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The Importance of an Onboarding Process for Librarian Success

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ABSTRACT

Starting a new job comes with its unique challenges. New librarians are expected to develop an understanding of their roles, often with no guidance. For assorted reasons, including staffing, time, and lack of planning, many libraries do not have an onboarding process. This article explores from a librarian's perspective the key ingredients needed when starting a new job in this hybrid environment, with a focus on the importance of an onboarding process that prioritizes effective communication, documentation of institutional knowledge, and the long-term success of librarians. This article is a call for library leadership to do more to ensure librarians succeed in their roles. Library leadership for the purpose of this article extends to anyone in the library with a managerial role and the authority to effect change.

KEYWORDS

onboarding, documentation, effective communication, library leadership

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Introduction

The process of securing a job can be tedious. Library leadership seeks candidates who they can retain for the long term, whereas many librarians are willing to invest in jobs that value their contributions. One way to ensure that this works for both parties is to commit to clear, effective communication of the role and expectations. This is not to say that roles cannot change, but those changes must be conveyed.

In addition, documenting library knowledge can help library leadership prepare for new librarians. New librarians can utilize library documentation to be brought up to speed on what has been done. Finally, librarians' long-term success should be prioritized. Regular check-ins should be in place to introduce new librarians to the library, its people, politics, and the key ingredients needed for success unique to that library.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted changes. Hence, it is important in this new normal for library leadership to ensure that their librarians have the tools and resources needed to succeed, which can be introduced through an effective onboarding process and sustained with regular check-ins.

Keisling et al. (2015) illustrated that an effective onboarding program enhances job performance and builds the library's capacity for innovation. An effective onboarding program allows librarians to use their talents and to develop a professional identity which centers on what they can bring to the library and what the library can do for them.

Onboarding programs should aim to introduce new librarians to the library's goals. According to Keisling et al. (2015) an effective onboarding program must:

- Facilitate introductions to other personnel within the library.
- Help new librarians identify their strengths and weaknesses.
- Ask new librarians to determine how their strengths can contribute to the library's success.

Onboarding Must Haves

A new librarian's success is highly dependent on what library leadership is willing to do to ensure that librarians have the tools and resources needed to succeed.

Onboarding processes should be seen as an ongoing learning experience and include the following:

- A clear outline of job expectations and responsibilities. Responsibilities can be fluid, but any changes must be communicated in a timely manner.
- A working understanding of goals to achieve and timeframe of those goals.

- A plan for documentation as the role evolves.
- A commitment to periodic meetings to discuss any changes and answer any questions.
- Discussions about the state of the role, how it can be improved, how the librarian can help enhance that role to meet the changing needs of their environment.
- A designated mentor to help the new librarian acclimate to their new environment. A mentor is extremely helpful as well for tenure track librarians.
- An investment in librarians as people—that is, informal team building exercises, lunches, and conversations can help foster a healthy, collegial work environment as librarians get to know their colleagues beyond the work they do.

The priorities of the onboarding process can be effectively shared in this new normal through effective communication, documentation of library knowledge, and a commitment to the librarian's success both as an individual and as an employee.

Effective Communication

Effective communication can make a partnership, and the lack of communication has the potential to derail any partnership. During the initial days of a new job, it will become quite evident whether the library has a cohesive understanding of the new librarian's role and its expectations. This can be further exacerbated by the lack of effective communication from library leadership. The first few months on a new job are crucial and can illustrate to the new librarians any red flags and chaotic politics due to insufficient communication, a sense of abandonment, and general lack of concern about the new librarian's role and contributions to the library.

During the initial months of hiring, the new librarian should ideally meet with library leadership and be provided with their expectations. For example, in many libraries, technical librarians are often hired during systems migrations. As such, library leadership should highlight whether certain projects must be prioritized, such as updating workflows or staff training.

Periodic communication between library leadership and librarians will help to assure the librarian that they are valued and part of the team. Meetings are also an opportunity to ask questions and potentially gain from library leadership a better understanding of how things work at that library. In addition, informal meet and greet opportunities to help the new librarian acclimate to their colleagues and environment can be essential in building trust and a solid foundation. It also provides opportunities for the library team to know their colleagues beyond the work they do. This has the potential to improve working relationships.

Documentation of Library Knowledge

Libraries not only face budgetary constraints, but also that of time and resources. This sometimes prevents vital work from happening, such as producing documentation. It is recommended that library leadership make it a practice to create documentation and have a succession plan.

Personnel changes can also happen often. To ensure that processes move forward and not to overburden existing personnel, documentation with a focus on succession planning can steer the library in the right direction. For example, at one of the author's previous jobs, they were responsible for overseeing a department of four personnel during a systems migration. The previous librarian in the position documented their processes within the previous system and left a binder. That binder proved to be very important in mapping past practices to current practices in the new system. It saved time. Documentation will not prevent hiccups; however, it can reduce anxiety and make the transition smoother.

It may be helpful to have documentation available online, even if it is a copy of a physical document. The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us the importance of being prepared at a moment's notice for change, and digital copies of documentation will save time needed to scan or create new documentation from existing physical ones.

Too often libraries spend time in a dreaded cycle, with limited improvement when personnel change without proper documentation. When this happens, new librarians can exhaust countless hours determining what was done and how to move forward, instead of building from existing infrastructures and policies.

Librarians' Long-Term Success

Every librarian has a different criterion as to what constitutes long-term success. However, librarians want to be valued. Being valued means both having the tools and resources needed to do the job as well as the support to foster learning opportunities. It means being seen beyond work and as individuals with varying interests. Investment in librarians as employees and people shows that there is commitment to the librarian's success both on the individual level and as part of a team.

It is said that employees do not leave companies, they leave bosses. Libraries can be toxic environments, especially for new and ethnic minority librarians. Library leadership must foster a healthy work environment and trust their librarians to propel the library forward with coherent goals and expectations.

Conclusion

Library leadership continues to be an area that needs dire improvement. Too often librarians find themselves in situations where they must manage up. Library leadership should

have a plan to onboard and ensure the success of their librarians. It is equally important for library leadership to continue to check-in and communicate with their direct reports throughout their tenure on the job. A healthy work environment is more than having the tools and resources to do a job; it is also about relationships and community building. Giving librarians a sense of belonging and support will only strengthen their willingness to grow as individuals and as part of the library team.

Hence, an onboarding process, coupled with effective communication, documentation of library knowledge and commitment to librarians' success will foster a healthy work environment where newly hired librarians can learn and grow as individuals and as librarians. This has potential to benefit librarians, libraries, and the profession.

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