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Doing something different – staff development and workplace learning at Cardiff University

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Background

Cardiff University Library Service offers its staff a range of workplace learning opportunities. These have evolved over time and had their beginnings in a job rotation pilot carried out as part of an MSc Human Resource Management dissertation project[1].

The dissertation was entitled "Piloting Job rotation in Cardiff University Library Service" and had two main objectives – to find out whether job rotation improved motivation and job satisfaction and to investigate whether technical and 'soft' skills increased.

The pilot was carried out in spring 2006. The environment at that time was conducive to job rotation due to the fact that Cardiff University Library Service had 18 site libraries (since consolidated to 14) and a staff of approximately 250 performing a wide variety of roles. In addition, Cardiff University had merged in 2005 with the University of Wales College of Medicine which meant that two different cultures were coming together. Job rotation was well suited to these circumstances.

Before the pilot began, a literature review was carried out to find out what the benefits and costs of job rotation might be to the organisation. A wide range of benefits were outlined in the literature. Among the benefits cited were the fostering of employee learning, career development and promotion, creating innovation, aiding the assessment of employee interests, increasing 'social capital' i.e. quality of relationships, reducing turnover, growing in-house talent, creating agile and flexible employees that can see the 'big picture' and increasing job satisfaction. Job rotation is also one of 35 "High Performance Work Practices" (HPWPs) which are thought to contribute to the improved business performance of an organisation[2].

The literature also highlighted the costs of job rotation which included learning curve errors, 'non-participant' jealousy, the financial cost of running the scheme and a decrease in output during the rotation. In addition the employee may ultimately leave if there is no reward or promotion at the end of the rotation.

Job Rotation Pilot

The job rotation pilot at Cardiff University Library Service was carried out in 2006 over a period of 6 weeks. The table shows the participants ('rotatees') in the pilot:

			No of hours swapped
Pair 1	Senior Library Assistant *Aberconway Library (Business)*	Senior Library Assistant *Nursing & Healthcare Studies Library*	29 hours /week

Pair 2	Senior Library Assistant *Arts & Social Studies Library*	Archives Assistant *Special Collections and Archives*	15 hours /week
Pair 3	Senior Library Assistant *Biosciences Library*	Acquisitions Assistant *Collection Management Services*	30 hours/week

Staff did not swap for their entire working week in order that they maintained contact with their 'home' library or workplace during the period of the rotation.

Feedback from the Pilot

The rotatees perceived that a number of 'soft' skills had improved as a result of the rotation. These were confidence, people skills and creativity in their approach to tasks. In addition they felt that 'social capital' had been increased through the building of relationships. According to one rotatee:

"you can't put a price on getting to know other people in those situations…and I think that facilitates any sort of cross-departmental working which I think is very important"

In addition to the 'soft' skills gained, the rotatees perceived that their technical skills had also improved. The table shows the areas they felt they had gained or increased skills:

Technical Skills	
Inter-library loans (2)*	IT troubleshooting
Database searching (4)	Voyager cataloguing
Advanced word processing (3)	S:\ drive
Voyager circulation (3)	SIMS
Report writing	Microsoft Access
Athens passwords	Orientation
Using photocopiers	Classification systems
Microsoft Excel	Internet searching

*Numbers shown are where more than one rotatee mentioned this area

Outcomes

Feedback from the rotatees suggested that a wide variety of new technical skills and soft skills had been acquired or improved. In addition, some rotatees felt their career prospects had improved. Two of the rotatees found they preferred their new working environments which resulted in their swapping roles on a permanent basis! They also felt that they took new practices back to their usual workplaces as a result of seeing how others did things.

The pilot was felt to be a big success in terms of benefits to the individual and thus ultimately to the organisation. Following the pilot, the scheme was formally introduced as an annual scheme with a Workplace Learning Working Group forming in 2008 to take forward this scheme and other new workplace learning initiatives.

New initiatives – "Do Something Different" Days

Despite the success of the job rotation pilot, it was found in subsequent years to be difficult to gain volunteers. This may be due to staff's lack of confidence about moving out of their usual workplace for a fairly lengthy period and the stress of taking on new tasks and roles. This reticence gave rise to a new initiative called 'Do Something Different Day' which was set up to be a 'taster' or mini rotation – in the hope that staff might then go on to volunteer for a full rotation.

Do Something Different Days were designed with similar aims to job rotation - to build relationships, see the bigger picture, cross pollinate ideas - but to be less daunting for staff than a six week rotation. The first 'Do Something Different' Day took place in June 2008, and attracted 5 applicants, who visited the Business, Law and Science and Biomedical Libraries, and the Acquisitions and Cataloguing team. It has proved extremely popular and is embedded into the library calendar; one member of staff has participated at least 10 times! According to this staff member,

'I really enjoy participating in Do Something Different Day because you meet lots of different people, some of whom you know by name but have never met. It enables you to broaden your network and put faces to names so that when you need to contact other University services you can picture that person and it makes the job easier.'

Since 2008, Do Something Different Day has run twice-yearly, usually in May and November. It is open to library staff at all grades, and while initially it primarily appealed to staff at grades 2 and 3 (Library Assistant and Senior Library Assistant and equivalent), staff at all different levels have applied including Subject Librarians, Site Heads, Cataloguing and Acquisitions Librarians; the University Librarian has even taken part, working in one of the university's large 24 hour study centres for a morning.

Initially, we included just the site libraries and the Collection Management Services (CMS) in the Day, but increasingly different sections of Information Services have taken part including Media Resources, IT Help Desk, the Careers Library, Advanced Research Computing @Cardiff (ARCCA) and the Finance and Communications Teams. Since the scheme started, over 134 staff have taken part and the most popular locations have been CMS and the IT Help Desk.

Since 2012, Do Something Different Day has been extended out to other libraries within the CLIC (Cardiff Libraries in Cooperation) organisation, including Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama Library, the National Museum of Wales Library and the Atrium at the University of South Wales' Cardiff Campus. This has been a welcome development, enabling staff from Cardiff University libraries to glimpse some of the similarities and differences between working in an academic library, to working in more specialised libraries and in public libraries. One participant who visited the Welsh Government Library and Archives states that

'even though it is such a different working environment, it was still very useful to share ideas and compare experiences and best practice.'

Job shadowing

In 2010, we launched a third workplace learning programme, job shadowing. The remit for this scheme is for a staff member who is eager to advance in the organisation or profession to spend some time 'shadowing' someone in a different, usually senior role, to gain advice and insight into specific tasks and skills involved. The scheme is very flexible, with the schedule and timings individually tailored to suit both 'shadower' and 'shadowee'. The participants meet up for an initial chat to discuss what the applicants wish to get from the experience, and for how long they wish to shadow. Shadowing is usually between 6-8 weeks; the participants can choose to meet each week at the same time, or can vary their meetings according to their schedules. As well as observing the daily office-based work, shadowers often get the chance to go to relevant meetings or observe teaching sessions.

The pilot programme consisted of two pairs, a Library Operations Manager shadowing a Subject Librarian and a Senior Library Assistant shadowing a Library Operations Manager. Subsequent shadowing arrangements are outlined in the table below:

Year	Shadower (Grade)	Shadowee (Grade)
2011	Subject Librarian (6)	Site Librarian (7)
2012	IT Assistant (3)	Team of subject librarians from the Business Library (5-6)
2013	Administrator/PA (2)	Subject Librarian and operations team in Senghennydd and Bute libraries (3-6)
2014	Courier (2)	Subject Librarian (6)
	Senior Library Assistant (3)	Subject Librarian (6)
	Senior Library Assistant (3) x2	Library Operations Manager (5) x2
	Library Attendant (1)	Staff in four libraries (2-6)
	Library Assistant (2)	Collection Management Services (3-6)

Initially, we envisaged the programme as a paired shadowing, similar to job rotation, but have found that to have someone shadowing a team of people in one library, or to spend one or two sessions in a number of libraries works just as well.

Some colleagues have been nervous about being shadowed – there is often a feeling of 'but I don't do anything interesting'! But those who have participated have found that being shadowed is 'an excellent opportunity to reflect on routine actions and choices' and is 'an opportunity to think about what I do and how I explain myself to others'.

Future developments

Do Something Different Day and the Job Shadowing Programme are both popular schemes; as noted, Job Rotation has not had many applicants in recent years, so decisions have to be made about whether to continue with the programme, relaunch it or end it. Another possible avenue we are exploring in Workplace Learning is developing a work placement programme with University IT.

References

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