CONSTRUCTING A NEW EMPLOYEE TRAINING PROGRAM | WE ALL WIN | OUT & ABOUT & ALL ABOARD

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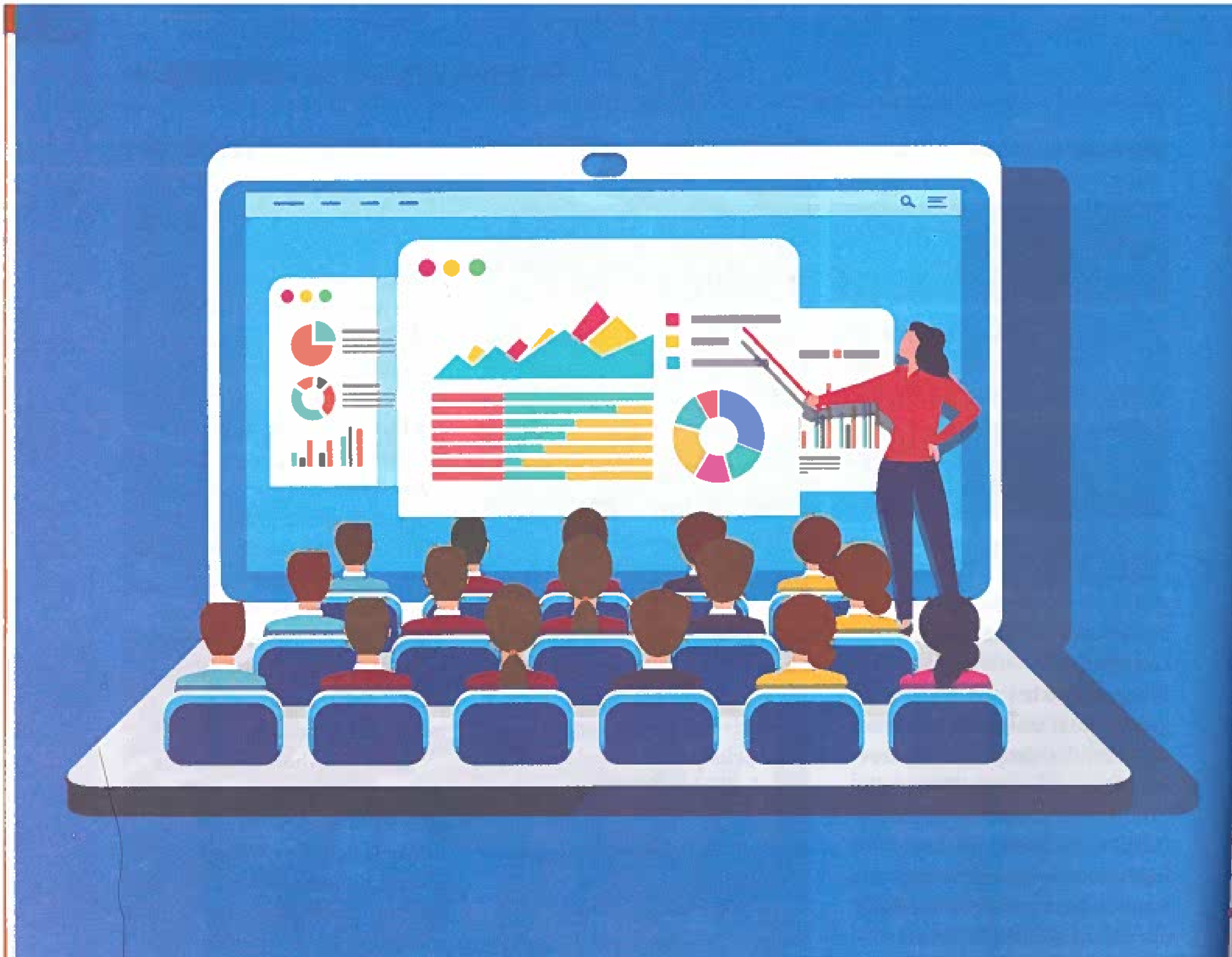

Constructing a NEW EMPLOYEE Training Program

Jeff Collins / *jcollins@lclsonline.org*
Jeff is Deputy Director, Public Service, Laramie County (WY) Library System.
Jeff is currently reading *Leading with Gratitude* by Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton.

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Laramie County (Cheyenne, WY) Library System, the 2008 Gale/*Library Journal* Library of the Year, has a rich history of hiring talented individuals and equipping them with the tools they need to be successful in their jobs.

In fact, every time a position opens, we review the job description, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the team the new employee will join, and consider which holes need to be filled. We then follow a rigorous process to hire the right person for the right job. This includes a standardized interviewing process, skills assessment testing when relevant, and looking beyond hard skills by utilizing soft skill assessments, such as Skill Survey Reference.[1] If none of the candidates meet our standard of excellence, we often advertise the vacancy repeatedly until we find a candidate we think will do an exceptional job in the position we are trying to fill. Our staffing and service models are designed to provide exemplary customer service and reinforce our mission to be a hub for engagement, literacy and learning, and lifelong curiosity and discovery.

However, until recently, we did not have a process in place to ensure that all employees were trained in a systematic manner that was consistent across the organization's divisions. In early 2017, we conducted an audit of our training processes that consisted of interviews with all employees responsible for training. This resulted in establishing a benchmark for training employees. Unsurprisingly, there were significant variations between divisions, units, and work groups. These variations were dependent on several factors, including the complexity of the position and division, whether the employee worked part- or full-time, and their educational background and skill set. We compiled the information obtained from the audit into a document summarizing how we trained new employees. This document, coupled with our research into effective training methods, shaped the development of a training implementation plan. This plan, in turn, outlined which elements we felt should be included in a universal training program and how the training process should occur. Our ultimate goal was for every new employee to be trained in a professional and standardized manner so that they would be able to master the skills needed to perform their job competently.

SPECIFICATIONS AND BLUEPRINTS

We decided on a structured on-the-job training system with phased training. This decision was based on how we historically trained employees and the research we conducted on training models, in particular, the 70-20-10 Model for Learning Development.[2] This model shows that hands-on experience is often the most beneficial learning method because it allows a new employee to learn the skills and knowledge they need to successfully perform in the new position. On-the-job training provides employees with opportunities to experience challenges, interact with co-workers within a work setting, refine their job-related skills, make decisions, and learn from their mistakes.

During the latter half of 2017, we sought feedback from division managers, assistant managers, supervisors, and trainers as we constructed the program. It quickly became clear that we needed to develop a system that was adaptable to each unique division, as well as individual employees, while continuing to ensure that every new employee received the same base-level of training. We incorporated this feedback, created a "tips for trainers" document, and then trained trainers on the new program. We officially launched the new system on January 1, 2018. During the first two years, we trained more than twenty-five employees. Our employee turnover rate for the prior three-years averaged 12.92 percent. At the end of year two, the turnover rate was cut in half to 6.25 percent.

Our organization is a mid-sized public library serving nearly 100,000 people with a 103,000 sq. ft. main library in Cheyenne, two branch libraries in Burns and Pine Bluffs, a bookmobile, and a robust outreach program. Naturally, coordinating training with disparate locations and work schedules is challenging. We determined that the employees' supervisors would continue to be the primary trainers since they had the most contact with each new employee, but we also wanted to build in opportunities for new employees to interact with a variety of other trainers and subject-matter experts. We found that employees who are experts on respective library systems/services are able to provide beneficial first-hand experience. For example, when training on meeting rooms, our meeting room specialist spends time with the new employee, reviewing meeting room procedures. Likewise, our deputy directors handle the Human Resources (HR) paperwork and new employee orientation processes, including providing an overview of organizational structure, mission, and library policies and procedures. This framework provides new employees a solid foundation that prepares them for success in their new job. Larger organizations may benefit from positions that are dedicated to training/learning, such as a training czar or employee development coordinator.

NUTS AND BOLTS

Key components of the new training program include training checklists, learning modules, knowledge examinations, monthly checkups/evaluations, and periodic opportunities for feedback. A thirteen-page training manual outlines the administration of the training program and the responsibilities of participants. To ensure accountability, new hires sign an acknowledgment page indicating that they have read the training manual and understand what is expected of them during the training program. Once the employee has completed training (successfully or not), we file the manual with the employee's personnel file, since that is where we file records of continuing education. Some organizations may choose to maintain a separate training/career development file for their employees.

The bulk of the training program consists of training checklists and learning modules. Checklists, typically about three pages in length, provide a list of topics that need to be covered and are especially valuable for ensuring that no topic gets overlooked. Each checklist includes instructions for the trainer which are laid out in a table format in a document. Topics are grouped by theme, but listed individually on rows. There are two columns for trainers to initial and date when they cover a specific topic.

Learning modules have a similar look and serve some of the same functions; however, they cover a subject in much more depth. Modules are laid out in a table format and include a description of the topic and an estimated amount of time it will take to complete the module. They also include resources, such as links to webinars, training videos, self-paced courses, and handouts. Most importantly, modules outline specific learning outcomes that the employee should be able to demonstrate upon successful completion. It is the supervisors' responsibility to select which modules are relevant to their employees and select a la carte style from the available modules. For example, seventeen employees are responsible for direct collection development, so only those employees need to complete the collection development learning module. We started with sixteen modules and grew to twenty-one by the end of the second year. Topics include business communication, customer service, safety and emergency, holds and ILLs, readers' advisory, and reference interviewing. The checklists and learning modules work in tandem to track each employee's progress.

Training is separated into five phases: onboarding and new employee orientation, library systems, division-specific, position-specific, and on-the-job. As a structured on-the-job training program, employees naturally build upon the knowledge and experience they acquire during each successive phase. This process is designed to ensure that they are able to complete minimum standards prior to working in a semi-solo or solo capacity. Visually, this process looks similar to an inverted pyramid where the employee's body of knowledge starts small but grows larger over time.

We initially planned to mandate completion of all checklists and modules for each phase and a phase review meeting prior to moving on to the next phase. However, that system proved to be unrealistic, and we scrapped it after receiving feedback from the first handful of trainees and trainers within the first eight months. It is now common for an employee to move between phases on a daily or weekly basis, depending on their training schedule and the availability of training.

Other elements of the training program include monthly performance/progress evaluations; testing/examinations, including written, verbal, role-play, and scenario-based; forms; training resources; a process for evaluating the program; and opportunities for re-training as needed. We use an active feedback and coaching process to correct behavior for all employees, and this re-training process is an extension of our current system. We clearly define responsibilities during the program to ensure that the trainee, their supervisor, and administration understand expectations. This also helps to maintain accountability. We use an at-a-glance sheet which allows others involved in the training process to quickly determine the training status of a particular employee. Each of these elements work holistically with one another to ensure that new hires are trained effectively.

Upon completion, trainees complete an evaluation of the training program in which they have an opportunity to provide feedback regarding the strongest and weakest aspects of the program and areas that might need improvement. This feedback allows us to refine and continually improve the training program. To help administer the system, we created eight forms, including a monthly evaluation form and corresponding guidelines for supervisors to use when completing the evaluation, a coaching session form, and an evaluation of training program form, which we administer online through SurveyMonkey. Finally, we provide a number of useful training resources in a shared folder that all employees may access. These resources include items, such as a glossary of terms and library jargon; a toolkit about service animals; and guides on using work phones, setting up voicemail, and tips for disengaging from talkative patrons. Every aspect of the program is designed to enable new employees to quickly begin contributing to the team.

ASSEMBLY

Prior to the employee's start date, we assemble a new training binder with dividers separating the different components of the program: manual, orientation, library systems, division, position, on-the-job, evaluations, and handouts/notes. We chose a bright blue color for the binder so it would be distinctive and easily identified. We re-use the binders, so heavy-duty 1.5-inch binders from an office supply store work well. We require employees to leave the training binder at work in order to minimize the chance of it being lost or forgotten at home. The employee's supervisor reviews the training binder and only uses learning modules which are relevant for that particular employee. We also created a step-by-step procedure for how to assemble a training binder.

As applicable, we configure their computer and email, add their profile to public service desks, program their office phone, and add their email address to relevant distribution groups. We add their contact information to the staff intranet and their email address to staff copiers. We order their name tag and business cards, create a cubicle/office sign, make sure their cubicle/office space is clean and tidy, and provide them with a few basic office supplies so they can start working immediately. The employee's supervisor sends an email to all staff, announcing that the position has been filled and providing a sentence or two about the new employee, with the intention of making each person feel welcome while also beginning the integration process.

On day one, the employee begins the onboarding process with HR and new employee orientation. Prior to their first day though, we work on acclimating the employee to the organization. If the employee is relocating, we provide community and relocation information to them in advance. At a minimum, we ensure that every new employee knows what to expect on their first day and first week, including a detailed schedule for their first day and information like where to park and what to wear. Although this may seem inconsequential, research has shown that organizations with strong onboarding processes improve new hire retention by 82 percent and productivity by over 70 percent. Small details make a big difference in how a new employee feels.[3] We try to show them the big picture and their role in it.

During their HR orientation, we provide them with a packet of information about the organization, including HR paperwork, organizational philosophies, employee expectations, and information about benefits. We also give them a security door fob and some library swag, including an LCLS-branded water bottle and a coupon to purchase a discounted mug from our coffee shop, The Library Café. This ties into research on best practices for making new hires feel welcome.[4] Leftover summer reading prizes are great low or no cost options. After paperwork, we review the training manual with them, show them to their work area, introduce them to their new co-workers, and administer a fifteen-minute VAK (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) learning style questionnaire. This questionnaire, in particular, helps us understand how the employee learns, so that we might adapt our teaching methods to best match their learning style.

Then we start training! Using all of the tools outlined previously, most of our employees complete the training program within their first six months of employment. This is dependent on a variety of factors, including their skill set and education, their position in the organization, and the number of hours they work each week. This process also syncs with our performance evaluation process, as all new employees receive an initial performance evaluation after their first six months of employment (and an annual evaluation thereafter).

At the end of training, we ask them to evaluate the training program and their trainers. Administration reviews each evaluation and shares relevant comments with the employee's supervisor. This process not only allows us to improve and refine the training program, but also provides a framework to address re-training in any area the employee feels they want additional instruction. This feedback process has helped to shape future initiatives, including a welcome video we are developing, intended to show new hires all aspects of the library—some of which they may never see, such as our branch libraries or bookmobile. The video should be a fun and exciting way to show the new hire some of what makes our organization unique.

PUNCH LIST

There are a number of lessons we learned during this multi-year process. To begin, it is not easy. It took quite a bit of time to review our current training methods, develop a plan for a more structured training program, and create the curriculum. Developing the program was just the first step. It takes care and feeding to maintain an effective training program. It also takes time to keep training content accurate, especially for checklists and learning modules. For example, we modified our meeting room processes three times over the last three years, including the introduction of a new service provider and a transition to online reservations. For each change, this meant updating content in the meeting room learning module and related handouts, videos, and resources.

One of the tools that we continually receive positive feedback on is a scavenger hunt administered during the employee's first week. The nearly 100-question scavenger hunt takes about three hours to complete and prompts employees to answer questions, such as how to get a library card, as well as discover specific collections of library materials and begin to navigate the building. The branch libraries have their own scavenger hunt, specific to their facility. Most importantly, the scavenger hunt provides a framework for the new employee to interact with their coworkers for the first time and provides all employees with a shared experience.

The new training program would not have worked without support from administration and buy-in from managers and supervisors. As previously mentioned, our organization has a history of hiring exceptional individuals and training them at a high-level, so it was a natural transition to make training a bit more structured. However, it was critical to gain buy-in from key staff members. Another aspect that ensured success was designating a staff member as the project manager to oversee the development of the training program.

Most training programs should be modular and adaptable. Our system works for all positions, from entry-level to advanced, and includes employees that directly serve the public, as well as support staff. It helps to remember that some employees may need additional training and may benefit from tactics such as job shadowing, "ride-alongs" with outreach staff, and one-on-ones with experienced employees. As with any HR-related policy or program, it is necessary to apply it consistently across the organization. Every new employee should participate in the training program. The program may also work for current employees in situations involving job transfers and promotions. Although current employees probably won't need base-level training, they may benefit from division- and position-specific training. Being adaptable helps to ensure that the training is effective for both trainees and their trainers.

CLOSE OUT AND AS-BUILTS

Despite the inherent challenges, the benefits of training and development in the workplace are well documented. Research has shown that being systematic in onboarding brings new employees up to speed 50 percent faster.[5] New employee training results in employees who are able to contribute to the organization more quickly and efficiently. Research also shows that effective onboarding reduces failure rates and contributes to ancillary benefits, such as increased employee engagement and retention and often better customer service.[6] Training provides new employees with clear expectations and a roadmap for how to be successful in an organization. Onboarding is also not a one-time thing, but rather a process that occurs over the first year of employment. Research indicates that it usually takes at least one to two years before an employee is "fully productive."[7] Opportunities for formal or informal mentorship and coaching also help with integration.

Ultimately, a new employee training program should be another tool in an effective library's toolbox. It needs to be used appropriately, properly cared for, and repaired or replaced as needed. It should complement other programs designed to engage employees and increase retention and job satisfaction, including continuing education and professional development. Universal training of new employees contributes to organizational success, and by delivering consistent support and guidance, positions new hires to accomplish great things.

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