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Developing our careers, transforming ourselves: the UOW new professionals network

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Abstract

The New Professionals Network was formed in response to an emerging awareness of the desire for peer to peer support at the University of Wollongong Library, particularly among new and recently graduated professionals. The purpose of the Network is to provide a space for staff in the first five years of their careers to discuss professional development issues, facilitate experience and knowledge sharing, and develop effective communication skills through articulating their experiences and opinions. As the Network has evolved, it has served as a valuable tool for personal and professional metamorphosis. Members report a higher level of professional confidence, a deeper engagement with professional issues, and heightened inspiration and skills to begin furthering their own professional development outside the Network. Several members of the Network have since continued to take up leadership roles within the Library. The traditional two-person mentoring relationship has been extended to encompass group mentoring, with former members continuing to act as mentors to current members. Staff who are actively engaged in the profession, possess an innovative and creative mindset, and who feel that they are supported in this development are of significant benefit to the organisation. These staff act to generate new ideas and further a workplace culture that values and promotes active professional development. The New Professionals Network also helps to socialise new staff into the professional environment, and provides an opportunity for them to learn from more experienced staff. Guest speakers from prominent positions in the Library have attended meetings on a semi-regular basis to discuss their own professional development journey, and the Network itself is comprised of staff with varying levels of professional experience. This paper discusses the creation and evolution of the New Professionals Network, and considers the potential for wider application of similar models at other Australian libraries.

DEVELOPING OUR CAREERS, TRANSFORMING OURSELVES: THE UOW NEW PROFESSIONALS NETWORK

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ABSTRACT

The New Professionals Network was formed in response to an emerging awareness of the desire for peer to peer support at the University of Wollongong Library, particularly among new and recently graduated professionals. The purpose of the Network is to provide a space for staff in the first five years of their careers to discuss professional development issues, facilitate experience and knowledge sharing, and develop effective communication skills through articulating their experiences and opinions.

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The New Professionals Network also helps to socialise new staff into the professional environment, and provides an opportunity for them to learn from more experienced staff. Guest speakers from prominent positions in the Library have attended meetings on a semi-regular basis to discuss their own professional development journey, and the Network itself is comprised of staff with varying levels of professional experience.

This paper discusses the creation and evolution of the New Professionals Network, and considers the potential for wider application of similar models at other Australian libraries.

Mentoring programs provide an opportunity for improved communication across teams, skills transfer, support networks, and a feedback mechanism for succession management development activities. (Roberts & Black, 2008) The University of Wollongong New Professionals Network (NPN) is a peer

mentoring group initiated by early career librarians who identified their desire for a peer led mentoring program for a rapidly evolving professional environment. Members of the NPN include staff from supportive, paraprofessional and professional roles. All members are encouraged to contribute openly to discussions regardless of professional qualifications or level of progression within the library. The University of Wollongong Library is a dynamic fast paced organisation which has experienced a sustained period of rapid change, with reorganisation of teams and the overall organisational structure, including a change in leadership and several high-level staff changes. The NPN has equipped members with support and encouragement to successfully navigate these changes, enabling the transfer of skills and knowledge, and providing guidance through peer mentoring.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE NPN

1.1. Traditional models of mentoring

In traditional models, mentoring is most commonly defined as the process where a senior employee takes a role in developing a junior colleague. This relationship is often hierarchical in nature, and the mentor provides advice to the mentee regarding skills development, competencies, knowledge, and experience in order to assist the mentee's progress along a successful career path. As well as giving advice, the mentor may also prove useful in providing contacts that assist the participant in engaging in professional networking. The most common complaints directed at mentors in traditional models are a lack of commitment, communication difficulties, their suitability, and the perception that the behaviour of the mentor is calculating. (Freedman, p.173)

1.2. Benefits of peer mentoring programs

The benefits of mentoring in general include improved socialisation of new staff, improved performance of participants in their work, and engagement with the culture of the organisation (Henrich & Attebury, 2010). Mentoring is particularly useful when used in conjunction with leadership succession, coaching and training (Freedman, p.173). Literature suggests that peer mentoring is a key component of a number of different models of group mentoring. The NPN is an example of successful voluntary peer-to-peer group mentoring. Formal mentoring programs are an effective means of providing support during periods of sweeping change (McDonald, 2003, cited in Freedman, 2009). When mentors listen, provide structure, express positive expectations, and share themselves, mentees are likely to feel engaged and encouraged with the organisation. Support lays the foundation for challenge and vision (Zachary, 2000).

2. APPLICATION AND PROGRESSION OF THE NETWORK

2.1. Initiation of the UOW New Professionals Network

The seeds of the UOW New Professionals Network were sown after three of the foundation members attended the 4th New Librarian's Symposium in 2008 and began discussing their desire for an ongoing forum to focus on professional and personal development. The conference provided the opportunity to share ideas with peers from all areas of the profession, and this inspired conversations about the suitability of a similar forum in a local environment. The UOW Library is a large academic library, and was gaining an increasing pool of early career staff through initiatives such as the Library Professional Cadet program. While a strong culture of professional development and open communication is

evident at UOW, formal opportunities are often training programs or workshops that do not provide space for the kind of peer to peer interaction which was experienced with other early career librarians at the conference.

Initial meetings focused on determining the structure and membership of the NPN, and quickly progressed to discussing professional topics identified by group members, including tips for demonstrating professional initiative, interview skills, work/life balance, and mentoring. In early 2009, the NPN began inviting guest speakers from Library management to attend meetings to discuss their own professional development journey. This was important for the development of the group in two ways - it gave the group an increased perspective by drawing on the experiences of higher level staff with varied career paths, and began to signal to the Library management that the Network members were serious about their ongoing professional development. Guest speakers included members of the Library Executive Committee and the University Librarian, and all members of the NPN felt that these meetings were beneficial.

As the NPN grew in size, conversations with Library management revealed the benefit of constructing a Terms of Reference to define the purpose and scope of the group. This document allowed the group to begin formalising its structure, and signalled the beginning of making the NPN a publicly available forum. The Terms of Reference included guidelines on meeting content and frequency and the desirable characteristics for potential members, including a demonstrated interest in professional development and a professional career spanning no more than five years. While the majority of the group is comprised of librarians, it is open to all professional and para-professional staff, and this was defined clearly in the Terms of Reference.

2.2. Contrast between peer mentoring and traditional models

The majority of professional literature about peer mentoring programs is concerned with formalised programs that are supported by the organisation or a professional association such as ALIA. The New Professionals Network is different in that it is a grassroots initiative, and is continually evolving as the Network grows and changes. While this has created significant challenges which will be discussed later in this paper, it has also meant that the members of the NPN are free to shape the purpose of the group to meet their needs.

2.3. Methods of communication within the group

Communication is primarily via email, using the internal mail system of the Library. The group commits to meeting monthly, and has a scheduled list of discussion topics allocated to each month. It is usual for one member of the NPN to initiate an email reminder that the meeting is coming up, propose a time and place, and write a brief paragraph raising the topic for discussion. As the NPN has evolved, various strategies have been trialled to manage the scheduling of meetings and communication among the participants including shared calendars in Microsoft Outlook, and Google Calendars. This was intended both to reduce the load on those members that organised the meetings, and to allow members to determine available meeting times in the context of their existing work and personal commitments. The diversity of the group is represented in the range of communication mediums used - while the predominant communication is via email, the group has also started a blog to share information on relevant issues, and provide a space for all the members to contribute to discussions, regardless of physical attendance at meetings.

3. PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL OUTCOMES FROM NPN MEMBERSHIP

3.1. Personal benefits and support systems

Current members reflect that they held a variety of impressions about the impact that their participation in the NPN would have on their personal and professional development. The development of the NPN was perceived as presenting a great networking opportunity for staff within the Library, due to the diverse range of positions and professional experience within the network. Members note that the NPN has been a forum for them to draw on the experiences of other people, and offers an open space to discuss work related difficulties and issues. Participants feel comfortable because they know that other staff have also experienced certain difficulties and provided them with advice on how to approach similar situations. This support has been of evident benefit for members, one of which feels that the NPN "made me feel at ease and more comfortable with my professional development". (M Thompson 2011, pers. comm. 13 April) As Wollongong is geographically separate from Sydney, attendance at library specific Professional Development programs can be difficult. One former member noted that "it was hard to get an opportunity to go to Sydney ALIA events whilst working there (at UOW). The NPN allowed me to network and discuss professional issues with my colleagues." (K Blinco 2011, pers. comm. 19 April).

The Terms of Reference define that NPN members must be working in a full-time capacity. This often means that members who are studying are doing so through distance education. Distance education can be an isolated experience as participants study without personal interaction with other learners. The NPN provides a support structure to staff who are studying, arming them with advice and suggestions for overcoming issues commonly experienced by members studying similar courses. Of the thirteen staff members who have formed the New Professionals Network since its inception, 46% have undertaken an acting role in a different (often higher level) position in order to increase their skills. 69% of group members successfully applied for permanent positions at a higher level. As a result of taking on additional responsibility, two members resigned from the group. Only one member of the group has resigned from the organisation. This clearly indicates the positive impact of a peer mentoring network as a key method of engaging new library professionals and retaining staff members. The voluntary peer mentoring model is one that may be successfully applied in any library with a group of staff who have an interest in discussing issues facing new professionals, and focusing on their professional development.

3.2. Improved communication between teams and satellite sites

Participation in the NPN has enabled connections between members of different teams, which are currently separated into clearly defined spaces in the library. Members, as a result of communicating within the safe space of the peer mentoring group, feel more confident in forging collegial relationships outside of meetings. As a result, they immediately have a contact in other teams in the Library when needed. This has been of particular benefit for members who are changing roles or for Cadets when moving between teams. As membership is open to members of staff located on all campuses, staff from more isolated campuses are able to 'keep up' with what is happening and are able to filter though new ideas and perspectives to one another. One member who works off the main campus reported that participating in the NPN allowed her to "still feel connected" to staff at the main campus library. (L Richardson 2011, pers. comm. 25 March)

3.3. Confidence in professional identities

NPN members have also reported that participation in the group has increased their confidence in communicating with Library Management. As mentioned above, special guests are invited to NPN meetings as speakers. This is often the first time members have had a discussion with the guest speaker and the informal atmosphere allows members to easily ask questions. This sets the basis for a professional relationship with staff members in management positions and allows for easier and more confident communication. Members have also expressed an increase in confidence when approaching new stages in their career and taking on new and different roles. One member acknowledges that the NPN "gave me the confidence to step out on my own" (L Richardson 2011, pers. comm. 25 March). This confidence is significant as it has enabled members to broaden their career aspirations, while staying in the Library and Information Services sector.

4. INITIAL, CURRENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

4.1. Initial challenges

Foundation members of the NPN entered as new graduates or new professionals who had little to no experience in mentoring, making the Network significantly different to traditional forms of peer mentoring. As mentioned earlier, traditional forms of mentoring have at least one experienced mentor to lead a peer mentoring group, pairing inexperienced persons with others of the same status (Level & Mach, 2005). The NPN is completely member driven, and foundation members were all at the *mentee* level seeking guidance and support from each other. Foundation members raised concerns about the ability to maintain group cohesion and identified potential risks to the effectiveness of the group including the introduction of new members, the impact of differing personality types on group cohesion and communication, and administrative issues. An additional challenge faced by foundation members was clearly communicating their intent and direction, a common issue in the formation of peer mentoring groups (Carvin, 2011). The formation of the Terms of Reference was a positive step towards resolving this challenge and greatly assisted in establishing that the group was not social, but was intended to play a key role in the professional development of members. It also provided transparency in identification of potential new members and played a key role in the Network being viewed more positively by all Library staff.

Effective management of these challenges has allowed members to develop a solid foundation of leadership competencies that they can apply to future leadership challenges and opportunities. Members note that the skills they have developed in organising groups, effectively communicating with differing personalities, and setting and attaining professional development goals have all been able to be practically applied in their work at the Library, as evidenced by their progression into higher level positions.

4.2. Current challenges

Since the launch of the NPN, many members have established their professional careers and attained higher level positions that hold greater responsibilities. This has impacted on their ability to attend meetings and participate in activities and discussions. Newer members have increased their capacity to perform organisational roles, supporting the continuance of the Network in the absence of

foundation members. As members of the NPN are in different teams and campuses, there have been inevitable scheduling difficulties with rostered shifts, personal and family commitments clashing with member availability to attend meeting and activities. In 2011, the NPN has developed a new meeting schedule and will revisit inviting guest speakers to encourage participation by members. The NPN also encountered challenges with coordination in that initially no clear roles were defined as to who would schedule meetings and nominated topics. Over time the NPN has recognised the importance of having a dedicated organiser and has nominated facilitators for monthly meetings in order to stay focused and on track. In order to reduce off-topic conversations in NPN meetings, members elected to have a regular, informal meet-up over coffee to discuss items which were not identified earlier in the year as topics of interest.

4.3. Future challenges

There are a number of challenges facing the New Professionals Network, primarily the effective management of the growth, evolution and visibility of the Network. Traditionally, mentoring groups are formally developed using a top-down approach and have a precise beginning and known ending (Carvin, 2011). The NPN is significantly different as it was developed at a grassroots level, aims to continue to evolve for future new professionals, and has no defined end date. Current members recognise that the ability to manage the growth of the NPN and maintain its status as informal and member driven will be challenging to sustain. There is a real risk that at as current members reach the end of their term there may be no new staff who are interested in furthering their professional development and fit the current terms of reference. In order to reduce this risk there has been a staggered transition of memberships, with the combination of new and founding members assisting in the sustainability of enthusiasm and the longevity of the NPN.

An alternative to this method of growth may be to evolve the NPN by transforming it into a formal mentoring program and absorbing the NPN into existing professional development practices within the UOW Library. However, this method poses a clear threat to maintaining the independent status of the group. Currently the Network is informal, and members can freely express themselves and their professional ideas in a space outside of formal organisational structures. To date this has encouraged discussions of cross-disciplinary issues, exchanging of ideas, and offers of peer support to its members in an informal manner (Carvin, 2011). As the Network evolves and actively promotes itself to Library management with the aim of becoming more visible, it will be challenging to maintain this informal and independent status.

5. CONTINUED EVOLUTION

5.1. Future Growth

It is important to note that the supportive culture of the UOW Library organisation was a key enabling factor in the formation of the NPN. It is only in a workplace with a clearly defined mission and vision that provides staff development opportunities that new professionals are willing to enter into leadership positions, even within a peer mentor and leadership group such as the New Professionals Network. (DeLong, 2009)

Potential growth strategies for the future of the NPN include the provision of information about the

Network in induction materials for new employees, and where member numbers allow, new employees who have expressed an interest in professional development can nominate themselves for membership. We believe that in order to be successful, the NPN membership must be voluntary – any members who are only participating due to pressure from team leaders or managers will not contribute equally to, or benefit the other members of this group. (Viney & McKimm, 2010)

5.2. Potential for wider application across the academic library sector

It is well documented that within the first five years of working as a professional, librarians deliberately change positions or jobs as part of the "five-year itch". (Markgren, Dickinson, et al. 2007) Many new librarians entering the profession leave within five years, with a large percentage citing a lack of career opportunity or challenge as their motivation. (Nixon, 2008) This trend informed the decision to create a five year membership term for the New Professionals Network, to support staff during their first years of working in libraries and provide opportunities for challenges and professional development.

The need to find workable solutions for the 'five year itch' discussed in the literature has implications for wider application of a similar peer mentoring model across the academic library sector. While the self-driven model of peer mentoring used by the NPN has had significant challenges, it has also had demonstrable benefits for members including the development of professional confidence, the development of strong peer relationships, and the opportunity to take a focused approach to professional development. The independent nature of the NPN has given members the ability to shape the structure of the network according to their own changing needs, ensuring that it functions as a truly relevant support system (Ragins, Cotton & Miller, 2000). As discussed earlier, several members have progressed significantly in their careers over the duration of the network, using the peer system to boost their confidence and skills and pursue their professional goals.

Staff who are actively engaged with their professional development have increased satisfaction, are able to increase their contribution to the organisation, and are less likely to leave in search of more challenging horizons (Singer, 2006). The growing need for library staff to demonstrate flexibility and agility in a changing information environment is widely discussed in the literature, and this is especially important in the academic library sector due to the rapid change also taking place within the higher education sector as a whole. (Pathak & Pathak, 2010, Level & Mach, 2005). Self-driven peer support such as that displayed by the NPN allows motivated staff to enable each other to attain this flexibility, share skills and knowledge and successfully navigate an increasingly complex professional environment.

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