
Evaluation of staff learning and development at Anglia Ruskin University Library



Jenny Cefai
Staff Learning and
Development Manager,
University Library,
Anglia Ruskin University
Tel: 0845 196 2264

E-mail: jenny.cefai@anglia.ac.uk

The university library considers staff learning and development to be central to the successful achievement of its strategic plans and objectives. Evaluation of that staff learning and development activity is vitally important for assessing the effectiveness of learning and development for the individual, the team and the library. Donald Kirkpatrick says, 'Everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it. When Mark Twain said this, he was talking about the weather. It also applies to evaluation – well, almost.'¹

Over the last two years, an investigation into evaluation of learning and development has taken place, led by the staff learning and development manager (SL&DM). The investigation has resulted in an online booking and evaluation form, involving and informing the staff, their line managers and the SL&DM in the process.

RESEARCH

Most evaluation undertaken by staff is based on the evaluation and assessment model devised by Kirkpatrick in 1976. Research shows that the evaluation is mostly at what he calls the reaction level ('happy sheets' and tick sheets) and, in many cases, does not go beyond this point. Without effective evaluation, staff learning and development runs the risk of being ad hoc, lacking direction and occurring in isolation without having any relevance to either the staff or the library. Evaluation is important for, and for informing, future planning.

Evaluation can be used to:

- assess if learning meets organisational strategies
- justify costs and help define future costs (both implicit, such as staff time, and explicit, such as costing of an event)
- establish the effect on the learners and how the event meets personal objectives
- improve the flexibility of the organisation and its ability to embrace change.

The aim is to achieve having the appropriate staff on the appropriate learning event, with staff supported after the learning and the results bringing benefits to the staff themselves and their organisation.

Birnbrauer writes that the majority of people involved with learning and development pay 'lip service to the idea that evaluation is important to successful training, but few conduct complete and thorough evaluations... evaluation often seems an anticlimax to the excitement and creativity that goes into developing and delivering a new course or program. Nevertheless, evaluation is mandatory, for it is the only way of determining whether or not our efforts have paid off.'²

As a result of this research, three essential elements in the evaluation process were identified by the library:

- *pre-learning evaluation*: pre-event analysis of anticipated benefits for learning events, both for staff and for managers, and an opportunity to benchmark current knowledge against knowledge learnt after the event
- *post-learning evaluation*: a culture of post-learning evaluation to be assessed from the perspective of the learner and the line manager to establish if baseline skills and behaviours have been improved; an opportunity also to decide how to share learning and feedback on the benefits of attendance
- *line managers*: line managers should meet with staff who have undertaken staff development in order to discuss and evaluate how it has contributed to the library's aims and the individual's personal development. It was recognised that the key to success is to engage the line managers: their responsibility to their staff does not end with agreeing to send someone off for training. They must engage with their staff to establish what their needs are and how they can best be served,

and to reflect with them afterwards on what has been achieved.

HOW THE LIBRARY INTRODUCED A CULTURE OF 'JOINED-UP' EVALUATION

To ensure best practice was being followed by the library and that the three essential elements could be an essential part of the process, an online staff learning and development form was devised which could be accessed via the library staff intranet. The library's web development officer was instrumental in enabling the form to be available in an online format and providing for a paperless accounting mechanism.

The form has three distinct sections:

- an application form
- a pre-evaluation questionnaire
- a post-evaluation questionnaire.

The application is completed whether the course is internal to the library or the university or is offered by an external provider. Details required include course title and location, provider, billing address and cost. Before the form can be submitted, a pre-evaluation questionnaire has to be completed, which asks staff to relate the learning event to their personal appraisal plan and also to library objectives (see Figure 1). Dates are also set for discussion with the line manager and for a post-evaluation meeting.

Figure 1. The pre-evaluation form

Once the form has been submitted, an e-mail is received by the line manager with a link to the form. When approved by the line manager, an e-mail and online link is generated to the SL&DM for budgetary approval. Once all the approvals

have been authorised, all the steps are in place. If the course requires payment, then our acquisitions department receives an e-mail and online link to the form so that they have the information required for accurate invoicing. The member of staff also receives e-mails letting them know the status of their request.

After the learning and development event has taken place, staff complete the post-evaluation questionnaire, assessing how the event matched up to their expectations and reflecting on what has been learnt and put into practice in the workplace (see Figure 2). This can be discussed at subsequent review meetings.

Figure 2. The post-evaluation questionnaire

The form has been in use for nine months now. Over that time, it has been revised and improved following suggestions from staff using the procedure.

As all staff access the course-booking section of the intranet with their personal login, they can create a personal learning log, which they can refer to at appraisal and review. It is also very useful for those staff who need to record their personal development for CILIP qualifications. Staff can see at a glance which courses are outstanding and which courses still require approval or post-

evaluation. They can also refer to the completed evaluation when necessary. Staff are encouraged to reflect on how they can share their learning with colleagues.

The online system also automatically populates a centralised database to aid strategic planning. Reports can be generated by the SL&DM to provide required information for either review or forward planning.

We plan to review the procedure when it has been running for one year. Staff will be sent a questionnaire asking them to provide feedback so that an analysis can be made and further improvements introduced if necessary. Anecdotal evidence so far is positive. The introduction of a pre-evaluation element is helping to ensure that staff undertake learning and development that is relevant and considered. The line manager is actively involved in the process and staff are given the opportunity to discuss the outcomes. The whole process is much more joined-up than it was previously and evaluation is not viewed as an optional extra. Line managers are involved in the learning and development of their staff and the SL&DM is enabled to keep a comprehensive overview of learning, development and evaluation.

Evaluation needs to be taken seriously by all to ensure that learning and development represent 'joined-up' thinking when it comes to staff development. Staff must be offered the learning that they need to improve their personal performance and help achieve the library's strategic objectives. Their learning 'gap' needs to be analysed so that a benchmark situation can be worked out. After the learning, the known gap can be evaluated to see if it has been closed. If it has not been closed, then the learner needs to be supported in some way with further training and support.

Evaluation doesn't begin and end when the learning event is over. It begins when the learning need is decided and it doesn't really end at all.

REFERENCES

- 1 D.L. Kirkpatrick, *Evaluating training programmes: the four levels*, 2nd edn, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, p 67
- 2 H. Birnbrauer, 'Evaluation techniques that work', in D.L. Kirkpatrick, ed., *Another look at evaluating training programmes*, Alexandria, VA: American Society for Training and Development, 1998, p 81