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# Staff Information skills: workplace support and development



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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Bruce states that 'Information literacy is about peoples' ability to operate effectively in an information society. This involves critical thinking, an awareness of personal and professional ethics, information evaluation, conceptualising information needs, organising information, interacting with information professionals and making effective use of information in problem-solving, decision-making and research. It is these information based processes which are crucial to the character of learning organisations and which need to be supported by the organisation's technology infrastructure.' (Bruce, 1999).

In 2003, the JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) held a seminar to discuss the development of information skills for all staff employed in the Higher and Further Education sectors. Previous research had focussed on the development of student skills. However as discussions progressed it became apparent that there was a pressing need to explore how staff develop techniques to manage their information requirements, their approaches to information-seeking and the resources they use. In response the JISC commissioned three parallel projects:

- 1 **Big Blue connect:** An investigation into the information seeking behaviour and skills sets of staff working in further and higher education
- 2 **Staff Development Provision Study:** A study to provide an overview of existing staff development provision for information skills in FE and HE, including an assessment of strengths and weaknesses
- 3 **Drivers for Staff Development Study:** A generic study to identify the drivers for staff

development with specific reference to the implications for information skills for staff

Output from each of these projects can be found on the JISC website at <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/cpdresources>. The results of their research highlight the following issues:

## Defining information skills

- general confusion exists over definitions and terminology used to describe information skills, and there is an accompanying lack of understanding of their importance to both an individual and an institution
- there is a tendency to conflate information skills with ICT skills
- these issues mean that information skills needs tend not to be recognised and addressed in their own right.

## Skills gaps

- relatively few staff interviewed demonstrated the skills and confidence to apply information to best advantage
- the majority of staff interviewed adopted a 'getting by' approach
- in many institutions information skills for non-academic staff (other than staff working within a library/information service) are not currently addressed.

## Lack of strategic framework for information skills

- there is a lack of institution-wide ownership of information skills issues; it is often seen as a 'library thing'
- it is not accredited or linked to career progression or recognised by any of the main professional organisations e.g. Higher Education Academy
- there is little or no evidence to suggest that staff developers either recognise information skills as a priority or as a development area to support individual skills.

## Fragmented provision, poor take-up

- existing training provision is fragmented with ad hoc courses and events run mainly by libraries and a small number of external agencies
- courses often tend to take a 'one-size fits all' approach in the absence of any defined progression path for information skills

- take-up is patchy making it difficult to justify running additional courses.

#### **DOES THIS ANALYSIS SOUND FAMILIAR?**

In a brief and fairly unscientific survey of colleagues through discussion lists and at various events I found that the summary above did, in general, reflect the current state of play.

The JISC has recognised the importance of mainstreaming information skills for all staff and its first step is to raise awareness of the importance of this activity to the whole community. This approach builds on much of the valuable work which is on-going at local and regional levels, mainly led by library and learning resources staff who have the expertise to act as advocates for the strategic development of information skills for staff.

Opportunities are being taken advantage to:

- 1 set up new working partnerships;
- 2 market the institutional library or learning resource centre as the centre of expertise for the delivery of information skills to all staff;
- 3 re-position information skills as a keystone of staff development activity;
- 4 promote information skills as essential teaching and/or research tool if institutions are to maximise investment in their information resources.

The JISC's current contribution to this process takes the form of two key documents. The first '*Investing in Staff i-skills: a strategy for institutional development*' aims to:

- present evidence to support the argument for investment;
- examine the potential risk little or no action is likely to have on the effectiveness of an institution;
- provide an example of an institution-wide framework to progress i-skills.

The sister publication '*Improving Staff i-skills: an Introductory guide*' aims to help individual staff:

- define i-skills;
- understand why they are important to individuals and institutions;
- recognise i-skills in context;
- make a start on an i-skills development plan;
- develop ideas to help you deliver i-skills provision for your own institution.

#### **WHY INTRODUCE A NEW TERM?**

i-skills has been introduced to provide staff who perhaps have been uncertain about existing definitions and use of terminology, with the concept of a broad, generic term. For those introducing i-skills its importance lies not with the use of the term itself, but in understanding how a range of skills can be applied in the context of an individual's work role.

#### **PROGRESSION VERSUS DIFFERENTIATION**

All student information skills programmes are based on the premise of progression. Irrespective of point of access, there is an underlying assumption that as a student proceeds through their course of study that there will be an accompanying enhancement of their information skills.

The development of workplace skills is more likely to be characterised by personal context and workplace needs. The information skills that one individual takes for granted may be the very skills that another needs but cannot master without some support. It is also the case, that unlike students where the expectation is that, to a greater or lesser degree, all students will develop expertise across the whole suite of information skills, individual staff may need only to become expert in selected activities and may rely on the expertise of others to complete the process.

#### **DEVELOPING A PROGRAMME: MOVING FORWARD**

It is quite a daunting prospect to consider the development of an information skills programme for all staff which is both tailored to meet individual and workplace needs. However it is an ideal opportunity to develop new partnerships and use information skills as a vehicle to encourage collaboration and innovative ways of delivering training.

The model below, adapted from the 6-step model provides a framework for the development of an information skills programme.



*Step 1: Identify the drivers*

What can you hang information skills to which will drive it forward and align it to a key institutional objective? What will motivate staff to spend time on information skills training?

*Step 2: Establish a group of champions*

Pull together colleagues from academic and central services and examine the potential for building an integrated delivery team. Collaborating over the delivery of information skills has the potential to enhance recognition of information skills as a professional development activity, improve content and relevance of the material and, in avoiding duplication of effort, maximise existing resources and expertise.

*Step 3: Develop a strategy*

Articulate the key objectives of an information skills plan. Can those objectives be mapped to institutional objectives? Are the links clear?

*Step 4: Address the cultural issues*

What are the political, social and cultural features of your institution? Are there any prevailing attitudes which need to be taken into consideration? Are there any initiatives or developments which will assist with the development of a programme?

*Step 5: Pilot a programme*

Why not try to gather a group of colleagues from across your institution to test your programme? Choose them on their ability to assess the effectiveness of the course and as potential advocates for further uptake and development of information skills.

*Step 6: Sustain momentum and extend activities*

Use as many channels as you have at your disposal to further promote the programme. Have you gathered feedback and evaluation? Have you considered any performance measures that can be used to assess impact? What level of support

do you have from senior managers? Can information skills be mainstreamed as a professional staff development activity?

**IS THIS APPROACH ANY GUARANTEE OF SUCCESS?**

Perhaps the most critical step in this model to achieving any level of success lies in Step 2. Developing new working relationships with staff who already deliver training in either related areas or as part of mainstream staff development will play a key role in broadening ownership of information skills. It may also begin to counter the perception that information skills is only for students, or for technophobes, or for those engaged in research. It may encourage all categories of staff to view information skills training as an investment by their institution in their personal and professional development. What is clear, is that there exists an attractive opportunity to both promote the expertise and knowledge already existing within many libraries and use it in new and innovative ways to shift the delivery of information skills for staff from its current fragmented position, to one based on strong foundations for strategic development.

For copies of the two JISC reports on Staff i-skills please visit the JISC website <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/cpdresources>

**References**

C.S. Bruce, 'Workplace experiences of information literacy'. *International journal of information management*, 19(1), pp. 33-47.