

Maintaining Your Competitive Edge**

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At a time when users believe that answers to every question hide only a keystroke away, law libraries must compete as never before for customer loyalty, and library staff must be able to demonstrate their value at a moment's notice. To have a well-trained staff and maintain its competitive edge, each library must understand the key factors needed to create an effective in-house staff training program.

¶1 In today's information age, where answers to every question appear to hide only a keystroke away, law libraries must compete as never before for customer loyalty. Whether serving a user base from inside a larger parent entity or as a stand-alone institution, library staff must demonstrate their value as providers of content, research, and training at a moment's notice. And in order to support its users' needs, the library must support training for all employees.

¶2 To ensure that it has a well-trained staff and to maintain its competitive edge, a library must understand the key factors needed to create an in-house staff training program resting on sound learning theory and practice. While no single training model will fit all libraries, common elements can be found in all successful programs. Recognizing challenges to in-house training program development and borrowing training methodology from the business world offer two jumping-off points for libraries interested in assessing their existing training practices.

¶3 As with any audit of existing practices, reviewing staff training begins with an effort to take a neutral look at how the library currently prepares its staff to make the decisions needed to address the changing face of the legal information environment:

- Does the library have an annual calendar for staff training?
- How often does the library provide training?
- What situations trigger the need for training?
- Who creates the training?
- Who receives training?
- How does the library measure training effectiveness?
- What percentage of the library's budget funds staff training?

* *Editor's Note:* "Managing by the Book" is a regular feature of *Law library Journal*. In each article, author Jean Holcomb highlights a book outside the field of librarianship containing a message about management topics that will resonate with law librarians.

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- Do support staff receive a proportionate share of training funding?
- What is the balance between on-site and off-site training?
- What assistance does the library provide to ensure that staff meet ongoing responsibilities while receiving training?
- What mechanisms are in place to track the effectiveness of training in changing behaviors?
- Are staff training goals in sync with library and parent organization core values and strategic initiatives?

¶4 If, after answering these questions, a library staff discovers that it has become complacent about staff training, it's not too late to overcome that complacency. The "can't teach an old dog new tricks" mantra has no scientific basis. Rather, brain researchers now understand that when we consciously work to develop new habits, new "parallel synaptic paths and even entirely new brain cells" develop, fostering new and innovative ways of thinking.¹ When initiating change, even positive change, planners must recognize that change has the potential to activate fear in our emotional brain, triggering the brain's flight/fight response.² To avoid this response, plan to make changes in the library's training practices in small, continuous increments—this will sustain the spirit of curiosity and wonder needed for the development of new habits.

¶5 For libraries that choose to take such a systematic approach to reviewing their learning environment, models exist in the business world. For example, in the 1990s, students of management theory explored the concept that the most successful corporations operated as "learning organizations." Researchers painted a picture of organizations "made up of employees skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge."³ Learning organizations, the theory held, supported a climate that valued tolerance, open discussion, and holistic and systematic thinking. As a result, learning organizations would tolerate unpredictability and adapt more quickly to changing circumstances than could their competitors.⁴

¶6 For librarians, this picture of how a learning organization functions reflects their world view of library operating practices. The three building blocks of a learning organization—"a supportive learning environment, concrete learning processes and practices, and leadership behavior that provides reinforcement"⁵—match most librarians' image of how their organizations function.

¶7 Yet self-identifying as a learning organization doesn't ensure that a library's practices will meet the criteria and measurable standards for learning organizations. In *Is Yours a Learning Organization?* the authors describe why the early promise of identifying and measuring the effectiveness of learning organizations didn't match the theory's potential. They believe that interest in exploring the ben-

1. Janet Rae-Dupree, *Can You Become a Creature of New Habits?*, N.Y. TIMES, May 4, 2008, at BU4.

2. *Id.*

3. David A. Garvin et al., *Is Yours a Learning Organization?*, HARV. BUS. REV., Mar. 2008, at 109, 109.

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.* at 110.

efits of establishing a learning organization waned because the sequence of steps that managers needed to follow to move forward couldn't be identified. To bridge the gap between vision and practice, the authors review the tenets of a learning organization and offer an assessment tool to help individuals and organizations measure the depth of learning present in an organization and in individual work groups.⁶

¶8 The diagnostic tool, available online,⁷ leads the reader through a series of statements that require respondents to assess their personal and group behaviors and practices relative to the learning organization building blocks.⁸ For example, under the supportive learning environment block, the instrument asks respondents to rate their agreement with statements such as "people are too busy to invest time in improvement," "people . . . are eager to share information about what [does and] doesn't work," and "people value new ideas."⁹ By identifying both desirable and undesirable behaviors, the tool provides a snapshot of how the organization functions internally and compares it against a set of established norms. The behaviors identified in the tool offer a roadmap of the practices and procedures needed to operate as a learning organization.

¶9 For librarians interested in testing their organization against the learning organization model, taking a fresh look at training design becomes critical. *Know Can Do! Put your Know-How into Action*¹⁰ provides a quick and easy-to-digest overview of strategies designed to ensure training effectiveness. Authors Ken Blanchard, Paul J. Myer, and Dick Ruhe promise solutions for the classic training challenge—translating the good intentions of those who attend training into learning that sticks.

¶10 For the authors, learning that sticks means learning that changes behaviors.¹¹ To close the gap between knowing and doing in order to make knowledge come alive, the authors first focus on the problems that stand in the way of using newly learned skills in daily life. They identify three challenges to learning that sticks and devote the balance of their text to prescribing antidotes.¹²

¶11 The first challenge rests on the principle that knowledge comes easily but doesn't change behavior. Defined as information overload, this challenge occurs because we expose ourselves to new information all of the time, but we don't find the time to pause to integrate it and put new knowledge into action.¹³ Learning requires focus. We must identify what's needed to improve performance and then vigorously acquire the skills.¹⁴ To totally master something we must saturate our-

6. *Id.*

7. To assess how well your library learns, visit <http://learning.tools.hbr.org> for a short version of the learning organization survey and supplementary resources. To try the full-length version, go to <http://los.hbs.edu>.

8. Garvin et al., *supra* note 3, at 112.

9. Learning Organization Survey, <http://los.hbs.edu> (last visited Oct. 22, 2008).

10. KEN BLANCHARD, PAUL J. MEYER & DICK RUHE, *KNOW CAN DO! PUT YOUR KNOW-HOW INTO ACTION* (2007).

11. *Id.* at 2.

12. *Id.* at 8–10.

13. *Id.* at 16.

14. *Id.* at 17.

selves. To overcome the natural habit to forget, the authors advocate spaced repetition—repeated exposure to the same information at intervals. Because the mind constantly engages in either learning or forgetting, learners must keep their interest up over time by zeroing in on the key points they want to apply and use. *Know Can Do!*'s solution for this challenge advocates learning less information more often.¹⁵

¶12 Applying the “less-more” philosophy requires that effectiveness of learning be judged by whether the new knowledge can be effortlessly applied on a day-to-day basis. To achieve this, more time must be spent on follow-up than on designing, organizing, and delivering training.¹⁶ The authors question the value of attitudinal evaluations at the end of training as indicators of learning effectiveness.¹⁷ They believe that the best way to measure learning effectiveness will be to match pre-training goals against observed post-training behaviors. For mastery to occur, the employee and the supervisor must have regular opportunities to review progress toward goals.¹⁸

¶13 Mastery of new knowledge opens the door for creative thinking. The second core challenge addressed in *Know Can Do!* is the natural tendency we all have for negative filtering. Rather than seeing our creative thoughts in a positive light, most of us must fight against what the authors describe as the habit of discounting the positive value of what we learn, discouraging us from using what we know.¹⁹ A negative mind-set acts as a “possibility filter,” constricting options.

¶14 To counter the effects of negative filtering, *Know Can Do!* describes a six-part approach called the “possibility mind-set.”²⁰ A possibility mind-set requires being open to new information, whatever its source. Using this approach forces individuals to retool their approach to listening:

- with no prejudice or preconceived ideas,
- with a learning attitude excited about new information,
- with positive expectancy,
- with a pen in hand taking notes,
- with a desire to hear not only what’s being said, but also what it can trigger in your imagination,
- with a ‘How can I use this?’ attitude.²¹

¶15 This positive mind-set enhances “possibility thinking,” leading to permanent changes of attitude that impact performance. For this change from negative to positive thinking to occur, the authors again advocate spaced repetition. Their experience suggests that presenting core concepts six times helps individuals tran-

15. *Id.* at 20–21.

16. *Id.* at 24.

17. *Id.* For thoughts on evaluation strategies from a law librarian’s perspective, see Kristen B. Gerdy, *Teacher, Coach, Cheerleader, and Judge: Promoting Learning through Learner-Centered Assessment*, 94 LAW. LIBR. J. 59, 2002 LAW. LIBR. J. 4, and Jessica L. Clark, *Beyond Course Evaluations: Yay/Nay Sheets*, 16 PERSPECTIVES: TEACHING LEGAL RES. & WRITING 149 (2008).

18. BLANCHARD, MEYER & RUHE, *supra* note 10, at 83.

19. *Id.* at 9.

20. *Id.* at 41.

21. *Id.* at 39–40.

sition from their natural tendency to reject new ideas to assimilating and owning new ideas.²² They also suggest an approach they define as “green light thinking.” Using green light thinking means that during discussion, participants must withhold all negative comments until all positive options have been identified.²³

¶16 The final challenge to learning lies in overcoming the lack of thoughtful follow-up planning. Follow-up planning can't be left to chance, but must be a part of instructional design from the onset. *Know Can Do!* defines a sequence of five steps for a follow-up plan to support learners' good intentions. In abbreviated form, the authors describe the steps as: “tell me, show me, let me, observe me, and praise my progress or redirect me.”²⁴ Accentuating the positive and praising before redirecting or correcting provides the key to the effective use of follow-up activity.

¶17 To monitor follow-up activity, the authors recommend that managers meet with their direct reports at least once every two weeks for fifteen to thirty minutes to provide structure, support, and accountability.²⁵ If this prescription sounds like the straw that will break a manager's back, the authors anticipate this response and suggest a structure that places responsibility for the meeting agenda on the shoulders of the employee, not the manager.²⁶ This meeting structure reinforces the book's stress on the values of repetition and accountability. Through regular meetings, the manager and the employee track progress, find methods to overcome roadblocks, and utilize built-in opportunities for praise. In addition, such structure takes the possibility for unpleasant surprises out of the annual performance review process and simplifies the annual goal-setting task.²⁷

¶18 In addition to an examination of these core challenges, the authors insist that training participants must take notes. Listening alone won't enhance recall. Not only must notes be taken, they should be re-read and summarized within twenty-four hours in clear handwriting to solidify the learning links. Within a week of receiving training, key insights should be shared with colleagues.²⁸

¶19 How can law librarians interested in reviewing and refreshing staff training put ideas about learning organization assessment and training program development to work in their libraries?

¶20 Addressing the questions suggested for an audit of existing practices will highlight the strengths and weakness of existing patterns of training. As a starting point, ask staff members to review a particular past training experience to identify what proved to be the most helpful aspects, where roadblocks occurred, and what retraining might be helpful. Review the results. Institutionalize such post-training reviews by creating a readily accessible template for all staff to use based on this exercise.

¶21 Look at regularly occurring learning opportunities such as Chapter and AALL meetings in a new light. Go to meetings with a specific goal in mind—one

22. *Id.* at 47.

23. *Id.* at 52.

24. *Id.* at 87.

25. *Id.* at 83.

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.* at 84.

28. *Id.* at 3–4.

that matches the program offerings.²⁹ Take notes. Set aside time, perhaps on your return journey, to reflect on what you heard. Write a brief report highlighting key points. Share the report with colleagues and upper management. Correspond with a colleague about key points. Write a program review for publication. Propose a program to fill in gaps or expand on issues raised. Develop a staff training session based on information gathered.

¶22 Translate regularly occurring events in the life of the library into training opportunities. See events such as new hires, promotions, implementation of new technologies, initiatives of the parent organization, and facility improvements as chances to develop and deploy staff training. Incorporate ideas from individual performance review and goal-setting meetings into comprehensive training planning.

¶23 In tight financial times, consider low-cost training options such as an office book group that selects, reads, and discusses a book relevant to an issue facing the library. Piggyback on training developed by others to save start-up costs, either by importing training from another organization or sending a staff member to participate in another organization's staff training exercise. If the clerk's office will be providing customer service training, ask if the library can send a representative. Invite the facilitator's staff to attend research classes presented by the library. Support the establishment of local meeting opportunities for all levels of staff so that both managers and support staff can meet on a regular basis with their peers from other libraries to discuss topics of mutual interest. Be creative in selecting the meeting forum by considering the use of online discussion as well.

¶24 Look at the broader picture by considering the variety of learning styles present within your organization and making a conscious effort to vary training methods. Think about natural energy cycles when picking a time to offer training. If 3 p.m. on Friday is the only time all members of a work group can meet, make sure that program elements compensate for the body's natural inclination to slow down then. Encourage all staff to build in uninterrupted time for professional reading and for reflection. S.Q.U.I.R.T. (sustained, quiet, uninterrupted, independent reading/reflection) time could be placed on the office Outlook calendar in blocks as short as twenty minutes, once a week, to initiate this practice.

¶25 Whatever training activity a library develops, remembering to think systematically about all aspects of the training cycle, from need identification to skill reinforcement, will help a library staff maintain its competitive edge. Training programs with clearly identified goals and built-in tracking mechanisms will make it possible for library staff to demonstrate their value. The positive self-esteem enhanced by a thoughtfully developed learning experience will energize both individual and institution.

29. For help in meeting goal setting, look at the *Personal Learning Inventory* that appears each year as a part of the AALL Annual Meeting & Conference Final Program. See, e.g., AM. ASSOC. OF LAW LIBRARIES, FINAL PROGRAM: 101ST AALL ANNUAL MEETING & CONFERENCE 10 (2008), available at http://www.aallnet.org/events/am_08/FinalProgram.pdf.