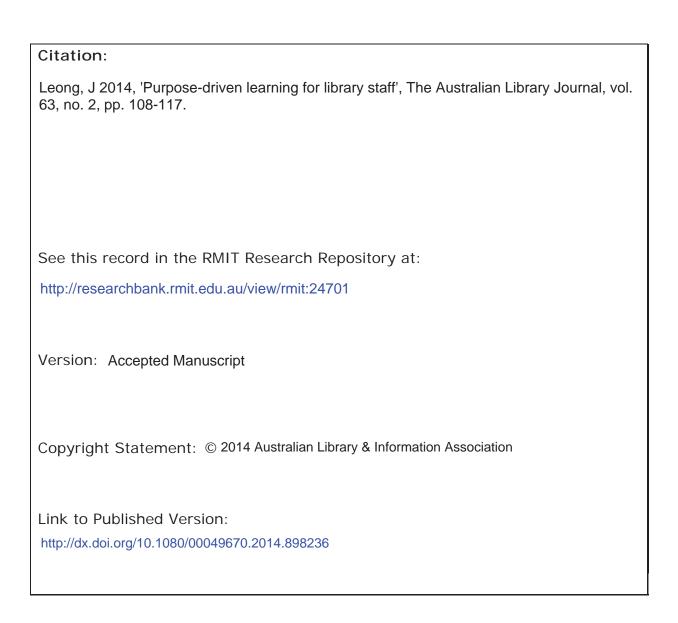


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# Purpose-driven learning for library staff<sup>1</sup>

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This paper demonstrates the effectiveness of a combination of alignment with organisational directions, methodical organisation and more informal and creative efforts to generate purposeful learning in organisations, and provides examples of innovative practice. It describes how a large academic library provides its staff with extensive and purposeful learning opportunities aligned to the strategic directions of the university and its expectations of staff. The staff development planning process is outlined and the approach to creating a common vision of the importance of continuous learning and sharing learning is discussed. RMIT University Library's structured and methodical approach has been successful in creating a positive and energetic learning culture. The library uses a variety of continuing education approaches and, in particular, recognises the value of experience-based learning. Examples of innovative approaches include: an effective library Cross Unit work Experience (CUE) program; team building workshops; specific purpose groups; development of an Innovation Process Model and practical tools to improve creativity; and a Reference Competencies project. Even with a positive learning culture in place it remains challenging to maintain staff's currency, particularly in the area of technology.

**Keywords**: professional development; staff development; libraries

# **Implications for Best Practice**

- Professional development should be carefully aligned with organisational directions for accountability and efficiency and to generate learner motivation.
- A structured approach to planning, organising, delivering and evaluating learning promotes continuous learning and organisational effectiveness.
- Adequate resourcing and staffing is essential to enable the sustained effort required to create effective organisational learning.
- A variety of approaches, including experience-based learning and new opportunities, generate interest and motivation.
- Attention needs to be paid to an inclusive approach which assists those who do not easily adapt to new technologies.

### Introduction

This paper describes an intentional approach to staff development taken by RMIT University Library. This large academic library has five sites, 152 full time equivalent staff, and an annual budget of twenty-five million Australian dollars. The staff development work of the library is outlined under three headings: alignment, structure, and creativity. Beginning with a description of the close alignment of the professional development efforts of the library with the strategic directions of the university, examples of where university and library concerns are deliberately addressed are given. The structured and methodical approach taken to create a positive and energetic learning culture, and the need to balance good organisation with stimulating innovation and creativity, are then discussed. The library uses a variety of continuing education methods and, in particular, recognises the value of experience-based learning.

Throughout the paper discussion focuses on efforts to create a common vision of the importance of continuous learning, and sharing what we learn with our colleagues. This is illustrated through a number of innovative approaches. This paper does not cover in detail the full range of learning activities which the library offers, but gives examples which may have potential application elsewhere. The modus operandi of the library is highly intentional and purpose driven. Sound structures are in place and varying approaches are used to maintain interest and challenge, and thereby to increase motivation.

## The RMIT University Library approach

## Alignment

Authors such as Marquardt suggest that in an organisational setting, professional development (PD) must be aligned with organisational directions for both accountability purposes and motivational reasons. In claiming importance for learning as the key source of sustainable strategic advantage for companies, Marquardt writes: 'Probably the most important strategy for inspiring and motivating an entire organization to move quickly and emphatically toward becoming a learning organization is to link increased learning with increased organizational success' (2011, 71). He suggests steps that may make this link between learning and business goals: mapping the relationship between goals and objectives, job behaviours and skills, and "job success indicators"; integrating learning events and preand post-learning activities with business processes; and creating a process to ensure learning activities match changing business goals (Marquardt 2011, 71).

Creating a purpose-driven staff development plan for one part of a large organisation requires strong awareness of the wider environment, organisational priorities, the major drivers and projects in the unit, and the current approaches and organisational culture of the unit. In the case of the RMIT University Library, the coordination role for this sits with the author (the staff development librarian) who reports to the University Librarian. The Library Executive and managers are highly supportive of excellence in continuing professional development and responsibility is shared by the executive, the staff development librarian, managers and supervisors, and individuals. This promotes a healthy flow of communication, enabling the staff development librarian to produce a cohesive and realistic plan and annual schedule of activities to capture learning activities throughout the library.

The library staff development plan sits within the framework of the strategic plan of the university and is aligned with academic and research plans, library plans, and university

development and training policies. Activities in this plan reflect staff development priorities identified from these, and also from environmental scanning, the RMIT Behavioural Capability Framework for staff, and library staff input. The latter is sourced from discussion with senior staff, emails, input from library units, focus groups, and discussion on the institutional Yammer micro-blog. The Organisational Development unit of the university provided an excellent template for PD planning, and this is followed closely. The library staff development plan sections are:

- purpose
- introduction to the approach taken to staff development
- how the plan is designed
- links to other plans
- evaluation and review
- staff development priorities
- development needs in the short and longer term
- programs/activities
- financial and staffing resources
- achievement targets, administration procedures
- dissemination policy, where the obligation to share what is learnt with others is made explicit.

There is also an appendix which lists the planned activities for the year under headings which reflect university-wide priorities, for example, global, urban, connected, learning and teaching, research, student experience, services and infrastructure. Additionally a small number of activities are listed under a unit-specific heading. The linkage of staff development activities with the key priorities of university is therefore explicit in the library staff development plan.

In addition to the likely benefits in terms of motivation, alignment of library PD with organisational strategic directions has the potential to create cohesion and efficiency through avoiding duplication. For example, efficiencies are gained by encouraging RMIT University Library staff to attend university-wide courses on customer service and cultural awareness, thus allowing internal efforts to focus on library-specific and specialised needs. Another area where close alignment has taken place is in leadership development. Major resourcing was provided for a university-wide 2006-2009 program and a number of leadership PD streams were offered. These comprised several face-to-face workshops and 360° feedback. The library ensured it was aligned with the university program through involving all executive and many senior staff in its leadership group in these courses. Library-specific followthrough includes topical sessions and a Round Table where practical application is discussed (Leong and Anderson 2012, 493). The University Librarian is a strong advocate of ongoing PD and the members of the library executive regularly attend Round Table sessions. Organisational Development now provides online leadership development material, some of which was used as pre-reading for an August 2013 Round Table discussion on authentic conversations.

Several other PD initiatives have intentionally addressed university and library concerns. These feature the experience-based and active learning approaches which were affirmed as valued by RMIT University library leaders at a planning meeting in 2008/9. Examples are:

- An internal Cross Unit work Experience (CUE) scheme was established as part of a library response to address organisational silos, following a university-wide staff survey in which the percentage of library staff favourably rating items in the cross-unit cooperation category was below a level considered desirable.
- A New Professionals Group was designed to entrench a positive and proactive workplace culture in early career professionals and served to establish loyalty to the organisation (Leong and Vaughan 2010).
- A Get Published Group increased presentation and publication output (Sullivan et al. 2013) and is now in its second iteration.
- An Innovative Librarians group has given opportunities to staff to explore new technologies, develop leadership and group work skills, and contribute their knowledge to others (Badham et al. 2011).

The CUE scheme has operated since late 2009, effectively giving participants better insight into the work of other areas of the library, and contributing to higher levels of understanding across units. Importantly, participation is voluntary, thus avoiding worker anxiety such as was noted by researchers of a compulsory job rotation scheme in a housing service centre (Järvensivu and Koski 2012, 12).

The use of special purpose groups has been an effective way of ensuring alignment with organisational directions and needs, while also providing autonomy which is important to motivation and effective teamwork. Alignment with organisational strategy is crucial, but it is also desirable not to overly restrict employees' independence. Haden (2013) points out that 'optimising processes and procedures' is vital, but 'freedom breeds innovation'. Reported and anecdotal evidence shows that the special purpose groups have been successful in terms of content learnt and applied, and for resultant increases in networking among colleagues (Badham et al. 2011; Leong and Vaughan 2010; Sullivan et al. 2013). These groups have demonstrated strong motivation to learn and share expertise with others, most obviously in the case of the Innovative Librarians who have run several '@pp-ternoon teas' at which they have demonstrated applications seen by group members as useful for library staff. Although formed as groups of ideally eight to ten members, the small groups have involved a significant number of staff as they either have end-dates or, in the case of the Innovative Librarians, intentionally create gradual member turnover enabling transfer of group knowledge to others. These examples are one part of the planned PD in the library and are good illustrations of interventions to shift organisational culture or to move in new directions.

#### Structure

In addition to seeking close alignment with stated university directions, the RMIT University Library takes a structured approach to organising and delivering staff development. Following best practice, training is provided throughout the employment job cycle. The RMIT University Human Resources group has regular induction events, has a thorough induction website covering information for new starters and supervisors, and ensures online training covering essential legislation is completed soon after appointment and refreshed regularly. Library managers and supervisors arrange induction plans for individuals and these cover library specific information, including occupational health and safety and evacuation procedures. Library induction plans also schedule a staged introduction for each individual covering tasks, skills training, operating procedures, and essential organisational knowledge. Ongoing skills training and refresher training is ensured through the long standing in-service training (IST) program organised across the libraries by the IST coordinators in consultation

with library managers and with oversight from the staff development librarian. Several years ago, managers determined that, where practical, internal 'mini experts' should present training at all library sites, rather than site staff preparing training for that library only. This was a positive move for efficiency and for promoting a unified learning culture. Staff now rarely decline requests to share their expertise outside of their immediate unit, as they know such sharing is officially encouraged.

This established practice in support of basic PD allows the staff development librarian to pay attention to a broader range of PD activities. Examples are arranging short sessions on new technologies, facilitating or advising special purpose groups, informal mentoring and coaching, encouraging greater interactivity in major meetings of library staff, and ensuring conference reports are presented. There is also an emphasis on gradually covering a range of customer service topics and behavioural expectations over time. The university produced an aspirational Behavioural Capability Framework in 2011, and this gives examples of expected behaviours for varying salary levels. Although its introduction was not without some dispute, it is an excellent tool for individuals to clarify expectations, identify current strengths and weaknesses, and identify areas to work on to prepare for promotion. It is arranged in six clusters: resilience, connectedness, commitment to excellence (continuous improvement), innovation, outcomes focussed, and open thinking (RMIT University Professional Development 2011). Three of these have featured significantly in library professional development over the last few years - resilience, connectedness, and innovation. Examples of the last two are given in the next section. Work on resilience and the impact of change was a significant focus in support of major direction changes in the delivery of liaison services, a library closure and resultant merge of staff groups, and major library system changes. Several externally facilitated in-house workshops were held at different times and a number of staff attended a resilience workshop offered by an outside provider, Inspirational Coaching. Open support for staff facing significant change, thorough planning, and attention to required training has been effective in smoothing the change pathway, ameliorating anxiety and generating a positive team learning spirit.

When providing learning opportunities in a methodical way, a link to stated capabilities is advantageous. Competencies statements are useful for clarifying responsibilities and for skills audits. The RMIT University Library is working to develop a comprehensive set of these. For certain positions, such as the solo staff development librarian, it is more effective to use those created elsewhere and the *Key Competencies for Adult Learning Professionals* (Buiskool et al. 2010) is utilised. A current project which pertains to a large group of personnel is the reference competencies project which is systematically addressing a need for increased skill levels for reference librarians and support staff. This project was necessitated by removal of highly skilled liaison librarians from enquiry desk shifts, and also followed on from an internal report which investigated trends in front line library services and suggested development of a single service point with the blending of functions among different staff members. Staff input to those who investigated service trends demonstrated understanding of the importance of continuous learning. Badham et al. (2012, 16) note: 'Whatever the configuration of the service desk(s) and the model used, staff stressed the importance of initial and ongoing training for the new skills staff are going to require.'

The reference competencies project involves reference and liaison staff working together to identify library subject competencies for various broad subject areas, and in the creation of learning tools and assessment. Developing online tools is an emphasis and the work will provide a way for reference staff to be assessed as having attained competence in specified

subject areas. Identifying varying levels of competence is a consideration, as is a system for recording attainment. The project affirms staff input regarding the importance of ongoing training; however, project leaders have grappled with varied responses in an effort to create a common vision for implementation across the library.

Projects such as the one highlighted in the previous paragraph may present a challenge for staff development work. Even when training needs are methodically addressed, there will be those who do not easily adapt to changing requirements, who learn more slowly, or who learn in a different way from the approaches offered. The organisational learning culture will ideally appreciate this reality, and it is the author's view that those who catch on quickly should be encouraged to take a reasonable amount to time to help others one-on-one where necessary. Staff should be affirmed in their efforts to learn and be encouraged to see asking for help as valid and even expected.

While recognising that some staff members may need individualised support, in general a structured approach to planning, organising, delivering and evaluating learning does promote continuous learning and organisational effectiveness. Adequate resourcing and staffing is essential for enabling the sustained effort required to create effective organisational learning. Learning opportunities and ideas are regularly promoted or discussed at RMIT University Library though the weekly electronic staff news and the institutional micro-blogging service on Yammer. Despite this, the author's personal experience suggests that only a subset of staff are keenly aware of PD directions and organisation; however, those less focused on it are nonetheless influenced by the learning culture in which they function and which they may take for granted.

#### *Creativity*

Previous sections have suggested the value of staff development aligned with organisational directions, activities designed with careful attention to intended outcomes, and methodical planning and delivery. These will combine to improve organisational learning; however, greater motivation and hence greater learning may occur if there is the addition of an element of innovation, a change from the expected, and inclusion of experience-based learning. Here a balance needs to be struck between organised variation in approach and the unpredictability which occurs when people are given the opportunity to self-organise and self-direct.

Organised team development workshops across the library are perhaps an unexpected approach to enriching the learning which is occurring. RMIT University Library utilised Team Management Profiles (Team Management Systems 2009) and workshops with approximately 85% of staff in the period February 2011 to December 2013. With the primary purpose of going 'from good to better, or better to best' in team work by understanding, valuing, and building on individuals' own work preferences and those of others, the exercise had the potential to contribute to building a learning organisation. Facilitators emphasised the value of gaining insight into others' preferences and strengths to know to whom to turn when help is needed to gain insight into a work situation. Greater understanding of others is likely to result in an increased flow of information and more explicit expression of tacit knowledge. Improved teamwork also opens up the potential for the team to take on greater challenges with confidence. The profiles allow the individual to grow in self-awareness, and sharing with others is built into workshops and also encouraged through later sharing one-on-one.

The insights gained may challenge people and reduce complacency. Reed and Avery (2001) suggest several things to consider when setting goals for PD, and one is pertinent here: 'The chaotic consideration involves the recognition that staff development consists not only of acquisition of new skills but also requires behaviour and attitude changes that may be difficult and uncomfortable until they are embedded' (Reed and Avery 2001, 36). Team development is a way of strengthening what is good, and seeking to challenge and redirect aspects of organisational culture and individual behaviour and attitudes to a more positive direction.

By discussing team strengths and weaknesses in terms of Team Management Systems' models, groups of library staff were able to identify areas which the team wished to strengthen. At least one unit identified innovation as an area to improve and they, as well as other interested staff, were aided by the development of an Innovation Process Model and a range of simple descriptions of approaches to defining problems, generating ideas, deciding which ideas to take forward, and strengthening ideas (Leong and Anderson 2012; Leong et al. 2014). These resources can be used in a variety of contexts and, over time, workshops are being held to strengthen capacity in innovative thinking. The first in an intended series of workshops was run in April 2013 and repeated in July 2013. In these workshops, groups of staff worked on thorough definition of key problems using one of the following methods: a mind-map, a fishbone diagram, an outcome checklist, cognitive mapping using Post-it notes, or the Kipling Method. These methods are just some of a large number of problem definition approaches which can be easily located (Cook 1998, Straker 2013). By adopting the Innovation Process Model, library leaders committed to welcoming innovation. The information provided to staff includes help to formulate sound suggestions and a form was developed to use for initial proposals.

To further enrich organisational learning, attention is being paid to adding interactivity and interest to major meetings in a relatively modest way. Examples include use of Keypad audience response devices, an experiment with use of games, and coaching for those leading parts of meetings or reporting back on conferences and training events to help them to think through the likely audience reaction to planned approaches. Gamification has been considered, but is unlikely to be adopted seriously in the near future.

Not all may agree that the examples discussed are especially innovative, but what is different from the norm is contextually sensitive. How far one can stray from the familiar, while still having a positive impact, is hard to predict. Innovation and creativity adds freshness to learning; however, people's responses vary. The author's experience is that many staff are strongly task focused and are motivated by the need to gain knowledge and skills to do their immediate job well. An overuse of unfamiliar approaches and too much surprise value may detract from actual learning. Fun and learning are not the same thing, but the addition of fun or added variety is recommended where this aids motivation and does not distract from learning the intended content.

#### **Outcomes**

In common with many organisations, the library uses evaluative feedback for training events and conference and seminar attendance. An evaluation feedback form reflects the thinking of Kirkpatrick (1998) and covers the first three of his original four levels for training evaluation: reaction, learning, and behaviour (the fourth is results). Data from feedback forms is averaged as a rough performance indicator for overall staff development work, but compliance in completing forms is low. The main value has been in the insight given into which consultant facilitators and training companies provide consistent quality.

Client surveys provide indirect insight into the effectiveness of training. The Insync Library Client Survey of July 2013 evidenced a trend of steadily increased client satisfaction when benchmarked against previous surveys in 2011 and 2009. Notably, for all four items in the 'library staff' category, ratings increased as compared with 2011 results. This category included a question pertaining to the accuracy of answers given by staff in response to enquiries. This was rated as the most important of all survey items by survey respondents and their assessment of library performance was a mean score of 6.22 out of a possible 7.

A reliable indicator of attitudes of staff to the training and development provided is gained from results of ratings in the 'Your Voice' employee engagement institutional staff survey (Voice Project 2012). RMIT University has run this survey in 2007, 2010 and 2013. The survey provides benchmarking data against prior results, other university and tertiary institutions, and 2,600 other organisations in a range of industries. The 2013 results evidence the value of a dedicated staff development role in the library, with ratings for questions in the 'Learning & Development' category comparing very favourably with ratings for the rest of the university, the university and TAFE sector, and an all-industries data column (see Table 1). In reporting results, the '% favourable' indicates the sum of the percentages of 'agree' or 'strongly agree' responses.

Table 1: RMIT University Library Your Voice ratings for Learning & Development category

Topic of item	%favourable		% difference		
	Library 2013	Library 2010	RMIT 2013	Uni & TAFE sector	All industries
Adequacy of guidance and training for new staff	71%	+5%	+23%	+29%	+14%
Commitment to ongoing training and development of staff	83%	+6%	+25%	+25%	+24%
Positive impact of training and development on respondent's performance	85%	+8%	+26%	+27%	+21%

Although this data evidences commonly held views of the overall value of the PD efforts of the library, data from other survey items provide insight into areas where organisational learning has also been a focus. Favourable library ratings for each of the four items under

'Leadership' increased over the previous survey by 22%, 16%, 15% and 2%. Three of four items on each of the categories of 'Performance Appraisal' and 'Supervision' also trended up. Another area of significant PD activity was team development, and the Your Voice data again pointed to positive impact as favourable responses increased by 10%, 7% and 3% for the three 'Teamwork' items.

Good skills in the technology area are vital for confidence and effectiveness in library work. The Your Voice survey includes an item on the skill levels of staff regarding use of existing technology. For this item, library staff in 2013 gave a 59% favourable rating, down 1%. It is not clear if this was primarily a comment on the competence of library staff themselves, but anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of staff are finding it difficult to keep up to date. That not all learning styles are being accommodated, or that more one-on-one help is needed are some of the possible explanations. Clarification on technology-related training needs, possibly through use of a library staff technology skills survey, is needed.

### **Conclusion**

In the business of learning, no organisation can claim to have arrived at perfection. Each organisation is unique in its strategic directions, organisational culture, resourcing, and capability. Best practice requires the careful alignment of professional development with organisational directions, for accountability and for improving learner motivation. RMIT University Library has also found that this provides efficiency pay-offs.

A structured approach to planning, organising, delivering, and evaluating learning ensures that an orderly process underpins continuous learning and organisational effectiveness. Adequate resourcing and staffing is essential to enable the sustained effort required to create effective organisational learning. Creative approaches to staff development are valuable additions to the mix. A variety of approaches, including experience-based learning and new opportunities, can generate interest, increase motivation levels, and potentially enhance levels of innovation.

The complex and ever-changing demands on professionals today mean that regular evaluation and reassessment of best practice in organisational learning is vital. In the provision of staff development, alignment with organisational strategy, good structure, and creativity underpin purpose driven learning. Notwithstanding the application of these principles at the RMIT University Library, challenges remain. In particular, the constant necessity to update technological and procedural skills and knowledge places strain on many. There is a need to provide greater support to enable all to cope and grow to their capacity. Assuming that all staff will absorb what they need from training sessions run at a normal pace, or individually from online and other guides, is all too common and clearly inconsistent with what we know to be true. The learning organisation we build must take account of individual needs and value informal and one-on-one assistance where it is required.

## Note

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Libraries as Learning Organisations Symposium, 1 November 2013, Queensland University of Technology. The revised paper

published in this issue of the *Australian Library Journal* has been double-blind peer reviewed to meet the Department of Education's HERDC requirements.

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