Innovation through discussion

The LibChats initiative at the University of Kent

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This article outlines the new initiative that was set up at the University of Kent to encourage innovation and improve community in the Information Services department. We are a team of three para-professionals from different departments in the library who have developed the programme into a successful series of talks that has now become integrated into the culture of the department.

Background

The world of libraries is changing swiftly; the key to getting ahead is to stay connected to the wider community and embrace change. But no single individual has the time to read, absorb, share and create action plans to implement every new tool, technology or trend. So what is the answer?

In the Information Services department at the University of Kent, we may have found a way forward.

Information Services (IS) is a large, converged IT and library service, providing IT facilities and support as well as an extensive library collection to over 19,000 students[1] in a number of locations in the UK and across Europe. The Information Services mission is 'to provide leadership and expertise that empowers the University community to exploit technology and information…'[2] In order to achieve this goal, IS needed to create an environment where knowledge could be shared and people from across the department could discuss new ideas, develop relationships and collaborate, getting to know each other in the process. However, as in any large department, there was limited day-to-day activity that allowed people from different teams to get together, either in a formal or an informal situation. Furthermore, due to the numbers of people involved, large gatherings can be very hard to administer.

We also recognised that there were gaps in staff development provision, particularly awareness of wider continuing professional development. It can be costly and time-consuming to access the development opportunities available elsewhere, most frequently in London.

One initial response to these issues at the University of Kent was the creation of 'TechTalks', concentrating on internal IT projects, new technological developments and collaboration between teams. This demonstrated how such gatherings could be managed, and opened up the possibility of creating a similar initiative with a library focus.

LibChats were born!

TechTalks were the inspiration, but once the need was identified, we realised that the department as a whole would benefit from discovering new ideas from external as well as internal sources, and from a wider scope for discussion. Further changes to the TechTalks model were required to take into account the various staffing and shift patterns of service point staff in the library; for example, planning sessions were scheduled to take place at a different times and plenty of notice was given to attendees.

By developing the model further, we created a new initiative called LibChats, taking inspiration from the very popular and well-known Twitter-based events UK LibChat,[3] which similarly discuss innovation and change in the information profession. We submitted a business case to our IS senior management team for a pilot of eight talks to take place over the course of an academic year. This timescale was natural in a university and allowed adequate time for planned evaluation and submission of a closure report to justify continuing the concept.

Throughout the pilot year, we recruited speakers from all over the country and from a variety of library environments. We are fortunate in this profession that colleagues are very willing to share ideas, and everyone we contacted was eager to be involved. In total six of the eight speakers were

external to the university, the furthest coming from the University of York. This allowed us to gain a deeper insight into what similar library services are doing in an academic context, as well as in services in significantly different environments, including the NHS.

The sessions were designed to introduce new ideas through a talk, with time for both informal conversation (over a cup of tea and a cake) and a semi-structured discussion. We felt that the informal element was essential to enable networking and to help bring out ideas raised by the talk. We were keen to encourage dialogue, in order to allow attendees to ask questions, debate issues raised and discuss how ideas could be applied to the workplace.

PRACTICALITIES

With the plan in place of hosting a talk every 4–6 weeks, we set about mapping out our core ideas for speakers, gathering together emerging issues and new technologies that we were starting to embrace. As three recently qualified para-professionals, we drew inspiration from our colleagues and from conferences we had attended as well as from our jobs in different teams in the library. We realised early on that, to ensure a constant supply of external speakers, we would have to organise talks well in advance. To enable this, we each took on responsibility for planning, organising and hosting two or three sessions in the programme.
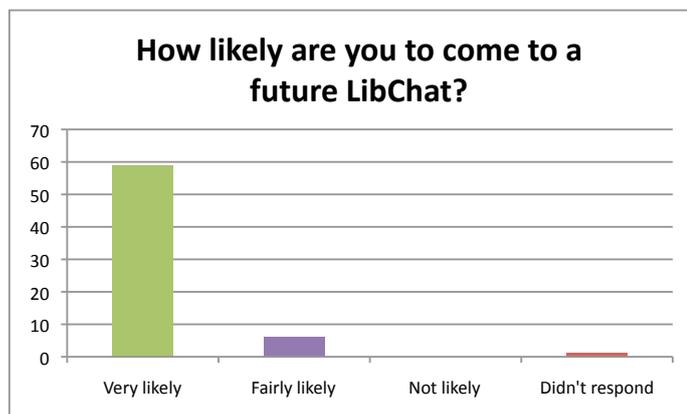
The speaker was chosen by the LibChats team, and an individual was assigned to approach and correspond with the speaker and arrange the session. Planning involved: booking a room for the LibChat, sending invitations, arranging catering and organising for any furniture to be moved. We discovered early in our pilot that making one individual responsible for a single talk was a very efficient way to manage this as it meant that one person could delegate the many planning tasks to the team, rather than three people being involved in making every decision.

The person who organised the session also chaired and led the discussion, supported by the other two members of the group; one as designated 'tweeter' (#kentlibchat) and one as note-taker. The presentations are then put up on an internal SharePoint site with the accompanying notes for anyone who was unable to attend. Due to the popularity and word-of-mouth publicity, we attracted high levels of external attendees, which led us to start a publicly accessible blog.[4]

The pilot year was a great success, with a lot of interest, positive feedback and a number of people coming forward with ideas for future talks. Both the formal and informal feedback that we gathered demonstrated that the pilot has had a positive impact on staff, bringing people together from across the department and encouraging dialogue between teams that often do not interact in their everyday work.

In collating statistics for the pilot review, we were able to demonstrate overwhelming support for the pilot, with 98% of respondents saying they were fairly or very likely to attend a future LibChat. Attendance had also been climbing steadily and included members of all IT and library teams. There was significant interest from other local institutions, to the extent that we negotiated space at the sessions and created a mailing list of external staff.

How likely are you to come to a future LibChat?

We also received a large volume of comments, including:

- 'I have found it really valuable, and am looking forward to coming to the next one.'
- 'It's nice to get involved with the library as someone from computing.'
- '… very interesting and thought provoking'.

The success of the pilot has led to the official endorsement of a new series of LibChats on a more permanent basis, which we hope to expand and develop over the coming years. The concept of LibChats has also struck a chord with the speakers themselves, with the initiative being investigated for implementation in at least one other university. We are very grateful for the generosity of our colleagues from all institutions in giving up their time and sharing their knowledge with us. So far, no one we have approached has

been unwilling to talk at a LibChat session, even though our budget can only cover travel expenses. Feedback has shown that LibChats are an effective source of new ideas: they are encouraging people to appreciate their role in the changing service that IS offers and are empowering them to develop further. We have been delighted with the support that the LibChats initiative has gained both within IS at the University of Kent and increasingly from colleagues outside the university. We hope to continue the series of LibChats into the future, focusing on the broad range of issues relevant to our work, and to foster new ideas, innovation and discussion. Having begun our second year of the series, we are now confident in our LibChats tagline:

'Innovation through discussion'.

References

1   http://www.kent.ac.uk/about/keykentfacts.html

2   IS Strategy Plan 2010–2013 retrieved from http://www.kent.ac.uk/is/strategy/

3   S. Wiggins. 2012. #UKLibChat – tweet all about it. *CILIP update*, 11:2, 36

4   http://blogs.kent.ac.uk/libchats