GOOD STAFF TRAINING IS ESSENTIAL

To make your library accessible, buying the right hardware and software or creating a special services division isn't enough. Staff members need to buy into the added services and be the library's salespeople for the technologies that allow expanded services and information.

Staff need to know what the service is and why it's important

Staff need to be comfortable with the technology. That comfort only comes from knowing how to use the technologies well enough to train others. Libraries whose staff is not on board run a greater risk of alienating the users for whom the services and equipment were purchased.

In libraries where equipment is underused, staff often creates an urgency to remove it or let it die rather than determine why it isn't being used.

When patrons are asked why they do not regularly visit the library to use the computers, they give one of two answers: "I tried it a few times, but the staff did not know how to turn it on or said it was broken" or "I asked where the JAWS computer was, but no one knew what I was talking about."

Before giving up on equipment, libraries may wish to train or retrain the staff and relaunch the services with a marketing campaign.

Although technology has saved people from performing many menial tasks, it also has increased workloads by creating the opportunity to do so much. When assigning yet another task to a staff member, take the time to explain why the library is taking on yet another project.

Library administrators should ensure the library staff is aware of populations with special needs, which is a big first step to assuring these populations have increased services.

Staff members need to understand that the patrons with the most to gain are patrons the librarians are not serving. They should understand that service to people with disabilities or service to people for whom English is a second language is not harder, it is an opportunity to grow and enrich job skills. But most importantly staff should know how they fit into the picture or how they are helping to assist special populations.

Know the equipment

Train staff thoroughly in the use of the equipment they will be teaching others to use. If they are not well-trained they will feel self-conscious, and patrons will sense this discomfort and feel uncomfortable as well.

In some parts of the country, where adaptive technology (AT) training is not available, the library staff must rely on self-instruction, distance-learning classes, and tutorials to learn how to use the equipment.

The human resources department should consider contacting appropriate organizations to inquire if any of their members might make appropriate tutors. If funds are available, the library could consider sending staff to classes held by manufacturers or rehabilitation clinics.

Whichever training method is selected, make sure that once staff members are trained, they are assigned the duty of practicing their skills.

Know the people

In addition to learning the new technologies, staff should develop a high comfort level for working with patrons who have special needs. People tend to fear the unknown.

Many people working in library settings have never spoken with someone who has a disability or carried on a conversation with someone who has a difficulty speaking English. In addition, families often no longer live close to one an-other, so some young people do not know how seniors live and learn since they only see their grandparents over the holidays.

As a result of not knowing how to react with members of the population that are different from them, they are reluctant to be proactive in their approach to service. Many are afraid they will hurt somebody's feelings or embarrass themselves by saying or doing the wrong thing.

They need to know that the only wrong actions are doing nothing or ignoring the situation. Several procedures exist that the library can use to assure that staff members have confidence in their own abilities.

All staff should take basic training

The entire staff should know what services the library offers—not just those in the departments offering the services. This need is especially true in large systems that are only able to offer totally accessible services in selected locations.

Although a need exists to focus on the specific requirements of the populations the library wishes to electronically connect with, some basic concepts can be addressed. Some of these commonalties include:

- Sensitivity training on working with the identified groups. In addition to having the workshops conducted by people who work with special populations, invite representatives of the populations to have lunch with the group. The sharing of food and casual conversation demon-strates that everyone is equal, and everyone makes mistakes and will be excused for mistakes.

- Providing opportunities for staff members to take targeted courses that enable them to perform their job more effectively. Staff working with adaptive technology or designing websites could take one of the online courses from EASI or WebAble.

- Purchasing the tutorials for software from vendors, or use those that were developed by other educational resources.

- Developing troubleshooting guides, frequently asked questions brochures, and an assortment of catalogs or Web links where patrons can purchase similar equipment.

- Encouraging staff working with non-English-speaking populations to teach useful words such as please, thank you, sign your name, and wait (in the languages most commonly spoken by patrons).

- Allowing staff needed time to work with patrons with special needs. Staff members are more patient with patrons if they know they have the time to help them.

- Preparing bilingual, illustrated flashcards for use when verbal communication fails.

- Establishing a means for staff to network with their counterparts throughout the world. Informal networks allow the sharing of information that is not in print.

Include the public and technical services staff in as many of the training pursuits as scheduling allows. Technical services staff often never meet the staff for whom they are working to create access to electronic information.

Additional tips for teaching AT to staff

Although adaptive technology (AT) is not difficult to learn, it does require time and patience. The following recommendations for training staff are offered by Will Reed, librarian and veteran AT instructor at Cleveland Public Library:

- Assure that staff members are comfortable working with people with disabilities, as well as have a knowledge of disability etiquette.

- Make staff members aware that their individual computer expertise enable them to learn how to use the AT equipment. The AT should not intimidate them.

- Assure hands-on learning and teach staff specific application and operations to avoid generalizations.

- Assure staff members that they have support should they encounter a problem they cannot handle.

- Provide easy-to-follow troubleshooting guides.

- Assure that staff is aware of which piece of AT aids which type of disability.

- Encourage the staff to use the equipment as a patron would. For instance, if working with a blind patron, turn off the monitor and use keystrokes for navigation and input as opposed to using the mouse.

- Once staff members feel comfortable using AT, have them work with patrons who would be able to offer suggestions about how to improve their skills.

- Fight the urge to take over for staff if a difficulty arises. This autonomy allows staff to gain confidence.

- Assign staff to practice, practice, and practice. Familiarity with AT enables the staff to be comfortable using it, which is relayed to the patrons.

Choose a leader

Designate one staff person to act as lead in working with special populations and computers. That person would be responsible for assuring that training guides are up-to-date and flashcards and cheat sheets are accessible for patrons and co-workers. Choose staff members who want to do this activity and have the ability to attend to details.

Realize some staff may not be suited for the job

Administrators should realize that not every staff member is suited for working with special populations. Some staff members are simply uncomfortable when placed in positions that require skills such as: listening carefully, patience, the ability to explain lessons differently if needed, and the ability to react appropriately in awkward situations. Do not force staff without these skills to accept the assignment.

Teaching skills and knowledge are both needed

People trained in the use of adaptive technology say good trainers combine technology skills with good teaching techniques. If the library does not expend the time needed to nurture and train staff in the area of working with special populations and using specialized equipment, then money spent purchasing hardware and software is wasted.

Ongoing staff training is time-consuming but invaluable to the success of any one program and more importantly to the institution. A confident staff passes their confidence onto the new computer user. A new computer learner who has confidence is more likely to want to learn and continue to learn, which makes for a successful program.