitment and barriers to participation) and organizational factors (updating climate and managerial support) are proposed to affect participation in updating activities through motivation.

It is assumed that in order to maintain competence in a profession, workers must undertake various learning activities to maintain their ability to function effectively in the profession. Technology, in particular, changes the nature of work carried out in a profession and workers must learn new techniques, theories or practices. Workers can choose the types of learning activities they undertake to update their knowledge, and they can choose the frequency with which they undertake these activities. Updating activities can vary from formal, structured learning to informal learning on-the-job. Frequency of updating can vary from an occasional course at an educational institution to monthly reading of professional journals to weekly informal discussions over coffee or lunch.

The literature on obsolescence/competence indicates that motivation to update is the single most important determinant of participation in updating activities (Dubin 1990; Fossum and Arvey 1990; Mathieu and Martineau 1997). Motivation is conceptualized using expectancy theory. Motivation to update is a function of the individual's belief that

participating in updating activities will lead to certain rewards and the value that these rewards have for the individual.

Certain individual characteristics have been selected for study in this research. Age is an important variable in the conceptual framework. Older workers (45 years of age and over) are considered at risk for obsolescence (Rix 1996), yet older workers are less likely to receive employer-sponsored training (Hum and Simpson 1996). Older workers are seen as resistant to change, less interested in challenging jobs and as a poor investment for training (Hassell and Perrewe 1995). Some studies have found that age is not a deterrent to participation in updating activities (Dorsett 1994; Pazy 1996; Stone 1969), while others have found that age has been related to lower interest and participation in training (Cleveland and Shore 1992; Larwood et al. 1997).

Professional commitment has been identified as a possible factor in maintaining competence (Fossum and Arvey 1990; Fossum et al. 1986) but has not been examined in previous studies. Career commitment, a closely related concept, has been found to be positively related to interest in skill development. Commitment to the profession of librarianship entails the belief and acceptance of the goals of librarianship (Morrow and Wirth 1989). Stone (1969) has found that among professional librarians, commitment to the profession is associated with greater motivation to participate in professional development.

Barriers to participation refer to personal circumstances that interfere with or restrict an individual's ability to participate in updating activities. These barriers include the lack of information, lack of resources, time availability, lack of convenience, lack of quality, and health and family circumstances. Stone (1969) found that librarians were deterred from participating in professional development activities by the poor quality of the programs offered, the inaccessibility of the development activity and lack of available time. Data from the 1994 Adult Education and Training Survey carried out by Statistics Canada show that 55% of full-time employees, aged 20-64, did not receive as much training as they felt they needed because they were too busy. The expense of training deterred 30% of employees while family responsibilities prevented 10% from taking necessary training (Kapsalis 1996b). Other studies of deterrents to participation in continuing education courses have found that lack of quality, family constraints, incidental costs, lack of benefits and work constraints affected the ability of individuals to take courses (Scanlan and Darkenwald 1984). These barriers are closely related to the concept of situational constraints which are characteristics of the work environment that interfere with or restrict an individual's ability to participate in training and development activities (Peters, O'Connor, and Eulberg 1985). These constraints are thought to have a negative influence on both motivation and levels of participation in updating activities.

At the level of the organization, two factors, organizational climate and managerial support, have been identified as influencing motivation to participate in updating activities. An organizational climate refers to the perceptions that employees hold of management policies and practices. An updating climate is the perception that the organization facilitates or inhibits updating (Kozlowski and Hults 1987). Studies of the

updating behaviour of nurses (Dorsett 1994) and information system professionals (Schambach 1994) have found that a positive updating climate is a significant predictor of participation in professional development activities. Managerial support for an employee's updating efforts has been shown to be a significant factor in the level of participation in training and development activities (Kozlowski and Hults 1987; Maurer and Tarulli 1994; Noe and Wilk 1993). Because managers act as gatekeepers to training and development opportunities by interpreting and implementing human resource policies and evaluating performance, they can influence the willingness of employees to participate in updating.

METHODOLOGY

The data reported in this paper were gathered in a pilot of a larger study of reference librarians working in public libraries in large urban centres in Ontario. The pilot was carried out at four branches of a large urban public library. A total of 15 librarians with reference responsibilities volunteered to participate. They were given the questionnaire to complete and about three weeks later, took part in a debriefing session to discuss the questionnaire.

The questionnaire contained questions that measured participation in updating activities as well as topics of updating activities. Motivation was measured by a series of questions that focus on the values and expectations of rewards and likelihood of attaining the rewards. There were multiple indicators of age – chronological age, tenure in the profession, subjective age and expected age at retirement. Scales to measure professional commitment, organizational climate, managerial support and barriers to participation were adapted from previous research.

Statements of policies on training were obtained from the organization, together with a list of in-house courses offered in a one-year period. No policy *per se* with respect to training exists in the organization. The latest Strategic Plan states that there is a direction "to support and value library staff as a key component of public service...through the development of a comprehensive training program". A set of guiding principles and assumptions have been adopted to guide the development of staff training policies, such as a tuition reimbursement policy. The principles place the responsibility for on-the-job training and competency development of subordinate staff on the shoulders of the line manager.

A training committee consisting of the manager of Planning and Development, the Training Coordinator and 10 representatives from all divisions of the organization is responsible for developing the training calendar. The mandate of the team is to identify training needs and development opportunities; ensure awareness in their division of training initiatives; evaluate programs and suppliers; recommend staff to serve as trainers; and, develop recommendations related to resource allocations.

The organization offers about 20 in-house courses every quarter. These are developed by a training team appointed in-house. The team develops and reviews the

course outline and pilots it before it is offered on a system-wide basis. A variety of methods have been used to deliver courses, including electronic classrooms, lectures, case studies, group discussions, panel discussions and computer-based instruction. Training may be delivered through internal staff trained as trainers, through City opportunities or through purchased services.

For the courses offered in-house, the topics of the courses include basic office applications (*e.g.*, word processing, spreadsheets); use of hardware (*e.g.*, LED projectors, network drives); tours of special collections in the system; use of specific electronic resources; skills for public service (*e.g.*, handling difficult patrons, identifying barriers for disabled patrons); developing programs for special audiences; and legal topics (*e.g.*, copyright, Child and Family Services Act). The courses range from a couple of hours long to full day courses, with the majority in the half-day range.

RESULTS

There were 15 respondents in the pilot study so only descriptive statistics are reported here. The respondents were predominantly female (11 librarians) and reported an average age of 46. They had spent an average of 15 years as a librarian, although the number of years of experience ranged from 2 years to 28 years. The number of years in the same position ranged from one year or less to 18 years, with an average of 7 years in the same position. The sample is about evenly split between those who expect to retire at age 60 and those who expect to retire at age 65. Even so, these librarians can look forward to an additional 16 years in the labour force on average.

The respondents spent an average of 72 hours in updating activities in the previous year, ranging from a reported low of 36 hours to a high of 145 hours on updating activities. The most popular updating activities reported were discussions with colleagues (16.5 hours), in-house training programs (16 hours), reading professional journals (10 hours), on-the-job training (9 hours) and self-directed projects (7 hours). To place these hours into perspective, the 1994 Adult Education and Training Survey (AETS) conducted by Statistics Canada found that the average full-time employee spent about 19 hours on employer-sponsored formal training, such as in-house courses (Kapsalis 1996a). Informal learning was not measured by the AETS.

The respondents reported spending these hours on a wide range of topics, learning about everything from Internet applications to troubleshooting equipment to electronic resources to instructional techniques to management skills to occupational health and safety. The most popular topic was electronic resources which all respondents but one reported learning about, followed by Internet applications, which was studied by 13 of the respondents. Integrated system applications and troubleshooting equipment was studied by 12 respondents. Occupational health and safety, a requirement in the workplace, was a topic of study for two-thirds of the respondents.

The most significant barriers to participation reported by the respondents were the poor quality of the updating programs and the lack of convenience, while the least

significant barrier was family or health reasons. Professional commitment among the librarians is very strong, with all respondents expressing positive feelings about the profession.

The respondents perceived the organization as promoting the exchange of information and supportive of updating efforts, but failing to provide enough time and resources for updating. Perceptions of managerial support seemed to be polarized. Those who felt that their managers were supportive were positive on all aspects of support, while others perceived no support at all.

Respondents all reported that they expected that the effort to update led to improved job performance. However, their expectations for rewards varied. The majority believed that it was not at all likely that a pay increase, better job security or more influence over work decisions would result from updating. However, they valued these outcomes as important or extremely important to them. The librarians believed that updating would result in increased personal satisfaction in their job, enable them to meet and network with other librarians and enable them to be assigned more challenging tasks. These outcomes were also highly valued. For these respondents both intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes were highly valued, although the expectations of receiving extrinsic rewards were very low.

DISCUSSION

The results of the pilot survey confirm that professional librarians are willing to be lifelong learners. They expect that updating their knowledge and skills will lead to better performance as reference librarians. They participate in a variety of learning activities, both formal and informal, in order to learn about a range of topics that include basic computer skills, reference resource skills and public service skills. Age does not seem to be a barrier to participation in updating nor are family and health reasons. The reasons librarians do not participate in updating programs have more to do with the programs themselves: poor quality or inconvenient scheduling or location. Strong commitment to the profession is a common characteristic among all the respondents.

The respondents believe that the organization is one in which the exchange of information between management and co-workers is valued and encouraged. The library system is also perceived as supportive of updating efforts through the provision of opportunities and resources to update. In fact, employees have a great deal of input into the development of in-house courses through the Training Advisory Committee, training teams and post-course evaluations. However, the librarians feel that there is not enough time provided in the day-to-day environment to take courses, explore new resources, try new techniques or learn new skills. In the words of one respondent, there has been "too much change in too little time, with inadequate staffing". Managerial support was perceived as either present or lacking, with no middle ground.

Motivation to update is affected by intrinsic and extrinsic factors. For the librarians in the pilot, they recognized that extrinsic rewards are not forthcoming in the

current environment. The intrinsic rewards are as motivating for them. As one librarian put it, "Opportunity to stretch is a good incentive to do professional development. So is the desire to do a job well. Then relevance, availability and time to pursue the training come into play".

The librarians indicated that the lack of time to pursue training is a very real barrier to updating. The comments on the questionnaires all mentioned in one way or another the difficulties imposed by lack of time. One librarian wrote, "In-house training is often necessarily too brief...Other reference librarians also unavailable [to talk to] for their experience." Another said that "[courses] were difficult to schedule because my working schedule was extremely erratic and therefore I was unable to make plans". Also as a part-time contract employee, she was not able to take advantage of in-house courses or receive reimbursement for conference attendance or courses at educational institutions. It is interesting to note that these librarians did not feel that family constraints imposed barriers to updating, only the lack of time at work.

The rate of technological change and the pace of change were also stressed by some librarians. In interviews, the librarians talked about constant changes in the electronic resources they are expected to be able to use and to teach patrons to use. A real frustration was the instability of the system. A common occurrence was that the system might be down or a resource unavailable at the specific time that had been scheduled as a learning period. One librarian felt that the technological changes had lead to reduced public service in some areas.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented results from a pilot survey of a larger survey of professional development of reference librarians in public libraries in Ontario. The results showed that librarians are willing and eager participants in formal and informal learning to maintain professional competence. They work for an organization that promotes the exchange of information and supports updating, but the lack of time to learn is a major stumbling block to maintaining professional competence in today's workplace.

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