Career Advancement

Skills for the 21st Century Library Workforce

By Lori Reed

 "Librarian 2.0. Librarian to deliver techno-savvy reference to an educated, enlightened resort community in SW Colorado. Must have MLS, strong general reference skills, and be an enthusiastic team player. Interest in blogging, RSS, wikis and IM reference essential. Strong Spanish skills a plus."

Ask most people what they think library staff do all day, and the typical response is "read books." In reality nothing could be further from the truth. Behind the scenes, library workers have always performed work that most people take for granted. Ordering and cataloging books and planning programs make up a good part of the typical library worker's day.

For the 21st century library employee the workplace is rapidly changing as is evident from the job ad above from the Wilkinson Public Library in Telluride, Colo. More jobs are requiring skills traditionally not required of library staff: computer programming, Web site design, blogging and knowledge of video games.

Libraries must meet the needs of a public that grows more technologically savvy. As more people turn to the Internet for entertainment and research, libraries, along with many other industries, run the risk of becoming obsolete. Long gone are the days when libraries can ban cell phones and computer games yet still attract customers willing to fund libraries with their tax dollars. Today's library employees must couple traditional services such as circulation, reference and readers' advisory with knowledge of the latest and greatest technology

What skills are the most important for the 21st century library worker? Michael Stephens, professor at Dominican University's Graduate School of Library and Information Science, said that the most important skill for the 21st century librarian is a sense of curiosity and the knack to deal with constant change. Stephens went on to say that "the librarian that adapts with each shift, social, technological and cultural, will succeed."

Jenny Levine, Internet Development Specialist and Strategy Guide for the American Library Association, said the most important skill for the 21st century librarian is the ability to play "not in the traditional sense of play versus work, but in the context of being able and willing to experiment with new services, technologies, ideas, etc."

How can libraries foster this kind of learning? The following tips will help you create an environment of learning.

- Be upfront about your commitment to employee learning and development by including a statement in your job descriptions that outlines the expectation for continuous learning.
- Ensure that each employee has an individual development plan that outlines learning and development goals for the year. Make sure that the individual goals support your organization's strategic goals. This step maximizes the investment by the library and ensures that the employee will have a change to apply what he or she learns. Incorporate the development plan into the employee annual review process.
- Communicate regularly with managers and staff and inform them of what learning opportunities are available.
- Look outside of your own organization for additional opportunities for staff development. Take advantage of the free training offered by vendors such as SirsiDynix and organizations such as WebJunction and the MaintainIT Project. Consider partnering with another organization like the New Jersey State Library did when they forged a partnership with the Trump Taj Mahal to provide free customer service training to library staff across New Jersey.
- Give your staff access to the resources they need to learn, including time. Schedule self-study time each week for staff to explore new technologies or to attend a webinar.
- If you haven't already, have your staff go through the Learning 2.0/23 Things Program. This program is designed to work as a self-paced, collaborative learning adventure. Each week participants discover and play with a variety of Web 2.0 tools such as blogging, RSS and social tagging.

Technology is changing the face of business in many fields including libraries. To keep up industries must stay abreast of current trends and be ready to jump onboard the next wave of technology.

Resources for Learning:

http://webjunction.org

http://maintainitproject.org

http://www.sirsidynixinstitute.com

http://www.opal-online.org/progslis.htm

http://plcmclearning.blogspot.com

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