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In-House Training & Staff Development

By Carol Tenopir

STAFF development and in-house training of any type are considered luxuries in many libraries. Such programs are more important than ever, however, with continuing expansion of the library's role, developments with new technologies, and the growth, developments, and changes in online database searching. The LAMA PAS Staff Development Program at the upcoming Dallas ALA meeting is thus especially welcome. "Training Issues in Changing Technology," scheduled for June 26 (9:30 A.M.-12:30 P.M.), will cover general and specific issues related to staff development and training for new technologies. Chaired by Charles E. Kratz of Rider College, the program will include presentations on the human factors of adopting new technology, how people respond to change, how managers can help the transition, and safety in the technological workplace. Several concurrent sessions will examine specific training programs in libraries.

In the area of online database searching, in-house programs can help to supplement vendor workshops and keep searchers up-to-date with new systems or services. These programs can be used to train new searchers or give experienced ones a chance to upgrade their skills. A good program can help to acquaint all library staff with the powers or limitations of online searching and with commercially available databases. This month's column will examine different levels of in-house programs, discuss various methods tried by some libraries, and look at some inexpensive alternatives that can be managed even by libraries with very small budgets. In-house programs need

not be just for large libraries or those with unlimited budgets.

Depending on the size of staff, budget, administrative commitment to staff development, and geographic location of the library, different levels of intensity or involvement with online search training might be adopted. The three most common levels found in libraries are: 1) general staff orientation programs; 2) searcher updating and skills improvement; and 3) basic search training. Some libraries offer all of these levels; others choose those that best fit their circumstances and needs.

General staff orientation

Even in a small library—or especially in a small library—most librarians recognize the importance of keeping all workers apprised of services offered by the library. Formal programs that introduce online search services to all staff levels from volunteers to management can improve staff morale, alleviate fears, and ultimately improve the online search service.

Such programs can be planned when search services are newly introduced in a library, but should be repeated from time to time for new employees and to keep older employees who are not directly involved with online searching aware of new developments.

The content of such a program will vary with the individual situation and background of personnel, but generally will include:

- definitions of online searching, online systems, and databases;
- an overview of what databases are available and those that will most likely be accessed in the library;
- an overview of what systems are available and those that will be accessed in the library;
- an explanation of the necessary equipment, documentation, and training necessary to begin searching;
- a basic introduction to the search process, including the role of telecom-

munications, query languages, and database characteristics;

- an outline of the search strategy development process;
- an explanation of how search request forms and pre-search interviews are used;
- specific decisions made in the library regarding staffing, pricing and use policies, equipment, etc.

By budgeting as little as \$10, a short demonstration can wrap up the program and will help make all of the above clear to even the most inexperienced participant.

The total time required to attend such a program need not be long; times ranging from one hour to half a day have been successful. The preparation time required is, of course, much greater. Time will need to be allotted in the schedule of the searcher or search coordinator doing the sessions.

Except for very small libraries, it is best to have the searcher (or searchers) at the individual library prepare and present the orientation session. Other options are possible, however. It is common for a central office of a library system or network to prepare the session for presentation to all system libraries. Alternatively, a group of libraries can divide the topics to be covered and produce a cooperative session. This may require staff travel to a central location or the presentors giving the same program many times, conditions that are not always feasible. Other options include asking a guest speaker from a search system, a local college or university, or a library that has more search experience to present the general information while the staff of the host library presents local policies and decisions. Introductory films, slides, and videotapes are available, but are less personal and can be used as supplementary material.

A nice benefit of taking the time to plan this first level of program is the use of the program to introduce the library board, community, or faculty and ad-

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ministration to the online search services thus creating more visibility for the library as well as fulfilling its educational role.

Searcher updating

The second level of in-house training programs (the second most widely used by libraries) may be called current awareness, intermediate searching, or online refresher, but their primary purpose is to keep searchers and other staff members up-to-date. Where the audience of the first level of programs included at least the entire library staff and perhaps other interested parties, the current awareness program has a narrower focus. In a large institution, the focus could just be on online searchers. Advanced search tips and techniques, databases on specific topics, and upgrading search skills have all been a part of these in-house programs in libraries. They can be organized by a searching coordinator who either teaches the sessions or finds staff members and outside experts for various topics. A committee can substitute for the coordinator's role. When such programs are done in-house, the time commitment by other staff need not be great and costs can be kept low.

Online practice is a useful component of refresher sessions. The chance to try out different strategies for the same topic or discuss the approaches of others to a question helps refine search skills. Online practice requires a budget, however, and adequate time may be impossible for some libraries. Low cost options include using such things as DIALOG's Online Training and Practice (ONTAP) files at \$15 per hour plus telecommunications, limiting practice to the relatively inexpensive ERIC databases, or using the free time often available for new databases. (Locally-produced search simulation systems or computer-assisted instruction programs are other options that have been reported in the literature. Such systems require initial programming and start-up costs that are beyond the grasp of most libraries. They may become more widespread in the future, however.) In lieu of individual practice time, participants can work out search strategy options together and try them online as a group.

Level two staff development for searchers is often done through an online user group. In a large academic library or system, this can be composed of all searchers and other reference librarians. In a small institution, a consortium of several libraries can arrange periodic refresher programs. This type of program is also widely offered through professional societies and vendors. Inconvenient meeting times, fees, or the inability to get time off may limit

the number of searchers who can participate in such opportunities. By planning such programs in-house, meeting times can be varied so all appropriate staff members are able to attend and the programs can be tailored to individual situations.

Refresher programs should not always be limited to online searchers. All library staff members will benefit from finding out about new databases and new trends in the online world. Programs on the proliferation of nonbibliographic databases, database copyright issues, possibilities of end-user searching, changes in database pricing, etc. affect all library employees. One hour programs (in some places held at noon in the lunchroom) are usually sufficient to help staff members keep up on developments in the online world and on how these developments may affect them.

Basic search training

The first two program levels are both primarily in-service staff development programs to make everyone in a library feel a part of library operations as well as in control of technology by being aware of its powers, limitations, and new developments. In-house training programs that provide basic instruction in online searching are less common, in part because they are expensive and require a high level of expertise to be done well, and in part because there are other alternatives for learning. A survey by M. Murphy shows that vendors train the majority of new searchers. Library school courses, professional conferences, or workshops are also used.

Still, Murphy's survey found that many searchers are self-taught or are tutored by colleagues. These people may be too far from training sites, unable to pay the tuition fees, or simply would rather work at their own pace. A formal in-house basic training program offered within an individual library or by a consortium of libraries solves several of these problems. It has the advantage of allowing instructors and students to continue to work together after the course is over so the learning process does not end when the class does. It can provide a collegial atmosphere and sense of accomplishment for students and instructors alike. Programs and examples can be tailored to the unique library and schedules can be designed to accommodate all staff members.

In-house training is not inexpensive or easy, however. Sufficient online time must be budgeted; materials must be prepared; the staff doing the instructing will require extensive time for lesson planning. Vendors now do most of the training because they do it well. If inexperienced searchers are training

new searchers, errors and inefficiencies can be passed on perpetually. The ideal training situation is, therefore, probably a combination of vendor and in-house training. If a library has the facilities to host a vendor's basic training session, it can earn free registrations. In an area where there are enough interested paying participants, this can be a way to cut vendor training costs. After the vendor training, an in-house session run by experienced searchers or a search coordinator can reinforce new skills and provide continuity.

In-house training and staff development programs for online searching deserve a closer look in these times of change and limited budgets. They should not be dismissed as too expensive or too difficult since there are many different program options. Such programs will provide a return on a library's investment of time and money by cutting travel costs, developing a more knowledgeable staff, improving in-library communications, and, most importantly, ultimately improving service.

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