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Oud, Joanne, "Jumping into the Deep End: Training for New Academic Librarians" (2005). *Library Publications*. 4.

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Jumping into the Deep End: Training for New Academic Librarians

Joanne Oud

Good training helps new employees learn their jobs well, adapt smoothly to their new environments and become effective quickly. Initial training also helps shape employees' first impressions of their new workplace. For the organization, the major benefits of training include improved employee satisfaction¹ and an increase in the length of time that people stay at their jobs.² Therefore, training has a major effect on job satisfaction, employee success and employee retention.

Good training is clearly important for starting new employees off on the right foot. But what kind of training is offered to new librarians in Canadian libraries, and how effective is it? A colleague, Angela Madden, and I did a survey of new academic librarians in Canada to find out. We identified 111 academic librarians with less than three years' experience and mailed them each a questionnaire. We asked questions about what they knew and didn't know when they arrived on the first day for their new job, what kind of training they received, and what difficulties they encountered in learning, if any. Ninety-seven librarians, or 87%, responded.

Existing training

We found that only 42% of respondents had been offered formal training when they started their jobs; 46% received informal training, and 12% had no training of any kind.

The two most common training methods used were informal one-on-one discussions and having the new employee ask questions on their own initiative. Nearly all the training reported used one or both of these two methods and seldom used other methods. Only a few respondents also reported group training sessions, practice exercises, job shadowing, or the use of a training manual.

For those who did receive training, it almost always consisted of information about job duties and introductions to library staff. Slightly less than half of all training also included information about the informal expectations of the job, for example concerning dress and expected hours of work.

The length of training received was 6 hours or less for 33% of respondents who received training, between 7 and 13 hours for 26%, and more than 13 hours for 41%.

Improving training

What suggestions did new librarians have for making initial training sessions more effective? Most pointed out the need to improve how training was conducted. Some commented that their training came in "bits and pieces," "was a bit ad hoc," or that "the culture here is to throw you into the deep end."

When asked what methods would have been more helpful, the most frequent suggestion, especially from those with informal or no training, was for a more structured, planned approach to training or, as one respondent put it: "a formal, methodological training program rather than having to ask an endless series of questions."

When it comes to training new staff, we found that most libraries have an unstructured approach that often requires the person being trained to come up with the questions and suggest areas of need. This is very different from the way most of us would approach designing instruction sessions with our users. Although the audience may be different, the basic principles of good instruction remain the same. As one respondent commented, "a good approach to training is to start with questions about learning style,

previous knowledge, getting a sense of where someone is coming from.” Knowing the background, learning styles and needs of our audience, and having clear objectives and a careful strategy to achieve those objectives, are just as important in staff training as they are for user instruction.

Many new librarians commented on the difficulty they had in finding relevant information and the frustration of trying to determine who to ask when they had a question. They suggested that one important component of a more structured approach to training should be a formal training manual. This would give new employees something to refer to after their training sessions, set out information such as policies and procedures, and provide a quick reference guide on who to contact about what.

Another frequent suggestion was to have a more practical, hands-on approach to training. Many respondents commented that practice exercises would have helped them retain more information from the training sessions, made them feel more confident and prepared, and made the training more interesting. They wanted to supplement training sessions with activities like job shadowing, finding answers to practice questions based on actual reference queries, and working through exercises based on common collection development scenarios.

New relationships and follow-up

Training would also be improved by being designed to match the knowledge gaps of new academic librarians more closely. Some areas where new librarians need assistance appear to be covered only rarely during training. When asked what they knew least about when they started, librarians most often mentioned library politics and culture, speaking effectively in meetings, how to say no to projects, liaison with faculty, and collection development.

Some respondents pointed out the potential difficulty for new librarians of shifting from a student-teacher relationship with faculty to suddenly being colleagues. Introductions to key faculty contacts and guidance in dealing with commonly encountered situations with faculty would be useful to many newly hired librarians.

In addition, training sessions should consider the “external” contacts that a new employee will need to make and facilitate those relationships. Some new librarians find themselves in the difficult position of being the only person

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Not surprisingly, their suggestions about what additional content would be useful to include in training sessions reflected these knowledge gaps. Many librarians reported difficulties in learning the nebulous aspects of library culture and politics. Better training in collection development was frequently suggested.

who knows about their new job: “I became the authority when I walked in the door. If I couldn’t answer a question, it couldn’t be answered here, and I didn’t know who to turn to in the community.” Several new librarians in this situation suggested that training should include introductions and perhaps even instruction sessions with librarians at other institutions.


Feedback on their progress and opportunities for follow-up questions and training were frequently mentioned as problematic or completely lacking. More formally structured sessions over a longer period of time would help with these problems. Practical exercises with scheduled follow-up sessions would assist trainees in seeing where they need to ask for more assistance and would provide the chance to do so. Ideally, training should include scheduled sessions for questions and clarification as the new employee encounters new situations over the first few months.

Only 14% of new librarians reported having a formal mentor, but many suggested that such a person would have been very useful. New librarians frequently suggested having a pre-assigned and formally

designated contact person available to answer their questions. This would reduce frustration and time spent trying to figure out who to ask what, and would also reduce some of the often-mentioned guilt at asking so many questions of their busy colleagues. A mentor assigned for an initial training period of six months or so could also provide the feedback and follow-up that many new librarians suggested were missing in their training.

Training and job satisfaction

Survey respondents who received structured training of more than 13 hours were the happiest both with their training and with their jobs. Those who received no training had a much lower level of job satisfaction: 25% rated themselves as being "somewhat unhappy" or

"very unhappy" with their job, as opposed to 5% for respondents who did have training. By this measure, training is an important part of our efforts to retain new employees, and careful attention to training design and implementation will result in more positive experiences for new librarians in our libraries. 

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Notes

1. Jennifer Reingold and Robert McNatt, "Why Your Workers Might Jump Ship," *Business Week* 3618 (March 1, 1999): 8.
2. Adam J. Grossberg, "The Effect of Formal Training on Employment Duration," *Industrial Relations* 39 (2000): 578-600.

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