Future librarians, future skills: skilling librarians for the 21st century

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We ask much of librarians – they must support scholarship and be scholars themselves, they must support students and be learners themselves, they must grasp and deploy new technologies, they need to understand the legal and ethical dimensions of their roles, they must be curators and teachers, possess outstanding interpersonal skills, be skilled classroom and online practitioners, be able to articulate and simplify the complex information landscape for their community, they must be advocates, ambassadors and evangelists for their profession and their service. We need thinkers, communicators, the curious, the resilient and the bold. We need builders and listeners, activists, designers, drivers, coaches and teachers who understand theory and can apply it in practice.

How can we be sure that we are creating the environment and providing the infrastructure and scaffolding for staff to cope with the current information and skills landscape?

At Staffordshire University our team of librarians, study skills staff and IT trainers together provide a service called Academic Skills Knowhow (ASK).

In addition to providing library collections, systems and academic liaison, the team provides a comprehensive information, digital and academic literacy service. But what qualities, skills and behaviours do staff need in order to deliver a service such as this? How can we make the most of our existing skill sets? How can we identify possible skills gaps? How might we further develop and empower staff to fulfil their potential? How might staff themselves manage their own continual personal and professional development? And how can managers better understand and support their staff, utilise their strengths and identify opportunities for development?

In order to investigate these questions and to find a solution we established the Skills Register project. We would focus on the ASK team in the first instance but would consider a model that would be applicable across the wider Information Services staff. Our intention was to develop and define a skills register in order to help understand the complex skill sets required for each job role, to identify the service skills mix for cross-team endeavours, to identify potential skills gaps in the service and to boost personal and team development and awareness.

The work was influenced by a number of key initiatives from major professional bodies: in particular, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) for teaching and supporting learning.[1] The Skills Framework for the Information Age (SFIA)[2] and CompTIA Certification roadmap[3] were also influential as was, of course, CILIP's Professional Knowledge and Skills Base framework.[4]

Within the Academic Skills Know-how team at Staffordshire there are two site managers (one based at Stoke and one at Stafford) and 17 information consultants, librarians, skills support teachers and data security consultants who work on full- and part-time contracts across the three university sites at Stoke, Stafford and Shrewsbury. The project began in earnest in February 2012 when the two Learning and Information Support Managers began a detailed analysis of the seven different roles in the team. These were not all traditional librarian roles; some were filled by and demanded professional IT consultants, trained higher education skills support staff and people with extensive data security expertise. The team managers needed to know what skills the team possessed and to understand what the areas of activity-specific roles encompassed and what particular tasks and duties were undertaken. They had to identify what core knowledge was needed to carry out the activities at the appropriate level and what professional values someone performing them should embrace and exemplify.

Team managers spent time unpacking and analysing in detail the seven individual job descriptions. Ten core skills were defined and ranked for each post. For example, an academic skills librarian might be expected to have skills in relation to learning and teaching, resources management, communication, liaison and networking, enquiry

and services delivery, technology engagement and delivery, financial management, performance measurement, project management, understanding national and university policies and professional awareness.

There was considerable discussion about how to develop a grading system so that staff could demonstrate their levels of competency in different areas. Some members of the team favoured the idea of an 'on / off' approach – competent / non-competent. This would mean that staff would need to declare either that they were able to train others in the area or that they needed to be trained. This approach was crude and unpopular and did not allow for much flexibility or the idea of progression and development. Instead, the idea of five basic levels of competence was developed: level one represents a basic understanding; level two, the ability to identify current issues; level three, the ability to apply the skill routinely; level four, the ability to apply the skill proactively; and level five, the ability to innovate. The Likert scale approach gave staff the chance to identify their current skill level in the various areas and also allowed people to progress.

Once the ten skills demanded by each of the seven different jobs in the team had been identified and a plausible grading system agreed, a workshop session was held and the entire team spent time identifying their own skills level in relation to the skills required by their role. All team members were asked to grade themselves and to share their self-grading with small groups of colleagues to discuss how expertise could be shared even on the micro-scale. We wanted to build up a 3-dimensional representation of the team's skills. Staff were encouraged to take their individual skills snapshot away to form the basis of discussion with their line manager and as part of their CPD process. It has to be said that some staff were very modest about their skills and expertise and others perhaps less so.

We have already used the work to inform staff selection and design interviews and we are beginning to use it to determine training needs both across the team and for specific individuals. The work has become the basis for discussions in one-to-one meetings and at appraisals. By sheer serendipity at the same time as the Skills Register work was in progress, Pebblepad was transforming into Pebble+[5] and we quickly saw the relevance of the ability of the software to create, record and share a personal development portfolio complete with attached evidence. This development has allowed

us to discuss and share experience and expertise more effectively. Each person's self-assessment is only a snapshot: we need to encourage people in the team to reflect, assess their skills honestly at least once or twice each year and discuss them with their line manager and colleagues, linking the findings to their appraisal and half-yearly review.

The idea has already spread beyond the ASK team: other areas are making forays into identifying their core skill areas, and the university is interested in developing its use with a number of services and academic faculties.

If you think it might be useful to help your team development we are very happy to share our ideas. Contact: d.j.parkes@staffs.ac.uk, a.j.pope@staffs.ac.uk

REFERENCES

1   UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) for teaching and supporting learning in Higher Education 2011. Available from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ukpsf

2   The Skills Framework for the Information Age (SFIA) available from http://www.sfia-online.org/

3   CompTIA Certification roadmap. Available from http://certification.comptia.org/ExploreCareers/careerpaths/career_roadmap.aspx

4   Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). Professional Knowledge and Skills Base. Available from http://www.cilip.org.uk/jobs-careers/professional-knowledge-and-skills-base/pages/professional%20knowledge%20and%20skills%20base.aspx

5   Pebble+ is the university's personal development portfolio for students; staff also benefit by using the system for themselves and in turn help students to use it.