

Case Study

Information literate staff: a response to the challenge

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Abstract

At a time when University staff are under increasing pressure from many different directions, it is vital that they are given the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to be as effective in the workplace as possible. Creating and sustaining the development of an information literate staff, is a major challenge to large institutions of higher education. In response to this challenge, the University of Leeds has created the Information Literacy Group for Staff, a cross-university group made up of the major on-campus training providers. The group has the remit of co-ordinating and developing staff training across the university. In the recent past the group has developed a portal through which staff may book training courses and events, and produced a promotional CD including a set of self-diagnostic tests, which enable staff to identify their own developmental needs. In the near future, the group will need to respond to external and internal drivers, including the JISC i-Skills initiative, and the introduction of student fees in 2006, which will undoubtedly have major repercussions for the training needs of University staff.

Keywords

Information literacy, staff development, higher education.

1. Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Universities are doing more with less in almost all areas of their everyday business. Jobs may involve taking on multiple roles and require staff to possess a new range of skills and abilities, and the arrival of new technologies on campus for e-learning, administration and research, offer a training challenge for all those involved in staff development.

How can we help our colleagues to work smarter not harder? How can we ensure that rather than being information overloaded, they are information literate? At the University of Leeds, staff development providers from several central units have come together to identify strategies for supporting information literacy for staff, and to co-ordinate their own provision in order to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

2. The challenge

Knowing where to find the right information to do your job has become a troubling issue for university staff; do I need to go through a portal, a VLE, a search engine, the library? Ideally, the pace of change should be accompanied by transparent access to appropriate training for all staff to ensure that they build and retain competency in information and e-literacy.

Finding information can be a nightmarish task. One recent survey of insurance corporations highlighted a common problem in all large organisations; 50% of respondents said that "...there is information residing in our systems that we may not know exists." (Insurance Day, 2005) Being information literate in large organisations is then, not just about the finding of information to do your job, but also about the management of the information you already have. As our dependency on electronic information grows, we should aim to achieve greater clarity in our information handling systems, rather than hoping that the problem will solve itself. This isn't just about IT or IT training, it is about the broader issue of knowledge management.

3. Arrested development

Academic staff frequently find themselves pulled in several different directions during the course of a typical working week; there are publications to write, reading lists to construct, web pages to update, research assistants to be appointed, module descriptions to be drafted and committees to be attended. Departmental support and secretarial staff are now often expected to understand and make use of technologies such as VLEs, electronic submission tools, online exams and complex databases. Things which were never covered in original job descriptions. At the University of Leeds we have seen a rise in numbers of support staff attending training in extra skills such as e-learning, and in the use of plagiarism detection systems being used on campus. Our training on web accessibility which covers the publication of information in appropriate formats, is over subscribed as more staff take on formal or informal 'webmaster' roles.

Stress and overworking are two major factors in the reluctance of staff to expend precious work hours on training courses and workshops, and tearing yourself away from the computer has become a major challenge to the sector. A recent AUT survey highlights this problem in stark terms: "Almost one-half of the 2004 respondents said that their workloads were unmanageable. One respondent commented: 'Overwork has now become institutionalised: everyone expects it.'" (AUT, 2004)

Access to training and support

Although significant numbers of staff are able to access the right training for their jobs, it is still the case that some staff find it more difficult to get the developmental support they need. Barriers to taking up training are many and various; staff are almost certainly time poor at all or particular times in the academic year, and many will be unable to put a full or half day aside for their own self development. The time poor can be both helped and hindered by technology; email for example, a fast and efficient communication medium for some, can produce daily heart-sink moments for

others, seemingly trapped by mailing lists they can't unsubscribe from, and bombarded with junk mail that refuses to obey their filters.

The amount of information flowing between individuals has increased astronomically as a result of email. In the past I would wander down to our porter's lodge at coffee time to pick up the day's mail. If I were lucky, I'd get two or three letters, rarely more. (Birkhead, 2004: 58)

Those working on short term contracts, such as research staff are unlikely to have a planned and progressive approach to addressing their own training needs, they may also move jobs frequently both within and between organisations, which will also hinder their ability to find appropriate information to do their jobs; staff who are unconscious of their skills deficits are unlikely to seek out training without prompting.

Rising workloads and stress, extensive casualisation, growing insecurity, excessive audit and a management crisis culture in too many institutions have undermined whatever groves of academe once existed. (Mackney, 2005: 18)

For all these reasons and more, it is vital that Universities plan their staff development provision effectively, with internal training providers communicating regularly to ensure that staff development is as flexible and accessible as possible.

4. The response: An Information Literacy group for Staff

The University of Leeds created the Information Literacy group for Staff, with a membership drawn from a range of training providers across the University and representatives from academic departments. Representation on the group spanned across several key areas including: Information Systems Services (ISS), the Library, Staff Departmental Development Unit (SDDU), Learning Development Unit (LDU), the Virtual Learning Environment team (VLE), and willing members of academic staff. Drawing on key staff training providers and academic staff enabled the group to exploit a pool of experience and opinion. Each group member was able to bring a different but relevant viewpoint to meetings, and to share the expertise of their department with the rest of the group. The group therefore benefits from a vibrant and enthusiastic membership, dedicated to moving staff training forward within the University.

The Information Literacy group for staff aims to share ideas and information with a view to providing accessible training which is responsive to staff needs. Our initial strategy was to carry out a survey or audit of information literacy training needs in relation to job categories; this however, proved frustratingly difficult and unhelpful in the face of the rapidly changing roles as described above. In the light of this we identified that our priority should be to encourage staff to keep abreast of changes; help them to identify relevant training for themselves, and to make that training easy to find and access. To achieve this aim, the group focused on six key areas of development:

1. To encourage staff to use the internal campus news service to locate institutional information

- Campusweb has become the major source of campus news for staff and students, enabling more efficient retrieval of information for everyone working at the University.
2. To develop a shared booking portal for staff training courses to enable those seeking training to find and book it more easily
 - In 2003 the group succeed in developing a shared front face for our events database which included an online booking facility; this saw a 2004-2005 increase in bookings of around 30% as a result.
 - Significant development work on the booking portal continues year on year, in 2005 for example, a new shared system running behind the customer interface has helped training providers to better cross-reference course bookings and monitor staff attendance.
 3. To bring together Information Literacy training materials authored by different providers in one place online
 - Members of the Information Literacy Group for Staff have developed online guides for specific skills or packages to provide 'at need' training, and relieve strain on traditional face-to-face methods of staff development.
 4. To consult over the development of training courses to identify gaps and opportunities
 - Information literacy skills have been integrated into the postgraduate certificate in learning and teaching in higher education (a course for new academic staff), and into training for research students.
 5. To develop self-audit questionnaires to assist staff in identifying their own training needs
 - The promotion of training to staff was also a crucial function of the group, and in 2004, a free CD 'Stuff for Staff' was launched. Aimed at all members of staff and showing a selection of materials derived from typical training courses, the CD also included a set of self-diagnostic tests enabling staff of broadly different categories to test their skills in a variety of areas from web searching and email management, to referencing. This approach gave staff an opportunity to assess their skills by function and real world activities, rather than by their grade and job description.
 - Self-diagnostic testing was felt to be particularly valuable in prompting those unaware of their skills deficit to seek out training, given that it addresses practical skills in everyday use by a whole range of staff.
 6. To look at existing staff development programmes to identify opportunities for Information Literacy delivery in them.
 - The members of the group who develop training programmes, meet to consult over provision for the coming academic year. As a result of this improved communication, 104 courses have been identified as including elements of information literacy for staff, allowing us to map our coverage and identify gaps.

5. Meeting the needs?

So, have the actions of the group begun to help meet the needs of University staff? Without a major survey of staff competencies it is impossible to determine how successful the group has been, the definite increase in workshop bookings in 2004-2005 is proof that more staff are aware of the training opportunities available to them, but the reasons for this heightened awareness are difficult to identify. One of our key concerns is that our group is able to keep pace with the demands of staff as their needs, particularly in technological terms, become ever broader; new workshops on using electronic voting in lectures, creating online polls and using blogs for teaching and research are just three new additions to the training on offer in 2005-2006.

5. Future directions

The coming year is an exciting time for the Staff Information Literacy Group. As well as the recent initiatives in staff information skills from JISC, we have new portal-related projects and human resources systems to implement. A number of future challenges for training providers and staff are emerging, we must ensure, for example, that we continue to develop new courses to keep pace with technological developments and, in the light of student fees, we must identify areas of technology use in which our staff can work to meet student-customer expectations:

The learning environment will become ever more important as competition intensifies in the post-2006 world of top-up fees and bursaries. Failure to satisfy students' expectations will dent recruitment as surely as substandard accommodation, a bad report from the Quality Assurance Agency or a poor showing in the research assessment exercise. (THES, 2005)

While it is likely that demand for training may increase given the growing number of staff who are keen to explore e-learning opportunities, there may also be an increased demand, and benefit, for staff training to be delivered in different ways, and staff may require greater flexibility in the way in which they learn new skills.

If there is to be a paradigm shift in the way educational institutions deliver education, there will need to be a paradigm shift in staff development Delivery should be anywhere, anytime. Staff should be able to put themselves in the learner's shoes and actively experience the learning environments advocated for their students. In order to mainstream these activities for students, they need to be mainstreamed for staff professional development. Only when staff are comfortable using a variety of delivery methods will they be able to incorporate them successfully in their own teaching. (Wills and Alexander, 2000: 65).

With job descriptions subject to rapid change as technology advances and pressures increasing on different parts of the University system, staff will need to adapt to new working practices as never before. Those working on short term contracts are increasingly concerned about their employability; staff in these situations may also find it difficult to develop and maintain a coherent set of skills over a series of jobs.

We must promote an understanding of the need for job related information literacy skills and ways to identify skill needs through career development staff review processes.

6. Conclusions

Continuous staff development is essential in a knowledge driven environment such as a university. Being information literate is an essential part of the everyday work of thousands of HE sector employees, as information multiplies ever faster. Where central training providers work together, the hurdles faced by employees in attaining information literacy can start to be broken down. At the University of Leeds we have begun this process, but our case study is far from complete, and we look forward to meeting the challenges of the future.

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