

Competencies: Do We or Don't We?

Maybe We Don't Need a Competencies List . . .

Although I am a firm believer that every organization can benefit from documenting competencies—be they technology-oriented or otherwise—there are some valid concerns to address before jumping wholeheartedly into a training program based on competencies. Here are some situations in which to question the usefulness of such a program in your own library:

- The library has no way, due to extreme monetary or personnel shortages, to provide any kind of time or funding for staff training—in-house, buddy system, peer training, hired trainers, external training sources, or even free e-learning. If this is the case in your library, as it is in very few (fortunately), you have bigger problems to worry about—such as keeping your library open at all.
- All staff members are completely trained and knowledgeable about every aspect of the job and every technology you are currently using and self-motivated to continue learning on their own, with no external prompting or formal training program, as technologies change and new systems are introduced.

As long as your library doesn't fall into either of the above categories, it is well positioned to benefit from a competencies-based training program. (And if you fall into the second, please send me a detailed explanation of how your library has achieved this miracle status.)

Some library leaders are afraid to train their staff members to use technology, especially advanced technology. I have heard more than one library director say something akin to, “But if we train our staff on things like podcasting, Web design, and digital-imaging technologies,

they will be swayed by higher pay of private industry for the same skills and leave the library.” This seems to be a fairly widely held belief, both for existing staff and newly minted Master of Library Science degree holders. Bruce Massis wrote in 2001:

Meanwhile, universities are turning out librarians who are increasingly fluent in information technology. This is a plus for the profession, but it presents a hidden danger as well: that librarians will be drawn to the for-profit world not only by higher salaries but by increased opportunities for further education.¹

People who work in libraries work in them because of some inner drive to do good—to work in the nonprofit community to better society. Nevertheless, it is true that, once trained to a particular level, some may see the financial lure of the commercial world and leave us. We will most likely never, despite our sincerest wishes, be able to meet the salaries of the private sector. But we *can* compete in the second area Massis mentions: “opportunities for further education.”² If we continue to offer our staff opportunities to grow intellectually, improve their skills, and contribute meaningful work to the organization, I think the fears of people leaving for other industries will prove to be largely unfounded. Regardless, the fear of creating a super-staff member who may be tempted to profit from his or her skills elsewhere is not a valid reason to not train staff on technology.

Benefits of a Competencies Program

Implementing a program to create a list of technology competencies can bring a variety of benefits.

Create Clear Expectations from Management

A clear set of competency descriptions can help employees understand managers' priorities. "The uncertainty of knowing whether your expectations are in sync with management objectives can be unsettling, to say the least," notes Romaine.³ When employees understand exactly what managers expect from them, they are much more likely to perform at a level consistent with those expectations. Competency descriptions can also help managers understand what is expected of the people they supervise, especially for situations in which a nontechnical supervisor is supervising technical staff.

Save Money

If the library can train each staff member to handle a simple network outage (rebooting routers, modems, and hubs), that could save the library some of those pricey \$200 calls to the network support staff. The library will also save time in the long run (and time is money) through the ability to train many people on topics simultaneously. Instead of twenty individuals getting one-on-one training from a peer "on the spot" in the library (usually not the ideal time or situation for learning a new skill), one trainer can impart the knowledge to twenty individuals in one fell swoop. A good manager is fiscally responsible, and training staff to use technology is fiscally responsible; therefore, a good manager trains his or her staff.

Improve the Accuracy of Job Descriptions and Classifications

Competency descriptions can also benefit management by addressing several practical human-resources concerns. Descriptions of technology competencies can provide a better way to build accurate classification systems. The competency statements created, be they general or specific, can be inherently tied to the job descriptions for the various staff positions—including volunteers. If the library decides to post its competency statements on the open Web, you can also link to the statements from job ads, thus giving prospective candidates a very clear picture of exactly what you will expect from them in terms of technology skills on the job. By simply adding one line to all of the library's job descriptions, something along the lines of "Meets and practices the library's staff core competencies," the library can quickly begin to recruit individuals who meet the needs of the organization and its users.

Be careful to note, though, that the library administration is happy to train new employees in the competencies so that new recruits don't get frightened off if they don't have every single skill right away. The interview panel can also highlight one or two key competencies in the interview process—gauging whether or not the candidates have the skills required for the position. By including the library's competency descriptions in the re-

cruitment process, whether in job announcement or the interview process, you have taken one more step toward filling your positions with staff members who are ready, willing, and able to meet your library's technology needs

What we do today may not be what we will do tomorrow. In such a state of flux, what tends to remain the same? The staff you hire. Technologies may change, some people may come and go, but when you make a hiring decision, its consequences likely will last for decades.

Roy Tennant, "The Most Important Management Decision," *Library Journal*⁴

Create a Culture of Learning

Technologies are changing quickly, and library workers need to be able to keep up. Unfortunately, we don't live in a world where technologies move from one to another quickly and completely. Instead, as Keith Swigger writes, "... seldom does one technology actually replace another, and ... new technologies usually make their own niches, rather than occupying the niche of a previous technology."⁵ So, as one example, libraries have to carry VHS at the same time they carry DVDs, and perhaps now offer downloadable video while still offering the previous two formats (though I would seriously encourage any library to study its VHS circulation stats if you need shelf space—this is a likely candidate for extermination).

Much has been written about the need for libraries to show a commitment to lifelong learning for all staff. Library schools are now turning out students who are technologically skilled, and that helps somewhat. But in order to reassert our profession as one of knowledgeable information-finding experts, we need to take full advantage of continuing education for each and every library staff member in every type of library. Ongoing learning must be a priority for each of us, both personally and professionally. Hastings and Tennant write:

Digital librarians must thrive on change. They should read constantly (but selectively) and experiment endlessly. They need to love learning, be able to self-teach, and be inclined to take risks. And they must have a keen sense of both the potentials and pitfalls of technology.⁶

Finding staff members who meet these criteria is tough; keeping them is even harder. Creating an institutional culture where learning and experimenting are encouraged is a principal way of doing both.

Creating a culture of learning in your own library includes many components. Beyond the basics of a training

program based on competencies, you must also consider budgeting adequately for training, offering in-house training, promoting external training opportunities, giving staff ample time to attend or complete physical and virtual trainings, supporting professional development that isn't strictly defined as training (conferences, user groups, reading professional literature), and having staff cross-train each other and share, both formally and informally, the information they've learned.

Creating a set of technology (or other) competency descriptions and using them as the basis for a coordinated training program will also contribute to a culture of learning. Competency descriptions can unify the staff across various units and departments and help to improve the sharing of knowledge and skills among staff members. The supervisor and employee can use descriptions of competencies to create a formal professional-development and continuing-education plan or set of goals. As the competency descriptions change, they will help staff adjust and handle the change. Staff will know, with any new product or service, exactly what they need to know to be able to use it effectively and help your users use it. The knowledge that comes from competencies-based training programs unquestionably promotes individual confidence and boosts staff morale.

If you're not helping them learn, you're helping them leave.

Bruce Massis from "How to Create and Implement a Technology Training Program," *American Libraries*⁷

Relieve the Tech Pack Mules

In 1997 Anne Woodsworth wrote, "technologies underlie all specializations within the profession."⁸ Each of us lives that truth every day. The problem occurs when, over time, staff members have not kept pace with the fast current of technological change in the workplace, when new staff members are hired who are ill-equipped to deal with the technologies in the workplace, and when library schools turn out students unprepared for the technology demands of the profession. Denmark's Jens Thorhauge reveals one key reason for this disparity between skills and demand: "The reality is this—at least in my country with an average age of the late 40s among librarians in public libraries—that the majority of staff members were educated, not only before the breakthrough of the Internet, but even before the online public access catalogue (OPAC)."⁹

Some staff members know more than others. That will always be the case, but holding every staff member to a set of documented competencies can level the playing field dramatically. This is essential because of Bob.

Everyone has a Bob. Bob is the "techie" on staff at your library. Bob may be a librarian, a circulation supervi-

sor, an aide—in just about any position. And regardless of his position within the organization, Bob is the person everyone else on staff calls when something technological goes wonky. Bob goes to all of the meetings having to do with technology, has all the passwords, knows all of the technology resources and services available, and probably tries (unsuccessfully) to teach some of this to the rest of the staff. Bob does not get any extra compensation for being the default tech support on staff. Bob does not get a reduction in his regular work duties for doing pieces of the jobs of the other employees. Bob does not usually even get acknowledged by management for doing this extra work. And Bob is tired. Bob may even be angry or at the very least resentful.

Bob is the type of employee that the library desperately needs to keep, but by overloading him with extra tasks, tasks that everyone on your staff should be equipped to handle, the library risks losing Bob. These feelings of inequity among staff members likely extend beyond Bob. There may be a Maria who is almost as good as Bob and who also gets tapped by other staff to fix the printer or show a user how to double space a document. And maybe you're lucky and have two Bobs and three Marias, and only one Jordan, whose technology skills peaked in about 1978. Guess what? Your Bobs and Marias don't appreciate that they have to do Jordan's job for him and that Jordan gets paid just as much as they do despite the disparity in skills. All it takes is one staff member out of step with the rest to make the others feel like technology pack mules. The tech pack mule revolution (or mass exodus), my friends, is only a matter of time.

Improve Customer Service

Many of us in libraries are acting as first-line, de facto tech support. If we do not have a handle on the technology tools that we use, the technology gets in the way of our service to our users, and things don't run smoothly. We want everyone on our library's staff to be able to help our users equally.

Let's talk about Bob just a little bit more. If Bob's not on the desk and a user needs help with something the person on the desk cannot handle, what happens? Either the user's time is wasted while Bob is sought out, or the staff person on the desk doesn't even bother to find Bob, turning the user away with his or her need unmet. And what happens on Bob's day off? Raganathan's fourth Law of Library Science is to save the time of the user. When we have to seek out our Bobs, we break that rule.

Our technology skills need to be so second nature to us—to each of us—that they come as naturally as breathing. Phyllis Christensen wrote about this topic for the Something New Every Day blog:

We must become so comfortable with those routine tasks that they do not overwhelm the high-level competencies that we all must also exhibit.

Those mechanical skills should be like answering the phone—something that we do automatically so we can move onto other things: managing projects like wireless, creating dynamic programming, collaborating with community groups, planning targeted services for millennials and the new seniors, and . . . [a]nything else means that that we not providing the BEST service to our customers. That's just not acceptable.¹⁰

By getting library staff members “on the same page” with their technology skills, the library creates a front-line force with technology know-how, expertise, and ability, each one ready to step in and solve whatever problem or question comes up—*right then and there*. No more shuffling a user from one person to another or making the user wait minutes, even days, for an answer. The library gets out of the unenviable position of relying on one or two tech-savvy staff people to do and know everything related to technology.

Build a Coordinated Technology-Training Program

Most library staff members have not been afforded adequate training, either formal or informal, with the various tools and resources they are expected to use expertly with and for their users. Unless we've taken our own time at home to explore these tools and resources, most of us don't know as much as we'd like to about the technologies in our libraries. Why? Because no one has given us permission, much less encouragement, to take time out (forgoing e-mail and book orders for a wee while) and learn these things. But there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Many of us have been doing things piecemeal to learn as we go along. As Roy Tennant writes, “You learn. You retool. You ask for guidance from others who are doing it. You visit libraries where they are doing similar projects. You take courses, or attend workshops or institutes.”¹¹ We're slowly trying to learn what we need to know—we're all trying. But some guidance in this area would be most helpful, no? Some idea of what we're actually expected to know would go a long way toward building confidence and allaying fears.

Having a set of descriptions of technology competencies gives you something to use to determine current skill sets versus desired skill sets, your status quo versus your status ideal. If your library lacks a coordinated technology-training program and is adding new technologies to the workplace (and what library isn't?), then competency statements are your ticket to stardom. Once you have test-

ed or self-assessed employees on the documented competencies, training needs will reveal themselves like sunlit valleys in a clearing fog.

You will know which skills to teach and to whom, and the categories you created for the competency descriptions divide nicely out into categories for individual classes.

Notes

1. Bruce E. Massis, “How to Create and Implement a Technology Training Program,” *American Libraries* 32, no. 9 (October 2001): 49+.
2. Ibid.
3. Cindy Romaine, “Staying Relevant: Competencies and Employee Reviews,” *Information Outlook* 8, no. 4 (April 2004): 21.
4. Roy Tennant, “The Most Important Management Decision: Hiring Staff for the New Millennium,” *Library Journal* 123, no. 3 (Feb. 15, 1998), www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA156490.html (accessed January 5, 2007).
5. Keith Swigger, “Congress on Professional Education: Education for an Ancient Profession in the Twenty-First Century” (adapted from a speech presented at the Military Librarians Workshop, Nov. 20, 1996, Annapolis, Md., full text published in *Change and Continuity in Librarianship: Approaching the Twenty-first Century, Proceedings of the 40th Military Librarians Workshop, 20–22 November 1996*, ed. Richard Werking, Defense Technical Information Center, 1997), www.ala.org/ala/hrdrbucket/1stcongressonpro/1stcongresseducationancient.htm (accessed January 5, 2007).
6. Kirk Hastings and Roy Tennant, “How to Build a Digital Librarian,” *D-Lib Magazine* 2, no. 11 (November 1996), www.dlib.org/dlib/november96/ucb/11hastings.html (accessed January 5, 2007).
7. Massis, “How to Create and Implement a Technology Training Program.”
8. Anne Woodsworth, “New Library Competencies,” *Library Journal* 122, no. 9 (May 15, 1997): 46.
9. Jens Thorhauge, “New Demands—Old Skills: A Strategy for Bridging the Competence Gap: Building Competencies in a Daily Working Context,” *IFLA Journal* 31, no. 2 (June 2005): 162–8.
10. Phyllis Christensen, “More Thoughts on 21st Century Competencies,” *Something New Every Day*, July 30, 2006, <http://snedlibrary.wordpress.com/2006/07/30/more-thoughts-on-21st-century-competencies> (accessed January 5, 2007).
11. Roy Tennant, “Learning and Retooling,” *Library Journal* (March 1998), 28.