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The Personal Information Trainer

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The Personal Information Trainer

Abstract

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Keywords

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The Personal Information Trainer

By Stuart Basefsky*

Abstract

The Personal Information Trainer (PIT) can become a unique employee benefit written into the employment contract of key individuals (very few) deemed to be essential to the success of a firm or institution. This is a no-extra-cost (non-compensatory) benefit that can help improve recruitment and retention of top talent and enhance the library's value proposition. This concept is useful to human resource managers, libraries, and the institutions they serve. This article provides the fundamental concepts and constructs necessary to implement such a program with an emphasis on why and how this should be done.

Regardless of the fact-based optimism of our profession that sees itself at or near the center of the information age, others do not always share that perception. When we understand our value--but others only see the costs--our positions and influence are at risk. Consequently, we need to plant the seeds that will grow into a changed perception among the decision-makers with whom we work--our value needs to be evident.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The most effective seed is ourselves, in the form of a well-targeted and sparingly used employee benefit. (1)

This benefit is known as a Personal Information Trainer with the appropriate acronym PIT. After all, a PIT is a seed--even if the term has perhaps a negative connotation. (This does not have to be bad. Broccoli, for example, does not have the best public image as a term, but we all know it to be healthy. Likewise, in this context, the PIT should be known by all to be healthy for productivity, innovation, flexibility, and other elements of competitive advantage that help our institutions grow and succeed.)

My argument is below:

A PIT AS AN EMPLOYEE BENEFIT

The PIT is a professional librarian or information specialist who is assigned to key individuals (very few) deemed to be essential to the success of a firm or institution. The PIT is part of the employment contract (2) with these individuals, a segment of a package designed to attract and retain these talented persons. The role of the PIT is to keep the individual and his or her office up to date on the latest resources useful for productivity and creativity and to provide training as necessary.

The PIT is not "owned" by the individual who has been given this benefit. Nor does the PIT work for the person. In fact, the PIT does similar work for everyone. The difference is that this targeted person gets individual attention and concern while others may be asked to get training as a group. The PIT has an obligation to focus attention on the needs of the target proactively.

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WHY CREATE THIS ENTITY? WHAT IS THE GOAL?

Most information centers or libraries (and the professionals who run them) are perceived to be part of the infrastructure of a company or institution. They exist for the benefit of everyone--not unlike a company cafeteria, gym, store, or other internal service.

Of course, an information center is linked to an institution's intellectual capital and, therefore, given higher regard. The respect received may or may not exceed that given to information technologists who service another element of what may be called the information infrastructure. The problem with "infrastructure" is people conceive of it as being free to any member of the institution. (Free from the perspective of users, but a major cost from the perspective of the institution's decision-makers). Things that are free are often taken for granted and, therefore, devalued. Herein is the problem: The library is devalued as a matter of perception by its users who in turn no longer place a demand on the institution to pay the major costs.

How then can decision-makers in an institution be persuaded to change how they conceptualize the role of an information center? In other words, how does one change the image of the information center or library from that of infrastructure for the users to one of valued service--valued enough to keep a demand for its continuance?

The answer is to move away from the egalitarian concept of the library or information center (excellent service for all) to one of exclusivity (excellent service for a few) in terms of user perception.

The emphasis here is user perception. After all, the key problem for libraries historically has been to set up a group dynamic among users in defense of the service value that information professionals provide. As I wrote previously in this publication:

"Nearly all library patrons will indicate that they are happy with library service. Unfortunately, none of them goes to lunch with the intention of asking the following kind of cocktail conversation question, 'How was your day at the library?' The reputation of the library and its quality services remain with individuals, not groups. There are no natural interest groups coming to the defense of libraries and the services they offer. Only the traditional, scholarly, and cultural imagery of libraries comes to their defense. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, in a cynical world where one knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing, respect based on tradition or even knowledge of true value is little to rely on. 'What is your organization costing?' is the predominant question of the day. 'What does the institution gain from your existence?' is the parallel question. Without good answers, the future for libraries is not promising. Consequently, a transformation is necessary." (3)

With increasingly cynical decision-makers, it becomes more and more difficult for information professionals to defend their services. No amount of measurements that speak to return on investment or nifty metrics that support the bottom line will change the perception of the information center as fundamentally a cost center, unless users coalesce around this internal organization (the library) with true desire for its valued service.

So how does one create user desire so strong that a collective voice for a valued service will be heard? This is the goal.

THE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Because of the above, two fundamental questions must be addressed:

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1. What is the value of the library to an organization and its employees?
2. What is the value of any infrastructure that is thought to be freely available to members of the organization as both a commodity and a service?

In part, both of these questions have been answered already. However, additional nuances need to be drawn out.

As to the first, personal agendas and projects attract individuals to information services. They know that information professionals can help them save time, be creative, reduce redundancies, promote their careers, and, in a word, compete. Once in a while, managers using these services will encourage others to take advantage of them for the general good of the organization. But for the most part, individual experience brings usage. Whatever group dynamic may exist in support of the library, it is usually at a conceptual level. This makes the institution of the library vulnerable to workplace politics.

In response to question number two, it is human nature to ignore or to be unconcerned about those things that are perceived to be free. And it is human nature to desire materials and services perceived to be useful but scarce.

To draw on a parallel image, think of tap water and bottled water. Tap water is perceived to be free and bottled water has a fee attached. Most people know that there is, in fact, little significant difference in water quality between the two. Packaging and a price makes the product desired and valued.

So how can libraries and information professionals be repackaged so they become desired and valued? In answer to this question comes the key element: the employee benefit. It is the glass or plastic bottle holding the water for which everyone pays dearly.

WHY MUST A PIT BE AN EMPLOYEE BENEFIT? HOW DO ALL PARTIES GAIN?

From a strategic perspective, it is important for an organization to attract and retain top talent. However, developing a unique and attractive compensation plan that is difficult for a competitor to copy is not easy. This executive viewpoint offers an opportunity to libraries within these institutions (all these libraries being different in terms of focus, specialization, and human capital) to step forward and argue that their specialized skills can offer competitive advantage if they could be turned into a employee benefit that is actually written into the employment contract of a few targeted individuals ("star" employees).

How is this done?

A conceptual framework needs to be developed and proposed in coordination with the top human resources officer within the institution. This requires an understanding of what constitutes an employee benefit.

"Employee benefits are the indirect components of the total compensation package including all tangible returns for an employee's labor except for direct pay." (4) In other words, it is perceived as pay--the most distinguishing and guarded element in the workplace. It defines to some extent status within the organization. This is true in particular when the benefit is reserved for an exclusive few.

* In keeping with the bottled water analogy, think expensive bottled water. Most important from the perspective of top management, however, is the fact that the library already exists. It is in the existing budget. Consequently, when talking about making one or several of the librarians a PIT, it

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is perceived as a non-compensatory benefit (no additional cost to the firm) that can be offered to attract and retain top talent.

* Think expensive-looking bottled water actually filled with tap water. When implemented properly, an interesting dynamic will develop that becomes evident in the differing perceptions of the PIT recipient, the librarian, and the other employees. This newly developed awareness by all parties benefits them all--and in particular the continuing investment (it is hoped) in the information center.

A well-explained PIT in the employment package should be received enthusiastically by an existing or prospective employee. After all, when a PIT is offered, it signals the willingness of the institution to invest in and provide exclusive support for this individual's work. It validates the individual's worth to the organization.

From the information specialist's perspective, to be a PIT means that one is viewed as a valued investment in the productivity of key talent--essential to the long-term benefit of the organization. It validates the worth of the PIT not only in this specialized role and but in providing general service to the organization.

The "other employees" not given a PIT may feel slighted. This is precisely the intent. They will likely begin to acknowledge the services of a PIT are somehow special because they themselves are not "entitled" to this individual attention. What was once not special becomes prized. These others may ask themselves, "Why did that person get a PIT and not me?" and "What am I missing by not having a PIT?" They are now motivated to seek the assistance of information specialists because they equate their services with status and advancement in the organization. Of course, the organization's management is happy to have the service used by everyone. That is why they created an information center in the first place.

To be noted in particular is the perspective of the human resources department. Offering incentives for top talent that do not cost extra money is desirable. It is a tool that HR executives would love to have at their disposal. (George Milkovich, the M.P. Catherwood Professor Emeritus at Cornell University's Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies and a world-renowned compensation expert, agrees with this assessment and encourages this innovation.)

CHECKLIST FOR IMPLEMENTATION

To implement this kind of initiative, one must first make a proper case with the institution's management or the head of the human resources department. This may not be that simple. Many executives are neither aware of the vital role of the information center nor of its potential. Opening the dialogue may invite unwanted scrutiny. However, a suggested approach includes the following:

* Reiterate the value that the library/information center has to the organization and indicate a willingness to enhance its already proven value. It is important to be very positive in expressing the vision of this vital resource and its professionals. If, for some reason, it is sensed that the value is already in question, start using economic terminology to make the case. My favorite is explaining that librarians are considered beneficial externalities in terms of economics. You may have to define this phrase. A good definition is, "where an externality-generating activity raises the production or utility of the externally-affected party. For example, a beekeeper may benefit neighboring farmers by incidentally supplying pollination services." (5) In other words, in-house information specialists help pollinate the seeds of the human capital potential of the entire organization. A key example of

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not recognizing this was the failed initiative of the Baker & McKenzie law firm that tried to out-source its library services. (6) The firm later hired a new in-house library staff.

* It is important to make the HR department a partner in this initiative. After all, this department is the key voice when it comes to compensation and benefits issues. In addition, any strategically astute library wants to have some input in decision-making. It is unlikely that a library without a partner at one of the leadership levels of the organization will have the necessary influence it needs to show its strengths. In addition, HR is a natural partner for other business concerns, such as training and development. Sharing a mutually beneficial agenda with another division of an organization is usually not a bad idea. Bonding with the leadership of the organization needs to be a goal.

* Start the initiative at a small and controlled level. In fact, ask to test this concept out on only one key individual. Get on the person's calendar for an office visit at appropriate periodic times (once every month, every two weeks ...) along with an invitation to bring new and innovative information to their attention if appropriate. Choose only a person for whom you know in advance that things will work out. Your first initiative needs to be successful. Look for assured success

* Make certain that the individual targeted has political influence over others in the organization as a culture leader. If he or she likes the service, others will envy the service and want to replicate it for themselves. This targeted individual should be encouraged to chat about the PIT employment benefit with others.

* Insist that this service be limited to no more than five priority people at any given time. It is too labor intensive otherwise. Perhaps after some experimentation and learning from these arrangements, the number can be enlarged.

* Tell other employees that they are welcome to have the same services. However, it is best if they take advantage of the training in groups. These groups can be put on the calendar as well.

* Review the PIT concept every six months for practice and policy concerns and adjust as necessary.

REAL AND PROSPECTIVE EXAMPLES

I have tested this concept successfully on three occasions. While I have not formalized these tests with an employment contract, my services have been cast as an employee benefit during the time they were operational with the persons being served.

* The vice president of human resources at Cornell University was targeted for a period of one year. I became this person's Personal Information Trainer making periodic visits to the office and providing intense one-on-one training on various databases. The instruction also included using the Internet in strategic ways and guiding the person to better use of the Internet, including elements of the deep Web. I also sent timely e-mails to keep the person aware of up-to-the-minute releases of importance to her operation. This effort resulted in several positive outcomes including:

1. The HR professionals at Cornell University were directed to my school and library--the School of Industrial & Labor Relation and its Catherwood Library specializing in workplace issues--for training and development.

2. The training of administrative staff elsewhere on campus became possible because of the good experiences of the HR professionals in dealing with our library services. The HR people spread the word.

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3. My school's library became known as a vital element to the success of the university in general--particularly valuable to Cornell's administration, which ultimately pays the bills for library databases and services. Consequently, this indirectly benefited all the libraries on campus. (7)

* The speech writer for the president of Duke University was targeted for a period of two years. Again, I became this person's personal information trainer doing many of the same things listed in the first example. However, in this instance, the president of the university would hear about the great services provided by its library and be witness to the result. This greatly enhanced the relationship between the office of the president and the library.

* The head of public relations at Duke University was targeted for a period of one year. As this person's personal information trainer, I demonstrated key databases that could enhance effectiveness on policy issues of concern in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. Many of the administration's research teams were directed to my library department--government documents--for similar training.

Any organization that wishes to target a key scientist, engineer, executive, and his or her office or operation can do so. As long as it remains manageable in terms of the labor commitment necessary, the spin-off benefits to the library or information center can be enormous. More importantly, the organization reaps many rewards for the effort if it is done strategically.

The examples above demonstrate effectiveness or at least its potential. What remains to be done is institutionalizing these efforts with the blessings of library leaders.

I have never been in a position of authority where I could institute the program that I am suggesting here. I am only able to show by my example how this can be done. Those in authority should be trying to do the same--but with an institutionalized approach. In my opinion, the best way to accomplish this is by creating the PIT employee benefit.

LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES

If one were to institute such a program, what would be the long-term consequences?

When trying to solve a problem--in this case, turning the impression of information services from cost to value--the solution can often create new problems. However, in this instance the problems should be welcome. These include:

* The reward for good work is more work. Even though many of our operations are stressful and under staffed, the risks of being seen as a cost center are too great. Most of us would rather be over-worked than be at risk of losing our positions because we are seen as a cost center. Take heart in the fact that once value is re-established, it should be easier to argue for more support.

* In hard times, management thinks twice before laying off an "employee benefit." It is not like cutting infrastructure that is seen as a cost center. PITs have value. They will be needed to keep top talent while others are let go. Still, this is no guarantee. It is simply better positioning.

* The perception of the library/information center changes. It is hoped that it will become a partner in the decision-making process--or at least be placed on the road to becoming a partner. Note that these concerns parallel the world of human resource management. Human resource professionals have long struggled to get to the decision-making table. Many of them still have major hurdles to conquer.

* If this kind of program becomes successful, it may parallel the evolution of wellness programs. In the 1970s, wellness programs were reserved for executive only. In the 1980s, they were extended

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to all employees. In the 1990s, organizations targeted at-risk employees by providing incentives for participation (smoking reduction, etc.). In the 2000s, a global workforce focus as well as alignment with work-life balance and employee assistance programs came into effect. The parallel for information competence for career development and competitiveness may string out along the same line--exclusive to executives, then for most employees, then for employees at greatest need, and then a more universal perspective. In all, a reinvention of information service could take place.

* In general, information service may again become valued like the library of the 19th and early 20th century. Being overwhelmed with information is as much a burden on good judgment, decision-making, and competitiveness as lacking access used to be. Too much information without adequate organization, framework, and context can be paralyzing. The skills of information specialists/librarians should be in demand. But this is a rational approach. People's perceptions are not rational. They need to be tweaked and molded. The employee benefit approach allows for this.

POLICY CONCERNS

The notion of developing a PIT as an employee benefit may be enticing. However, there are a few major concerns that any library must take into consideration before choosing to implement such a program. Among these are:

* The culture of librarians and librarianship

Too often librarians tend to be ideologues with regard to egalitarianism. They wish to treat everyone equally. This can remain a goal. However, in practical terms this culture needs to make adjustments. After all, treating everyone equally is in part responsible for people perceiving us as an infrastructure. It has given us an image of being a cost center. Why? One only has to ask the question, "Who determines if one's services are valued or not?" The answer of course rests in the hands of people in power: decision-makers.

Again, services available to everyone tend not to be valued. Certainly, competitive executives, scientists, engineers, lawyers, and other professionals who have ambition do not want to think of themselves as going to a common trough to enhance their careers. So if librarians want to engage the good will of these ambitious and influential persons, they need to "game the system" by making influential people think they are getting special service. This may or may not result in improved funding support. Of one thing that is certain, however, is that if we do not move in this direction support will decline. Providing equal service will have us disappearing equally.

* The need for the "visible librarian"

This kind of program needs highly visible librarians. The occupation needs to attract persons who are comfortable with being in the spotlight and taking on extra responsibility to make this kind of program work well.

* Staffing

If the current organization does not have the right kind of personnel to carry out this initiative, an evaluation of the pros and cons of reorganizing is in order. Age should not be a factor. This is not a generational issue. It is a question of finding people who are not afraid of change.

* The view of the decision-makers

I have spoken with numerous partners in law firms (8), executives in companies, and administrators in universities. They welcome forthright and professional librarians telling them what they

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want and need in order to make the larger institution more competitive. They would prefer to get away from the stereotypes of librarians. They want to think of their information specialists as change agents. All they seek is a professional attitude, good proposals, and useful experimentation. If they see evidence of progress, they will treat people in our occupation with respect. They will value them and their services. The differentiation of service--in the form of an employee benefit--is one of the politically appropriate ways of earning their confidence.

To conclude, the cost center image of our services must change. Librarians and information specialists should seek methods for making the transition to value. One such model is implementing Personal Information Trainer as an employee benefit. It may or may not be a good fit for any given library organization. However, the change has to come from individual efforts. It is best, from my perspective, if these efforts can be institutionalized in some form. The evidence of my own efforts tells me that this can be done.

What disturbs me is that when I am successful, the highest compliment that I get is, "Oh, you are no librarian. You are something different, something special." Yes, I am valued individually--but what about my profession, my information center. I wish it were something different, something special. Perhaps with this concept and similar ones, it will become possible to put the "special" back into special libraries.

Endnotes

(1) Employee Benefits are defined in Roberts' Dictionary of Industrial Relations (Fourth Edition, 1993) as "... any form of employee compensation other than direct wages.... [It] includes all the elements of an employer's total compensation system, direct and indirect, that the employer uses to remunerate or benefit its employees."

(2) According to Black's Law Dictionary (Eighth Edition, 2004), an employment contract is "A contract between an employer and employee in which the terms and conditions of employment are stated."

(3) This quotation is taken from my article, "The Library as an Agent of Change: Pushing the Client Institution Forward," in Information Outlook, August 1999.

(4) (Milkovich and Newman, Compensation, 1993)

(5) The MIT Dictionary of Modern Economics (Third Edition, 1986), edited by David W. Pearce, at page 145.

(6) See LLRX.com for the article, "Outsourcing in Law Firm Libraries" by Rachel Pergament, April 1, 1999 <<http://www.llrx.com/features/outsourcing.htm>> [excerpt] "On March 31, 1995, the Chicago office of Baker & McKenzie fired the entire ten person library staff. The firm announced that it planned to close its library and replace the staff with a library management company. Although these events occurred almost four years ago, and Baker & McKenzie has since hired in-house library staff, they continue to receive attention from law librarians and influence discussions of library management practices and procedures. Moreover, Baker & McKenzie's actions provide important lessons about librarians' perceptions of outsourcing and the pitfalls of entering into an outsourcing agreement without considering its impact on the entire law firm."

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(7) See Basefsky, S., "The Other Client: Information Training for Administrators Pays Dividends for the Library" in *College & Research Libraries News*, 2000, vol. 61, n.2, pp. 100-101.

(8) Most recently with a partner at Kaye Scholer LLP in New York City.

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