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EMPOWERING LIBRARY SUPPORT STAFF: A 15-YEAR JOURNEY OF TRAINING, LEARNING, AND ACHIEVEMENTS

*** Dr. Shubhangi M. Vedak**

* Librarian, Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College, Ghatkopar, Mumbai

Abstract:

Globalization and rapid advancements in ICT have intensified competition across various fields, including academic libraries. The introduction of new technologies like Library Automation, Web 2.0, digitization, QR codes, and the recent AI tools has significantly raised user expectations. To meet these demands, effective use of ICT and continual updates to library practices are crucial. This requires comprehensive training for all library staff—professional, para-professional, and support staff. While professional staff often have access to stay updated through conferences, seminars, workshops and development programmes, para-professional and support staff, often lack such opportunities. These support staff who are vital in delivering library services and representing the library to users, should also receive proper training in recent trends in the field. To address this, Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College, Ghatkopar, Mumbai has been conducting an annual one-week training programme for Library Support Staff (LSS) for the past 15 years. This paper discusses the learning experiences, features and evolution of the programme's themes, topics, and sessions, along with feedback and challenges faced.

Keywords: *Library Support Staff Training; Upgrading Skills, Capacity Building; Soft skills development; Staff motivation; Training Effectiveness; Organisational Success.*

"Training is not an expense, but an investment in human capital"

- Roy H. Williams

Introduction:

Training is a process aimed at enhancing knowledge, skills and attitude for performing a specific job. According to Dale S. Beach (1985), training is "an organized procedure by which people acquire knowledge and skills for a definite purpose or for performing a particular job." Organizations invest heavily in training to compete in today's competitive world. Whether it's induction training or on-the-job training, effective training is crucial for optimizing human resources, helping employees achieve both organizational and personal goals. As work evolves, employees need to develop a broad and adaptable skill set essential for organizational success. As reviewed by Oluwaseun (2018), it is understood that as employees gain a deeper understanding of their roles, their confidence grows, enabling them to work more independently with less supervision from their immediate supervisors. This, in turn, enhances their self-efficacy and commitment. Quality training can lead to proper employee engagement, higher efficiency, improved work quality, increased motivation, enhanced morale, better teamwork, and fewer errors, all of which contribute to a strong competitive advantage.

The advent of new technologies and their applications in libraries have posed challenges for academic libraries over the years. As academic librarians are expected to continually upskill and adapt to new innovations and technologies, it is equally important to

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train library support staff to keep pace and contribute effectively. **The smooth functioning and advancement of library services can be achieved through the combined efforts of librarians and library support staff.** In this context, the Library Department of Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College, Ghatkopar, Mumbai, initiated a training programme for its own support staff and extended it to library support staff from other colleges and institutions in Mumbai.

Background and Objectives of the Training Programme: To enhance and upgrade the skills of the Library's Support Staff and Paraprofessionals, train them in new technologies, and motivate them to work positively and actively, a one-week training programme was initiated in 2009 at Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College, Ghatkopar, Mumbai. This programme has been organised, usually in the month of December every year, since its inception.

The following aims were set to launch the initial training programme:

1. Introduce participants (library staff) to the basic operations and functions of the library
2. Enhance accountability and performance by ensuring they are aware of their roles and responsibilities
3. Acquaint them with current trends in the library field
4. Provide hands-on training in IT-based technologies
5. Motivate them to serve the user community effectively
6. Enhance their soft skills and interpersonal abilities

A 15 Year Review of the Training Programme:

In alignment with the above set objectives, the programme was designed under the following four key modules:

1. **Technical and Professional Tasks:**
   This module focused on essential technical tasks within the library, including classification, cataloguing, reference work, manual information search and
   retrieval and the application of library software.
2. **Library Facilities & Services:**
   Innovative facilities and services were showcased through case studies and visits to various modernised libraries.
3. **Basic Computer Skills:**
   This module covered essential computer skills such as basic operations, information search and retrieval through the Internet, and the use of software applications. Participants received individualised attention based on their technological proficiency.
4. **Soft Skills Development:**
   Emphasis was placed on enhancing participants' communication skills, interpersonal relations, team-building abilities, and problem-solving skills within their workplace.

Initially, the training programme focused on fundamental topics to match the grasping and understanding levels of Library Support Staff. The programme covered basic Library and Information Science principles and provided extensive hands-on training in practical and technical library work, including classification, cataloguing, reference sources, basic computer skills, information search and retrieval, and housekeeping tasks such as cleaning, dusting, shelving, and binding. The programme integrated traditional library functions and operations with emerging technologies, offering innovative and effective services through library software applications, digitization, networking, virtual reference sources, and AI tools. Additionally, it included soft-skills development workshops within the training programme aimed at inspiring and motivating participants to serve the user community efficiently at their workplaces. Participants learned to develop practical solutions that enhanced job satisfaction while helping them grow in their roles.

Eminent library professionals from various colleges and institutions were invited to conduct interactive sessions on the scheduled topics. These topics, which covered the latest trends in the Library and Information Science field, were developed under the guidance of authorities and esteemed professionals who had contributed to the programme over the years, along with feedback from the library support staff.

To break the monotony of regular lectures, technical subjects, and hands-on training, the programme included practical sessions, role plays, and games to convey concepts. The programme also included sessions focused on developing participants' overall personality and soft skills, helping them manage daily challenges. These sessions covered topics such as communication skills, personality development, importance of teamwork and team building, motivation, and cultivating a positive attitude towards work. Eminent professionals from management fields were invited to conduct these sessions, providing additional motivation and inspiration to the participating Library Support Staff.

Presenting a case study adds significant value to the training programme. To complement this, a visit to a modern, well-managed library was organised in addition to that of our RJ College, the host institution. This visit offered insights into the changes and developments that libraries have undergone over time across the city of Mumbai. Participants gained knowledge of various library management practices and were equipped to propose improvements to their own libraries to better attract and satisfy their user community.

The training programme's themes and sub-themes were regularly reviewed and updated to reflect the latest trends in the LIS field. The programme was titled "Library Operations, Functions and Services"; "Changing Academic Libraries Scene-Upgrading the Skills of LSS". Over the years, it has covered several key themes and sub-themes like, "Transformation of Academic Libraries: Recent Development in Libraries"; "Changing Role of Libraries as Learning and Knowledge Resource Centres in Digital Era". Sub-themes have included Innovative & Effective User Services; Emerging Trends, Challenges and Gainful Actions; Changing Role of Academic Libraries during Covid 19 Lockdown-Upgrading the Skills of LSS; Reopening of Libraries Post Covid-19 Lockdown: Innovative Library Services and Skills of LSS; Libraries: Traditional, Hybrid and Virtual; Emerging Trends and Technologies in Academic Libraries - Job Satisfaction and Progress at Work. Subsequent sessions focused on applications of AI tools in libraries. Chronological records of the topics covered and participant counts are well maintained. Another key element of the training programme has been the Inaugural and Felicitation keynote speech delivered by prominent figures in the Library and Information Science field to set the tone and round off the training programme, respectively. These distinguished speakers emphasised the importance of continually upgrading and enhancing skills, as well as the need for the library staff to be passionate about their work and the field. They highlighted the significant role that Library Support Staff, being at the forefront of providing services to users, play in the library's growth and development. This is particularly important for achieving user satisfaction through efficient and effective services. Participants, particularly those who are younger or newer to the field, were encouraged to pursue further studies and professional degrees to advance their skills and career prospects.

From the feedback received from participants via formal feedback forms and from resource persons through oral comments, the benefits of being part of this programme are highlighted below:

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Overall Benefits of this Programme to the Participants:

A platform to share work experiences, showcase strengths, learn strategies to overcome challenges, and gain knowledge about practices, techniques, and new technologies in the field. It also offers an opportunity to develop communication and interpersonal skills, fostering a positive attitude towards one's work.

Overall Benefits of this Programme to the Resource Persons:

Resource persons gain the opportunity to share their knowledge, experiences, and skills while staying updated on their assigned topics. They interact with participants, gaining insights into the challenges faced by subordinates in the workplace. The programme serves as a platform to upgrade their knowledge, hone their presentation skills, and contribute to their career progression.

Benefits to the Organizing Institution:

Organizing such programmes provides the host team with valuable event management experience. The successful execution of the event enhances the institution's identity and reputation, offering a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction to those involved.

The Training Programme organised by the library department of RJ College for Library Support Staff, year by year got a very good response from various colleges in Greater Mumbai, rest of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. A total of 449 library support staff were part of this training programme over the 2009-23 period.

Feedback from the Participants:

The achievement and success of the training programme are reflected in the positive responses and feedback from participants, both in their feedback forms and at the valedictory function. Nearly all participants described the programme as informative, interesting, and useful. Approximately 90% of participants rated the programme as excellent, praising its well planned organisation, relevant topics and highly effective resource persons. Additionally 7% participants described the programme as very good, noting its meticulous planning, delivery and quality content.

Some of the inspiring and encouraging suggestions and opinions from the participants include:

- **Relevance of Topics:**
  All the participants agreed that the topics covered were directly related to their jobs and that they would apply what they learned whenever possible.

- **Content Evaluation:**
  Participants found all the topics to be interesting and informative, with no irrelevant content.

- **Identifying and Overcoming Challenges:**
  The training helped participants identify their weaknesses and provided strategies to address the challenges they face daily.

- **Timely Service and Technology Use:**
  Participants became more aware of the importance of providing timely service to users using the latest technology.

- **Serving the User Community:**
  The programme highlighted the significance of serving the user community effectively.

- **Soft Skills Development:**
  Sessions on soft skills, including teamwork, communication skills, personality development, and interpersonal skills, were particularly inspiring and will contribute to improved user services and proactive behavior in the workplace.

- **Frequency of Training:**
  Participants suggested that such training programmes or workshops be organized regularly, or at least annually, and make it mandatory for all library staff to ensure a positive attitude and improved performance at work. They appreciated the learning opportunities provided by the host college and the visits to other colleges, which

enhanced their understanding of various activities and services designed to attract users to the library.

Feedback from the Librarians who deputed their library staff to the programme was overwhelmingly positive and encouraging. They mentioned that their staff gained a wealth of knowledge and interesting information from the training programme. Librarians also observed that their staff found the training highly beneficial, showcasing increased motivation to suggest and implement innovative services and ideas. The improvements in skills, confidence, and overall performance were evident, positively impacting both individual growth and the efficiency of library services.

Features of the Programme:

- Depending on the competencies and interests, some participants acquire skills more quickly, while others may take more time as they gain experience. Personalised attention is provided to those who need extra support to understand or handle technology effectively.
- Residential arrangements for outstation participants.
- On the eve of the valedictory function, exams are conducted to help the participants review key aspects of the LIS field. The entire training programme, from inauguration to the exam, is designed to emphasise learning, retention, and the practical application of knowledge imparted to them. Based on the results, the top three highest-scoring participants are identified and awarded for their achievements. All the participants receive a certificate of participation.
- Awards for the highest-scoring participants in the exam conducted.
- Recognition and encouragement prizes for the senior-most participant nearing retirement, who actively participated in the training programme.

- Encouragement prizes are awarded in memory of deceased library staff members from the Library Department of RJ College.

Challenges and Shortcomings of the Training Programme: Initially, securing computer and IT labs required significant effort, leading to scheduling the programme during student vacations. Funding, particularly for arranging lunch for the participants posed a challenge. Despite gaining sponsorship due to the programme's consistency, several issues have arisen over the years. Although the programme has been well-received and deemed necessary, a decreasing number of participants, especially post-COVID-19, has become a concern. The identified reasons for this decline include:

1. **Increased Workload:** Library Support Staff may perceive attending training programmes as adding to their workload.
2. **Staff Shortages:** With increasing workloads and decreasing staff numbers, it is challenging to relieve available staff for training.
3. **Lack of Support from Authorities:** Some authorities do not see the need to send their staff to external training programmes.
4. **Perceived Lack of Innovation:** Authorities believe that Library Support Staff do not need to engage in out-of-the-box learning.
5. **Limited Practical Use:** There is a perception that such training is of limited value, as participants may not implement what they have learned.

Investment in Training Programmes:

Attending training programmes is an investment with significant long-term benefits for both the staff and the institution. While the effects of gained knowledge, acquired skills, and improved attitudes may not be immediately visible, the positive impact on behavior and performance becomes apparent over time. This has been evidenced within the host team.

Post Training Feedback:

The verbal feedback collected from a few participants after a few months highlighted their experiences and insights. They reported applying the practices and techniques learned during the training at their workplaces. This included implementing QR code applications, proposing innovative activities and services to their supervisors, embracing change, staying motivated, and delivering services with a positive attitude.

Assessing Impact:

Investing in the professional development of staff and encouraging their participation in external training programmes not only strengthens their sense of commitment and responsibility but also contributes significantly to the overall growth of the organization. With comprehensive data gathered over the past 15 years, the author intends to undertake a detailed study to evaluate the effectiveness and long-term impact of this annual training programme for library support staff. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights for enhancing future initiatives and sustaining continuous improvement.

Conclusion:

The training programme has been continuously evolved to stay relevant to changing technologies and trends in LIS. **T**raining programmes empower employees and are crucial for their development. The journey of conducting training programmes is both fascinating and essential. It highlights the need for ongoing education for library staff at all levels. Such programmes are motivating and inspiring for both participants and organisers. They not only enhance knowledge and sharpen skills but also positively shift the participants' attitude. While training programmes may vary in length and depth, Jenkins (1990) aptly points out that training becomes collaborative when individuals from multiple institutions participate in the same activity. This collaboration can involve trainers from different institutions working together, as well as trainees from various locations learning together and sharing their experiences, which enhances the training process and fosters commitment—something we have observed with this training programme. Offering incentives, salary increases, and promotions can motivate employees to take part in training and development programme, as recommended by Oluwaseun (2018). This, in turn, can lead to improved performance and greater contributions to the organization. Agencies like UGC, AICTE, ICSSR, Universities and the government should recognize the importance of such programmes and make it mandatory for library staff to attend them to acquire the necessary skills for their roles. The overall training philosophy focused on achieving desired changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behavior. Successfully achieving these changes indicates that the training programme objectives have been met gainfully.

Future Plans:

An ALA-approved programme, known as the Library Support Staff Certification (LSSC), recognizes the achievements of Library Support Staff working in libraries. This course is administered by the ALA-Allied Professional Association (ALA-APA). There are plans to offer similar certification courses in the future in collaboration with relevant academic or professional bodies in the country.

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consistent contributions and enthusiastic participation have enriched this programme year after year.

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