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Client service: competencies and communication

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Client service: competencies and communication

Abstract
Long recognised for its philosophy of quality and service excellence, the University of Wollongong Library recently restated and simplified its key client service goal to read exceptional service. Achieving this bold promise included revisiting our commitment to training and development and improving sustainability through initiatives and innovation. Two recent developments are ensuring that this promise is being met. Significant increases in student numbers, bringing with them highly diverse needs and expectations have challenged established approaches to service delivery. The Client Services Division (Loans, Short Loans, Information Desk, shelving) and Roving Helpers articulated a need for more up-skilling and flexibility in service provision - particularly at point and place-of-need. We recognised that our earlier approaches to staff training, such as on-the-job and core training workshops, were no longer sufficient.

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University Libraries

Client service: competencies and communication

Long recognised for its philosophy of quality and service excellence, the University of Wollongong Library recently restated and simplified its key client service goal to read *exceptional* service. Achieving this bold promise included revisiting our commitment to training and development and improving sustainability through initiatives and innovation. Two recent developments are ensuring that this promise is being met.

Significant increases in student numbers, bringing with them highly diverse needs and expectations have challenged established approaches to service delivery. The Client Services Division (Loans, Short Loans, Information Desk, shelving) and Roving Helpers articulated a need for more up-skilling and flexibility in service provision - particularly at point and place-of-need. We recognised that our earlier approaches to staff training, such as on-the-job and core training workshops, were no longer sufficient.

An initial step was the identification of a range of client-centred service behaviours e.g. welcoming, courteous, clear communication, problem solving, and mistake resolution. These were then coupled with task / function competencies. Hands-on learning modules were designed to develop the desired behaviours, attributes, and competencies essential to fulfilling our goal of exceptional service.

The competencies were identified by library staff process, or product 'experts' who also delivered training in a classroom setting. Additionally, relevant core training workshops were incorporated into a 2-3 day program including: IT support and trouble-shooting, database basics, engaging with clients, and the library values and ideal culture. In total, 11 modules were delivered. Outcomes include shelving staff now able to interpret reading lists, conduct catalogue and basic database searches, as well interact with clients in a friendly, approachable manner.

The training is supplemented with resources covering the modules and additional self paced training activities. New staff are required to complete all of the modules and existing staff select relevant modules based on the results of a self-assessment. Once completed, ongoing support is provided by experienced peers and attendance at refresher training. The acquired level of competency is evaluated against a matrix over the first 4-12 weeks following training.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of modules has shown that staff confidence is high, with 93% of participants satisfied with their preparation for a client service role. Unsolicited feedback from clients is universally positive. This will be tested more formally through planned client surveys.

A recent library renovation has resulted in a considerably larger building, introducing new challenges in both navigation and scale of service. Key service points are located on the ground floor. A well established Roving Help service has proven the value of

adopting approaches that support mobility and responsiveness in meeting clients' needs at a time and place convenient to them.

To further enhance access to skilled staff and service flexibility, a two-way radio communication system has been implemented. All staff rostered at service points, shelving, or Roving Help are now connected to one another. The radios are used to support an array of client interactions, for example requesting assistance with technology, asking the shelving team to locate a missing resource, or connecting clients with the staff member that best suits their need. Especially useful at night and weekends when staff numbers are limited, the two-way radios allow staff to work on tasks away from the desk and make it quick and easy to call them back to service points when needed. This seamless communication has enabled service to extend beyond the physical service point to encompass the entire building. A pleasing outcome is staff's heightened sense of contribution and participation in achieving library goals. We are now wired for service, encouraging greater engagement between staff and clients across our service areas.

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