Getting Up to Speed

Creating technology competencies

There is a real deficiency in the technology expectations we have for the staff of our libraries, and it is strikingly evident in their overall lack of technical skills. We are now left with a bifurcated staff in every library—those who are the go-to people for tech questions and those who are technically deficient, whether through lack of training or through an unwillingness or inability to learn. We all need to have, and be able to teach, the skills that our users need to participate effectively in today's information economy and society.

In writing "Technology Competencies and Training for Libraries" for the March/April 2007 issue of ALA's Library Technology Reports, I found that establishing technology competencies is the first step on the road to filling this gap and helping libraries to be at the forefront of all aspects of technology, including our staff skill levels. Libraries can reap major benefits by embarking on a project like this, including: outlining clear management expectations, clarifying job descriptions, improving customer service, creating a culture of learning within the library, helping to relieve the technology pack mules on your staff, and helping the library build an ongoing technology training program.

Establishing technology competencies for your library is a good six-month process, but it is worth every second. Begin by formulating a competencies task force, with representation from various positions and units of the library. The task force will steer the process, including writing a purpose statement, then setting a timeline and the scope of the library's competencies. Get as much staff input and buy-in as you can through brainstorming sessions, surveys, and communication about the project's status.

When it comes time to write the competencies, libraries should take a few basic steps to ensure a smooth process: Pull what you can from other libraries' competencies, use the key areas raised by staff and plug items into rough categories, and let the document evolve as new ideas and discussions occur. Choosing the competencies' format will be an important decision.

Once the competencies are approved, the task force must decide on incentives for completion and negative consequences for a lack of completion or retention of skills. What will happen to staff who meet the competencies? What will happen to those who fail to meet them? These are tough questions for any organization, but they must be answered and applied uniformly across the board.

Staff can be assessed in a multitude of ways: through formal testing, open-answer questions, surveys, peer assessment. Upon assessment completion, the library's training coordinator needs to determine the training needs for each individual staff member. The coordinator can then begin with basic classes and slowly move into more advanced topics.

Consider teaching models such as in-person, e-learning, and self-motivated instruction like the Learning 2.0 program at the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenberg County in North Carolina (AL, Feb., p. 26). Learners' progress should be tracked and the library should reassess its staff members.

Once reassessments have been analyzed, it is time for celebration! The library has moved leaps and bounds forward in staff technology preparedness. This may also be the time to consider revising the competencies, something I advise libraries to do at least once a year.

We are in a field where technology skills and education are essential and critical not only to the success of the employee but also to the success of the entire organization in its mission to serve its users. Using competencies to move us forward on an ongoing basis will ensure our relevance in this and any other millennium.

Creating technology competencies for your library can be a good six-month process. But it is worth every second.

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