6-18-2014

Training Tech Services' Student Employees Well: Evidence-based Training Techniques in conjunction with Coaching and Mentoring Strategies

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SHORTENED TITLE: Training Tech Services' Student Employees Well

ABSTRACT. Librarians in higher education who work in technical services must frequently rely on student employees to accomplish tasks previously assigned to professional staff only. Hiring, training, managing and mentoring student workers for the performance of high level library functions can prove challenging. However, working side-by-side with student employees can be a positive experience when evidence-based training techniques and effective coaching and mentoring strategies are utilized. This paper focuses on training techniques integrated with ongoing coaching and mentoring strategies which promote a positive work environment and motivated, successful student employees.

INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries have changed a great deal in the past 30 years. The changes are reflected in significant technological advancements, the utilization of international bibliographic databases, and the role of the internet in library services. Along with these changes has come a dramatic shift in work assignments. Budget cuts and the growing responsibilities of faculty librarians have resulted in a shift of a variety of tasks once completed by professionals to paraprofessional and student staff members. Student employees work at circulation, information, reference, Special Collections, government documents, or periodicals desks. Students assist patrons, shelve materials, and even work in nonpublic areas doing various technical and clerical tasks. In the late evenings and on weekends, student employees may keep the library open during hours when professional staff members are not available. Student employees make up a critical part of the staffing of today's academic libraries and often exceed the number of regular staff. As these student employees are required to do complex technical and service work, student

employee training takes on a high priority. Similarly, supervision for this group of employees is every bit as important as supervising full-time staff members and must be given full attention.

Academic libraries clearly need student employees to get the job done, and the work is more complex than ever; therefore, the process of training student employees should incorporate evidence-based practices in the design and delivery of the training information. By examining various methods used in training student employees, supervisors will discover some of these methods produce better results than others. Student employees will supply accurate and conscientious job performance when they experience effective training. The remainder of this article will discuss best practices in facilitating performance in student workers, beginning with the hiring process and addressing training and mentoring procedures as well.

Hiring

The effective training of student employees begins with the process of recruiting, interviewing, and hiring; the literature indicates that this is probably the most important part of the supervisor's job. Baldwin states, "Probably the single most important part of your job as a supervisor is to hire the right people and train them well, thus reducing their risks of being discharged."[1] Bagshaw agrees by adding, "The interview process is vital to finding candidates best suited to library work."[2] This process varies greatly from one library to another. Establishing a good fit between the student and the job and then training the new employee well reduces the possibility of problems later on.[3] A current description of the work and the skills required to do the work should be readily available. This information is useful for the job posting, and essential for screening applications, interviewing and then hiring.

The purpose of the interview is to gain the kind of information that will help the supervisor understand the student's motivation for working, his skills and previous work experience, and his fitness for the available job. Some libraries elect to give applicants an aptitude test which includes measures addressing skills in alphabetizing and call number sequencing, as well as attention to detail. This practice is apparently not widely implemented; according to Kathman's 2004 survey of 158 responding institutions, only 8.2% of those surveyed gave this kind of test.[4] This result may indicate a belief on the part of supervisors that screening for specific skills or lack of skills is irrelevant if thorough training is provided following hiring. It certainly indicates that the majority of libraries that responded did not rely on a screening test to identify capable applicants. Sweetman, in a chapter discussing hiring procedures reminded hiring supervisors to use a variety of screening tools to make the hiring decision, such as the interview, objective screening tools, and reference checks. But she went further with an example from Southwest Airlines who "hires for attitude and trains for skill."[5] "Their philosophy is that it is much easier to train someone in the tangible, task-based aspects of a job than to re-train someone's social skills, attitude, or general outlook."[6] A student who wants to work and makes every effort to learn job-related tasks may make a better employee than a disinterested brilliant student or a well-meaning but over-involved student.

Initiation of Training

Training is everything. The first few weeks of work for the new student employee should be an organized and efficient time of orientation and deliberate step-by-step training. Kathman states, "By not giving adequate attention to training, supervisors run the risk of not only the inefficient use of valuable resources, but also a bad employment situation for the student, the supervisor, and the library."[7] Orientation to the library is the first step in effective training.

Kathman believes that "employees do better when they understand how job-related tasks fit into the larger picture."[8] General knowledge about the library should be addressed the first day: from the location of various collections to the professional behaviors expected from employees. New employees begin to gain context and understanding of their new work environment when they tour the library with their supervisor. A check list may prove helpful so that every new employee hears the same information. Supervisors cannot assume new employees know any of these things. Some students have never worked before so the new work experience may be intimidating. Consider how international students or students from diverse cultural backgrounds may have differing expectations about the work environment and their role as an employee. The orientation information should provide clear guidelines regarding the library's expectations, and should be available in writing so that students who experience information overload can refer to it later.

New technical services student employees especially need to understand the department's role in the library. In order for the new employee to see how the work of this department touches nearly everything in the library, begin with a couple of purposeful tours.

1. Tour the library – Take the student to every floor and every department. Introduce the employee to librarians, staff, and student employees. Point out every collection and shelving area. Connect what they see to the work in technical services.

2. Tour the department – Show the employee where to store belongings. Explain the sign-in procedure and expectations. Identify various work stations and explain the tasks accomplished in these areas. Point out each labeled shelf and book truck. Explain the process that a new or used book goes through from start to finish. Call

attention to the effort to organize and separate various groups of books. Explain the importance of accuracy when completing various tasks with these books.

Specific Skills Training

Libraries report a variety of methods for training student employees from written manuals to peer-training. Some use very precise check lists of skills and procedures for guiding one-to-one training while others use videos and other computer-based methods which are completed independently. Recent studies have pointed to evidence-based practices for training in these areas. In evaluating proposed training techniques, a worthwhile topic to consider is Cognitive Load Theory. Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) postulates that humans only have the capacity to learn a limited number of new things at a time.[9] Supervisors need to be mindful of a couple of basic aspects of the present theoretical framework of CLT: "(1) that the focus of attention is capacity-limited and (2) that the limit in this focus averages about four chunks in normal adult humans."[10] A "chunk" can be defined as "a collection of concepts that have strong associations to one another."[11] An application of this theoretical framework for the purposes of library training would be to organize the content of training sessions so that they include chunks of related material or tasks rather than a collection of unrelated content. The trainer should bear in mind that the learner can only retain about four "chunks" of new information at one sitting. Recognition of these most basic aspects of human cognitive load will keep the supervisor from wasting time and causing frustration when the trainee has reached his cognitive limits.

In what format or context will training information be offered? Many libraries have utilized computerized instruction for training employees. The conclusion of one survey of Alabama academic libraries indicated that computer-based training would solve several problems

with training large numbers of students. Students could view the training modules at different times instead of the near impossible task of assembling a large group. It would also alleviate some of the time spent in one-on-one professional to student worker training.[12] However, a study by Haley indicated that while online training may be effective for imparting some general information such as methods for recording work time, emergency exit procedures or professional behavior in the library, this method does not satisfy all training requirements. Haley's study focused on training preferences of library staff. They "preferred traditional face-to-face training as opposed to online training."[13] Although this study surveyed full-time staff and not student employees, the caveat can still be applied. Results of the study indicated that people like to interact with people because questions can be asked with immediate feedback, and personal interaction with a supervisor builds rapport. Another study by Jetton had a similar outcome. WebCT was used to create a multifaceted approach for training. The following training items were created: "maps and location guides, policy statements, procedures for basic computer activities such as circulation, specialized databases and software, and instruction on equipment. In addition, assessment of student progress was desired."[14] Procedural documents described the steps necessary to perform an activity and also described policies. At the end of a year of using this training method, students were surveyed. "The students indicated a distinct preference for one-on-one training with the supervisor. They also felt that they learned more from experiencing activities at the desk. Video learning was considered their third choice.[15]

Direct instruction has been commonly used to impart new information for centuries. "Direct instructional guidance is defined as providing information that fully explains the concepts and procedures that students are required to learn as well as learning strategy support that is compatible with human cognitive architecture."[16] Face-to-face, direct instruction is

effective and is an essential part of training student employees. Anderson weighs the advantages of both online and face-to-face training and pointed out that "where there is a practical skill being taught, the need for face-to-face training or an element of it becomes important."[17]

Other studies have described attempts to digitize training to decrease the demands on trainers that are involved in direct instruction. Chen describes the development of interactive courseware to teach basic cataloging knowledge, involving a series of training lessons using flash movies and interactivities. He points out that there are limitations and even some problems with e-learning. For example, as upgrades and changes to the cataloging interfaces occur, they need to be reflected in the course. Also, this method is limited to fairly basic procedures for cataloging because much of the work of cataloging needs to be taught in context. Chen concedes that "the e-learning courseware is not intended to replace the traditional face-to-face and/or one-on-one training methods; instead, it is offered as a training aid for section supervisors and a tool to promote learning activities. We acknowledge "the potential of blended learning" in the enhancement of library staff training, and continue to make more effort in this direction."[18] He also identifies various support material such as handouts and cheat-sheets to be used in conjunction with the e-learning courseware. These cases represent the efforts that library personnel go through to find innovative ways to use technology in training student employees. It also demonstrates their attempt to maximize time and budget by designing training aids which promote learning and reduce face-to-face training time. These cases also support the benefit and practice of one-on-one training methods. While one-on-one training may be repetitive and time consuming for the supervisor, evidence-based training methods along with other educationally sound techniques will improve the rate at which the employee learns and masters new tasks.

Within the training sessions, specific strategies support thorough learning of complex tasks. Two effective and evidence-based training strategies are increasing difficulty (ID) and part-task training (PTT). Wickens et al showed that both methods make it possible for the trainee to focus on and learn a new task by reducing some of the cognitive load of learning.[19] An example of PTT in technical services would be teaching the employee to label books and only label. He would only label books until he becomes very comfortable with the process. Next, he would be taught to add an item to the bibliographic record. He would then do this task until proficient. Each new skill would be taught in isolation and practiced before being added to the larger process. In essence, this layering of skills allows the employee to focus his attention on one or two tasks at a time. An example of ID in technical services would be training a student employee who is familiar with adding an item to the bibliographic record to learn the additional steps of copy cataloging.

Task cards are another effective training tool for all kinds of new employees. After a new employee has learned a new task, there may be moments when one small detail or step is forgotten. A hint may be all he needs to get back on track with the task. The steps to a task are simplified and printed bullet-point style on cardstock. The card is displayed where the task is performed. This is especially helpful with cataloging or interlibrary loan where there are a lot of details or steps to remember. From an educational standpoint, "layered learning" makes the most sense in training student employees. This process of developing a framework of knowledge and then gradually layering more knowledge and skills over time allows the employee to understand context, remember details, and work independently and successfully. Wickens and the other researchers noted that training-system "designers should also recognize that selection of training

strategy is not one size fits all and that consideration of individual factors, such as experience, and skill types…should weigh on decisions."[20]

Supervisors concerned with cost effectiveness may feel concern about the utilization of librarian time for direct instruction or training of new student employees. However, they may fail to take advantage of a more accessible resource—already trained students. Plenty of research shows the benefits of peer training. Nilson reminds her readers that leaders must be found and entrusted with the task of helping each person be all they can be. "Those responsible for training must revolutionize the workplace to make it a learning place. This is the challenge and opportunity of peer training—each person on the job teaching and learning from the other."[21] Liu and Batt demonstrated the economic savings of informal training in their 2001 study with telephone operators. "The return on training investment for this sample of telephone operators was 489.8% for all workers."[22] Even a fraction of that percentage would please library administrators. Finally from the education profession, studies of all kinds show improvement in learning through peer tutoring. Munley et al studied peer tutoring on the university level. Their research showed "that peer tutoring does indeed produce a positive effect on student learning outcomes.[23] Peer training can be used along with one-on-one supervisor instruction. Experienced student employees paired with a new employee adds a layer of less formal training. These student employees model correct practices and coach the new employee as they assume more responsibility.

Along with direct, face-to-face instruction or blended training methods, the supervisor should provide a written training manual. Easy accessibility in the form of a blog or LibGuide may encourage use at the point of need. Online formats also make it easy to update and change

information. Short videos can be embedded in the blog or LibGuide to review a particular task or give specific information like emergency exit policy.

To summarize, when initiating the employee training process, supervisors should remember the challenges they themselves met while acquiring all the information they needed to know in order to perform their jobs competently. There are many details to remember when processing and cataloging items for various locations in the library; this new learning takes significant effort. The learner must develop a schema or conceptual framework of tasks and how they fit into the library as a whole. Overloading new employees with too much detailed information in training sessions will result in mistakes and frustration, but the implementation of evidence-based training strategies will result in excellent technical services student employees.

Coaching

As a follow-up to effective training strategies, development of student employees can be enhanced through supervisors' coaching and mentoring. Coaching and mentoring are development techniques used widely in professional environments, and are differentiated by the intention of the interaction. Coaching is fine-tuning skills and giving a prompt about what comes next. It is clarification and feedback. Mentoring is a listening ear, wise advice, and friendly encouragement. The goal of coaching is to develop and improve job skills. The goal of mentoring is to encourage positive growth in the young adult.

 According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), they are both based on the use of one-to-one discussions to enhance an individual's skills, knowledge or work performance. "Coaching is about developing a person's skills and knowledge so that their job performance improves, hopefully leading to the achievement of organizational objectives. It

targets high performance and improvement at work."[24] "Coaching is directly concerned with the immediate improvement of performance and development of skills by a form of tutoring or instruction."[25] In the context of training student employees, it describes the interactions which transport the employee's knowledge and skills toward a higher level, mainly by a form of teaching or tutoring. This may involve positive reinforcement of the work done correctly along with brief interactions in which mistakes are corrected within context. The engaged supervisor observes the student employees at work and regularly inspects their work to insure accuracy. The supervisor identifies a behavior that needs changing and gently brings it to the attention of the employee for correction. "Coaching is teaching, not scolding."[26] Effective coaching takes place after a new skill is practiced independently and then checked by the supervisor. Then the next day, the supervisor will sit down with the student employee and process each item with a mistake. When the employee makes corrections with the supervisor coaching him when needed, the correct process will be reinforced. The supervisor uses these moments to evaluate the employee's understanding of the task being learned. If necessary, the supervisor may provide some written instructions for any part of the task which seems hard to remember. Baldwin summarizes by stating, "A good supervisor coaches student employees in much the same manner as a football coach coaches a team. Corrective measures are taken when a change is needed in an observable behavior. Coaching is an excellent way to alter behavior, making a good employee an excellent employee. It is a continual process that is an extension of training."[27] There is a lot of detail in the various tasks of cataloging. It takes time to learn and remember it all, but student employees can learn to do many tasks well when the supervisor takes the time to train thoroughly and coach effectively.

Mentoring

Mentoring is a common and growing practice in almost every profession. Whether formally arranged or informal and meaningful, mentoring involves a close relationship between someone who seeks or needs guidance and someone who can provide it. Mentoring in the context of the academic library usually assumes less formal characteristics. Academic librarians are perfectly positioned to interact on a regular basis with young adults. Librarians spend time training student employees and then they interact with them regularly. Over time, relationships develop and librarians offer a listening ear, encouragement, and advice. Mentoring develops in unique ways because personalities of both professional and student are unique. Reale makes a meaningful observation about students and librarians:

> "There is much wisdom in being able to simply "meet students where they are." This
> means to be able to accept them, initially as we find them, and make an honest attempt to
> discern what their goals are. If we, as academic librarians and other paraprofessionals, are
> working side by side with students day in and day out, we have to seize the opportunity to
> help them along in their job, which will most likely be the kindest they will ever
> encounter."[28]

The process of development and growth cannot be rushed. It takes patience to walk alongside the young person as he navigates this time of growth. Student employees come to the library from diverse backgrounds. Whether international students, first-generation students or students from other parts of the United States, these young people need guidance and encouragement while developing into young adults. These different "groups" exhibit unique situations and understanding of communication and behavior. Reale notes that "the great equalizer among

students is that all are subject to the same rules, environment, and so on. They may react differently, cope differently and succeed or fail depending on the emotional, cultural, or educational background they come from."[29] Awareness of the differences that students bring to the job aids the supervisor in that progression of training in communication, responsibility, and new work skills. Working with students in the library environment and mentoring them takes time and energy. Supervisors will not develop a mentoring relationship with every student employee, but when they do, it often adds value to both the supervisor's and the employee's work experience. As supervisor, one trains and coaches the student employee to be the best employee possible. As mentor, the attention, guidance, and genuine care expressed to the student employee over time nurtures the growth of a human being.

Conclusion

Training implies learning. There are not many shortcuts to thorough learning. Supervisors cannot set a new employee down with a training manual or video and come back later to a competent employee. Training equals teaching. Experienced teachers instruct, correct, and layer lessons. They observe practice and give feedback. The best supervisors realize that student employees benefit from comprehensive training. They also need to know that not all training methods are equal. Research explains much about how people learn and how much they can learn at one time. The combination of effective training methods coupled with coaching and mentoring strategies produce confident, proficient student employees in academic libraries.

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