New skills for the team you have, and the team you don't...

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In January 2012 the University of Chichester opened a new library on the Bognor Regis campus and a brand new service, the Support and Information Zone (SIZ).

The two went hand-in-hand as the new library was designed to facilitate a 'one-stop shop' approach at our smaller site. The Bognor campus is home to roughly a third of our students and the original library, while homely, was no longer fit for purpose. The investment in the new Learning Resource Centre (LRC) needed to ensure the maximum use of the resources at the site, and the concept was to provide one place for students, staff and visitors to visit for the library, IT and

The new Learning Resource Centre

student support enquiries, which would also act as main reception for the campus.

Originally it was thought that a member of each team would share the same enquiry desk. However, with the design of the building progressing well, it became clear that more could be done to integrate the teams working in this new space and a commitment was made to create an integrated team, and to do this at Chichester as well as Bognor.

How it works

The SIZ became the main reception area within the LRCs on both campuses; it is accessible in person there, and via telephone and email. The staff on the desk are trained to answer enquiries about IT and library support, queries relating to academic registry or finance and appointment bookings for a full range of student support services (careers, disability and dyslexia support, international and financial support, counselling and health advice). The back office staff answer every call that comes into the telephone switchboard as well as other calls from lines that have been redirected there, for example from the library book renewals line. (These lines are slowly being phased out.) Every call or enquiry is logged using Supportworks – enquiry management software – while email and calls logged through a 'self-service' portal simply drop into the same software. Queries that cannot be answered are passed on to the relevant team via Supportworks, which allows the person it is passed on to, to see a complete history of the query or call. It also provides good quantitative data, and the SIZ are currently showing a 98% 'first-time fix' rate for library enquiries. (This compares to a 5% fix for queries relating to Estate Management, where calls to fix the leaking taps etc. are simply logged and passed on.)

Recruiting staff with the right skills

Once the decision had been made to create a new team to work across both sites, rather than work a hybrid model with the current teams, job descriptions were drawn up and advertised internally, initially just to those teams that were affected by the change. Two posts were initially created, a general 'SIZ adviser', who would staff the desk and phones and a 'SIZ supervisor', who would manage the advisers and the relationships with the relevant supporting departments. In time, a Head of SIZ post was also created, but the initial set-up work was done by the SIZ project board (made up of heads of the relevant services and faculty representation) and the SIZ project manager.

The 'SIZ adviser' posts were graded at the equivalent of a Senior Information Assistant, which made it attractive to a number of staff who had previously been working at Information Assistant level. Team members were asked to apply for the relevant posts and were then interviewed. Almost all the posts were filled in this way. Remaining positions were then advertised to the rest of the university and then externally as required.

We were committed to bringing about this change without going through formal organisational change, so a great deal of time was spent ensuring the teams involved were consulted and engaged with the process. For the library, almost all our evening and weekend staff moved to the SIZ; however, there were a number who were keen to stay in their current roles. An unrelated voluntary severance scheme that was in operation at the time did give some members of staff a third option.

Getting staff ready – the training programme

One of the main challenges was to ensure that staff were trained to a sufficient level to be ready for the opening of our new LRC whilst still doing

their current jobs. We developed a three-month training programme, releasing staff to attend the training that was relevant to them (e.g. library staff did not require training on the library systems) and offering part-time staff additional hours to provide cover. This was just before Christmas and several team members were happy to work extra hours for extra pay. Interestingly, while most had been apprehensive about the level of IT skills they would need, those who had not previously worked for the library were surprised by the training required to meet the library requirements, presumably because they thought that we just stamped books! Key to this training was the introduction of self-service technology; for example, library self-service, self-service password resets and self-service call logging for IT, estates and general queries.

WHAT ABOUT THE LIBRARY STAFF?

Over a year later we can now more clearly see how library and SIZ staff work together. In the case of our Bognor campus, SIZ, library and IT teams share the same open plan office, while at our Chichester site the location of the post room in the SIZ office facilitates information exchange as all staff are in regular contact.

It has been enormously helpful that one of our library supervisors chose to move to the SIZ team, taking with her an in-depth understanding of the library circulation services for which she had been responsible, thus ensuring that key library skills are kept up to date. Throughout the year we provide training as required and we have a monthly meeting to discuss any changes to services or issues that have arisen at the SIZ desk.

For the library staff, training relating to the introduction of the SIZ has mainly consisted of getting to know Supportworks. Queries are often passed back to the library this way and they now also use the software to log the enquiries we get directly. Library staff take full responsibility for the self-service kiosks and provide training and updates on changes to the library management systems and other software (e.g. of self-service 'smartgate' software which logs books that set off the alarm).

Having made the decision to keep the library enquiry desks on our first floor, we used this opportunity to train para-professional staff to undertake enquiry desk duties. One of our key aims was to ensure that library staff still had daily contact with our users; however, there have been many additional benefits, such as increasing con-fidence and skills and also freeing up our professional staff to undertake other tasks. Staff were asked to work in a number of news ways, some of which were created by the move to self-service; and the library team remains as busy as ever.

CONCLUSION

Key to the success of the introduction of the SIZ has been the approach taken to recruiting the team. It was not easy to sell the benefits of moving to the SIZ and / or staying with the library service. We were very sensitive to the issue of staff feeling 'left behind' or that they felt 'forced' to move because of their current working hours (e.g. evening and weekend staff). However, a policy of open communication and information dissemination ensured that staff who stayed with the library service remain motivated and continue to demonstrate their dedication and professionalism, and the staff who moved to the SIZ have settled well to meet new challenges and are enjoying their new roles.