

Organizational Learning for a Distributed Workforce at a Virtual, For-Profit Library

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abstract: This case study discusses the implementation of formal organizational learning activities at the Richard G. Trefry Library, which serves the American Public University System, an accredited, for-profit, asynchronous institution of higher education. Discussed are the challenges and solutions throughout the implementation processes along with the issues faced by a virtual library staffed with a distributed workforce. Practical pointers on implementing a virtual peer-to-peer learning webinar series are included in the Appendix. This paper also addresses a gap in the literature representing organizational learning at virtual, for-profit academic libraries.

Introduction

In *The AMA Dictionary of Business and Management* published by the American Management Association, George Kurian defines *organizational learning* as a “culture of learning and constant improvement within an organization, marked by the pursuit of excellence.”¹ Library management at the Richard G. Trefry Library of the American Public University System (APUS) embraced this idea of organizational learning to address an unmet need within the library. As a virtual academic library less than 25 years old, supporting a for-profit institution with a distributed workforce of multiple employees working in different locations, the library lacked a formal method to ensure its librarians and paraprofessionals could maintain their professional skills.

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Professional development funding was sparse. It was challenging for librarians to stay abreast of the latest features available through the library’s databases and to main-

tain awareness of all the learning tools supporting our programs, which include such varied fields as legal studies, nursing, space studies, and business. The library had not effectively shared the unique expertise of its librarians and paraprofessionals. It lacked a system for knowledge management, defined by Harry Scarbrough as “the explicit strategies, tools, and practices applied by management that seek to make knowledge a resource for the organization.”²

To address these concerns, the Trefry Library’s administration was ready to support organizational learning activities. Three librarians, working closely with library administration, developed and implemented a plan for such learning. The proposal included three aspects of organizational learning for libraries—professional development, learning opportunities, and knowledge management—as identified by Julie Evener.³ The strategy would address professional development through peer learning, presentations from content providers, and knowledge management using the SharePoint collaborative platform.

Background

The American Public University System (APUS), a university accredited by the Higher Learning Commission in the United States, offers asynchronous learning to students around the globe. The majority of students, 89 percent, are adults who also hold full-time jobs. Nearly two-thirds of the enrollment, 62.8 percent, serve in the U.S. military on active duty.⁴ The university was established in 1991 as a for-profit learning institution.⁵ The Richard G. Trefry Library supports the university with full-time and part-time staff members, including librarians, paraprofessionals, and administrators, employed in a distributed work environment. Library services began in 1999 with a staff of one.

To best serve APUS faculty, staff, and students, the library’s collection is primarily virtual. It includes e-books, journals, videos, and learning tools. The library also has a small archival collection of military history books that are held on-site at the library’s physical location in Charles Town, West Virginia, the academic headquarters of the university. The collection was donated by the library’s namesake, Richard Trefry, a retired lieutenant general in the U.S. Army.

As a virtual library supporting a virtual institution, APUS reference librarians have always worked remotely. They live in four different time zones, including the states of Kentucky, Washington, and West Virginia. From those locations, they staff four service points: text, chat, e-mail, and virtual research consultations. Typical service hours are Monday through Thursday, 8:00 a.m. to midnight, and Friday through Sunday, 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Eastern Time, 365 days a year. Service coverage is modified for holidays. The library’s management and paraprofessionals primarily work in a hybrid environment, both on-site at the library and from their home offices.

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casually communicate expertise, and ask questions about resources. Working remotely also reduces chances for library staff to learn about one another’s areas of expertise beyond their assigned liaison responsibilities. Some staff have foreign language



competencies, others have acquired knowledge through conference attendance or other professional development, and still others have hobbies that inform their practice of librarianship. Not knowing about colleagues' areas of "hidden" expertise means lost opportunities to provide the highest levels of assistance to our students. Additionally, because of time zones and full-time and part-time work statuses, staff member work schedules may not overlap. Finding a convenient time for everyone to meet virtually or attend a virtual event is challenging.

Literature Review

Organizational learning is not new to academic libraries. Megan Oakleaf described organizational learning as a relevant concept for twenty-first-century libraries, pointing out that it was essential for libraries to become learning organizations.⁶ This idea was echoed by Saowapha Limwichitr, Judith Broady-Preston, and David Ellis, who advised that organizational learning can help a library "remain relevant in a period of fundamental change in library and information service provision."⁷ Evener noted that such learning within libraries includes the three concepts of "professional development, knowledge management, as well as individual and group learning opportunities."⁸

The library literature describes academic libraries engaging in the three aspects of organizational learning that Evener discusses. Karen Harker, Erin O'Toole, and Catherine Sassen at the University of North Texas in Denton published an assessment of their library's professional development program, designed to encourage research and scholarly activities.⁹ Sandra Shropshire, Jenny Lynne Semenza, and Regina Koury identified and analyzed knowledge management practices at the libraries of Idaho State University in Pocatello and of Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.¹⁰ The Dartmouth College Biomedical Libraries in Hanover, New Hampshire, launched a professional development program with individual and group learning opportunities "to encourage professional development for all staff and to respond to a period of intense change by bringing staff together within a supportive learning community."¹¹

As reflected in these examples, organizational learning in the library literature focuses on libraries serving nonprofit, brick-and-mortar colleges and universities. There are few or no studies of such training at libraries supporting for-profit educational institutions.¹² This paper begins to fill the gap by shedding light on organizational learning at a single for-profit institution, the American Public University System.

Needs and Challenges

The Richard G. Trefry Library lacked a formal method to encourage librarians and paraprofessionals to pursue professional development. Previously, staff members—librarians and paraprofessionals alike—sought training opportunities to advance their skills independently, resulting in uneven access to such programs. The university's teaching and learning center offered programs and workshops for professional development, but they focused primarily on topics outside librarianship. When members of the library staff left, they took their knowledge and expertise with them.

Several significant challenges needed to be addressed for organizational learning activities to succeed. With already full workloads, librarians and paraprofessionals had



limited time to devote to additional expectations or responsibilities. The librarians, both full-time and part-time, worked from four different time zones. Because the library's virtual service points—chat, e-mail, text, and research consultation service—needed to be staffed seven days a week, availability for group activities was limited. Budgeting was an additional concern; library administration lacked funds to assist in developing this program.

Implementation

In the second quarter of 2019, library administration charged our group of three librarians to implement organizational learning activities. Our professional development team was quickly reduced to two due to workload issues. Under the direct advisement of the library administration, we formalized a plan. By the start of the fourth quarter of 2019, we had fully implemented a program of organizational learning activities.

The program included three types of monthly webinars. Two were peer-to-peer professional development opportunities. In one, staff members—typically librarians—were invited to give webinar presentations of approximately 45 minutes on topics reflecting their area of expertise. We recorded these webinars so staff members unable to attend could view the content later. The other type of peer presentation focused on librarians who volunteered to share reports on external professional development webinars they attended virtually, such as those of the Association of College and Research Libraries. Two volunteer librarians gave 15-minute reports back-to-back for a webinar that totaled 30 minutes. To keep these reports informal, we kept concise summaries of the presentations rather than recording them. Collaborative meeting software, initially Adobe Connect and subsequently Zoom, was used for the presentations. Outside speakers gave the third type of webinar, with the goal of developing practical reference skills. Most frequently, the speakers represented providers of online learning tools and content whose products were in our virtual collection. In presenting the functionality of a newly licensed product or highlighting updates to their tools or databases, these trainers offered critical information, particularly to those who lacked expertise in the products. The representatives provided recordings of their presentations when possible, which were made available to people who could not attend. We scheduled webinars at midday to accommodate the widest possible variety of time zones and work schedules. The team invited all library staff members to attend the webinars. Library administration encouraged attendance by prioritizing it and asking that the professional development team keep a record of who participated in each live presentation. While most librarians and paraprofessionals did their best to attend, they found it difficult at times because of conflicts with reference shifts and other responsibilities.

With help from the library's SharePoint administrator, we added a page designated for professional development to the library's SharePoint intranet site. This site provided a basic framework for knowledge management and was accessible to the entire library staff. It included three SharePoint lists, one for each webinar series. The lists provided the details of each upcoming event, including title, presenter, and date. After each webinar, we added additional detail, including access information for the recording, if there was one. We appended supporting document files as needed. In addition, the page included a



document library with internal planning and attendance records. The site also provided a calendar app showing the upcoming webinars.

At the end of the first year, from the fourth quarter of 2019 to the third quarter of 2020, we evaluated the organizational learning activities program. Among an average of 19 staff members for the year, the combined attendance rate for all the webinars was 67 percent. This included full-time and part-time librarians and paraprofessional staff (see Table 1). Despite good attendance, the momentum to maintain the webinar series waned. The sustainability of such an ambitious schedule with required attendance for busy librarians and paraprofessionals came into question. It was particularly difficult to find volunteers to participate in the webinars discussing professional development experiences. To present such a program, librarians had to identify and attend an external webinar, and then elect to share what they learned. Some librarians found it too time-consuming, and others too intimidating. This webinar series was scheduled only eight times over the initial 12 months due to a lack of volunteers; the team subsequently decided to discontinue this type of presentation altogether (see Table 1).

The library's organizational learning activities changed in other ways at the end of the first year. Library administration reduced our professional development team to one, again due to workload distribution issues, because the library was involved in several other major projects. The time and day for the two remaining types of webinars were standardized to occur at 1:00 p.m. Eastern Time on Tuesday whenever possible. This time and day worked best for our full-time and part-time librarians and paraprofessionals, who lived in multiple time zones. The remaining team member expanded the functionality of the SharePoint page lists for the remaining two series to include attendance checkbox fields and a calendar view. This change automatically populated

Table 1.

Webinar attendance at the Richard G. Trefry Library from the fourth quarter of 2019 to the third quarter of 2020

Webinar series	Average number of staff attending	Percentage of staff attending*
Peer-to-peer learning—sharing of internal expertise	13	68%
Peer-to-peer discussions—professional development reports	12.75	67%
External presenters—practical skills	12.25	64%

*An average of 19 staff members, including full-time and part-time staff, was used to calculate attendance, due to fluctuations in library staffing.



Figure 1. A screenshot of the page designated for professional development on the Richard G. Trefry Library's SharePoint intranet site.

a calendar based on the event's date and eliminated the need to upload attendance documents for each event. The team member added content to the SharePoint page by including links to external, free or low-cost, virtual professional development webinar opportunities, as well as significant in-person meetings and conferences. She also added a reporting form to capture staff attendance at external professional development and training events (see Figure 1).

At the end of the second year, from the fourth quarter of 2020 to the third quarter of 2021, the professional development librarian closely evaluated the organizational learning program. Using an average of 19 staff members for the year, the combined attendance rate for all the webinars dipped to 60 percent (see Table 2). During the COVID-19 pan-

demic, scheduled presentations did not always occur as planned. Three events—two peer-learning webinars and one content provider training webinar—were canceled or rescheduled due to pandemic-related issues. It also became increasingly difficult to arrange for external presenters. One provider explained that they were short-staffed because of the pandemic and could not provide a live webinar. Instead, they directed us to a previously recorded training webinar. Other providers also sent us to previously recorded webinars in place of a live presentation, although they did not cite COVID-19 as the reason. Not surprisingly, the pandemic impacted attendance as well. When librarians were personally affected by COVID-19—whether they or their family members became ill or they had to address other related issues—attendance suffered (see Table 2).

Discussion

Over a two-year period, the organizational learning program introduced in the Richard G. Trefry Library offered opportunities for professional growth and skill set development and maintenance for both librarians and paraprofessionals. The peer-learning webinars provided a mechanism to recognize expertise among staff members that may have otherwise remained unknown. Additionally, preparing and presenting these webinars gave librarians the opportunity to practice their virtual presentation skills. For example, they incorporated video into presentations, used live polling apps, and coordinated workshop-style breakout groups. The external product representative webinars made it easier for librarians to keep up-to-date with changes and upgrades to the databases and electronic resources the library had, maintaining and expanding their skill sets. The live presentations made it easy for the librarians to ask questions and receive timely responses. As part of these training sessions, some content providers also supplied customized usage information, allowing library administration to make

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Table 2.
Second year webinar attendance*

Webinar series	Average number of staff attending	Percentage of staff attending
Peer-to-peer learning—sharing of internal expertise	10.09	53%
External presenters—practical skills	10.45	55%

*An average of 19 staff members, including full-time and part-time staff, was used to calculate attendance, due to fluctuations in library staffing.

informed decisions about the value of these resources to the university community. Whether the presenter was a coworker or an outside expert, live webinars provided an opportunity to interact with colleagues, a valuable added benefit for those working in an asynchronous teaching and learning environment.

Using the knowledge management tool SharePoint was essential. It provided a single location where the library could manage scheduling and provide access to the recorded webinars. The SharePoint list feature offered an easy way to make event recordings and summaries accessible to the entire library staff, and it also facilitated attendance tracking

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and report generation. Those who could not attend the live webinar, as well as new hires, could easily access the information. As time passed, the SharePoint site evolved, becoming an archive of internal expertise on topics related to virtual librarianship. Adding information to the SharePoint page about upcoming learning opportunities outside the library and tracking attendance at those events further supported professional development. The integrated event calendar

made it easy to schedule the webinars and see upcoming programming at a glance.

The library hopes to further develop its organizational learning activities. The peer-learning topics could be selected specifically to support the library's strategic plan. The externally provided training webinars could include more context related to the library's collection and learning environment, something that in-house librarians could address. Additionally, integrating more of SharePoint's features into the program planning process would be useful. For example, SharePoint has the potential to automate workflow tasks and collect internal evaluations after each presentation. Sustainability, a concern that accompanied this project from the onset, has remained a challenge. Despite the value this organizational learning brought to the library, maintaining the program requires a substantial amount of staff time that takes away from the library's core operations and service points.

Conclusion

Our experience shows how organizational learning, including professional development,

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training, and knowledge management activities, can be implemented in remote learning environments with a distributed workforce. Obstacles, including budget constraints, varying work schedules, and sustainability issues, can be overcome through planning and with help from a supportive library administration. Both nonprofit and for-profit academic libraries can learn from our experience implementing organization learning as they



face similar concerns. The pivot to virtual library services and remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that brick-and-mortar academic libraries can also draw lessons from our program.

While learning from one another over the past two years, library staff members have discovered much about how to implement an organizational learning program. Looking forward, the Richard G. Trefry Library hopes to further develop and refine its organizational learning activities.

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Appendix

Here are some practical considerations and pointers for initiating a virtual peer-learning webinar series.

- Before the event:
 - Identify the purpose of starting a peer-to-peer learning webinar series.
 - Get support from library administration and participating staff members.
 - Become familiar with the interests and expertise of the potential presenters.
 - Determine how webinar topics and presenters will be selected.
 - Choose a webinar platform that is easy to use and to record.
 - Create a 12-month planning calendar that identifies themes, if any, to be highlighted.
 - Select a recurring time and date for consistency.
 - Begin scheduling webinar presenters at least three months in advance.
 - Take attendance.
 - Create an opening and closing splash page to serve as an introduction to your content.
 - Schedule the event on library staff calendars to prevent conflicts with other meetings and activities.
 - Push the individual webinar events to individual calendars. Incorporate an automated reminder, if possible.
 - Be flexible if scheduled presenters need to reschedule.
 - Reach out to presenters in advance by offering to test the Zoom room, which doubles as a reminder.

During the event:

- If recording the event, begin with a soft opening that includes a brief welcome and notes about using the platform. Start the recording and proceed with an official welcome and introduction of the speaker.
- Be prepared with questions to keep the momentum and assist with attendee engagement.
- Be ready to help the presenter monitor the chat box.
- Watch for participants who may have trouble finding the Zoom link and may need to ask you about it.
- End the webinar by thanking the presenter and attendees, and by giving a nod to the upcoming event.

After the event:

- Send a personalized note thanking the presenter.
- Follow up with all invitees. Thank those who attended and include a link to the recording, if available.



Notes

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