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**Building Capacity for Learning, Change and Innovation**

by Stephen Abram and Jane Dysart

How does your organization approach change and innovation strategies? How are professional development needs addressed in your strategic plan? Are people your most important asset in jargon only?

I've written about the groundbreaking Learning 2.0 program at the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County, developed by Helene Blowers, in this space before. We have even run two SirsiDynix Institute programs on it this year. Hundreds of libraries and library staff are now engaged in this transformational program. I am writing this column on the plane having just visited the staff of PLCMC for the Technology Day program. This is an awesome library, actively seeking the future. When you combine a series of innovations like their amazing main branch, Imaginon Centre, The Eye4You Alliance Teen Second Life project, the LibraryLoft MySpace presence, gaming tournaments, and more with the Learning 2.0 program you can easily see why they were named library of the year. And they share!

While I was there they topped off the day with a few announcements. Matt Gullett unveiled a huge new series of partnerships to take their gaming projects to the next level and Helene revealed two extensions to the Learning 2.0 program. They launched Learning 2.1, a self-paced learning program along the lines of 2.0 but improved with the feedback from the experience with their first program. They also launched a very exciting PLCMC Scholars program. Employees can apply for 6 month secondments to a project of their own design and choosing – with space, budget and support. It's an amazing initiative for 4 lucky scholars to build something transformational in the public library context. Why am I writing about this today? Well, other than to express my admiration for a library system that's trying its best to improve – despite being great already, I was deeply struck by their humility. They always said, when I probed, that they didn't think they were the best, in the top tier, or even very innovative! They just felt that what they accomplished was just interesting work done by a great team.

***Amazing!***

If we could all look at professional development and innovation as a team activity in the service of the profession and our enterprises, we could really change the world – even more than we do already.

So, what would be some simple ways of increasing our organizations' capacity for learning, change and innovation? So, as I sit on this plane, (in the middle seat, arrrgghh), on deadline for this OneSource column, I thought I'd brainstorm some traditional and non-traditional ways to look at professional development.

### **1. How does your enterprise make conference attendance choices?**

Here are some questions to consider:

- a. Does your organization pre-plan most of your year's worth of conferences? The timing of each is rarely a surprise and this shouldn't cause difficulty. Do you pay in advance to protect this critical budget or is it viewed as no important enough to protect and as the first thing to cut?
- b. Do you have training needs assessments tied to your mission, vision and strategic goals?
- c. Do you balance the attendees who go to conferences? Is there a thought-through balance between individual developmental needs and enterprise strategic priorities? Check your demographics: Are you only sending senior staff? Are you building capacity for the future by developing your future leaders?
- d. Every year is different. Are you looking for local conference opportunities for extend the budget when these occur? Many conferences offer bulk registration deals. Check out what a van load of staff costs vs. individual cars and plane tickets.
- e. Are you looking for biodiversity? Is there a range of topics and styles? Don't just pick single issue conferences or just library oriented events. We can learn from all sectors.
- f. Are you planning and remembering non-MLS staff and their conferences (HR, foundations, finance, Systems, etc.)?
- g. Are you being too local? Are you seeking some international or other learning opportunities? Are you getting out of the state?
- h. Lastly, have staff report back on what they learned. Even better have them blog it daily. An oral brown bagger in real life or online lets everyone ask informal questions and delivers value back to the organization

Make conscious choices in a grand annual plan so that you're not reactive. And, still be flexible to take advantage of other opportunities that come up.

### **2. What are the differences in certain conferences (not better or worse – just different)? How do I achieve diversity?**

Understand that there are a variety of conferences and each has an important role to play. There are so many because we have a complex environment in the information world. We are also at a critical juncture in the repositioning of libraries in society. It's an exciting time but we have to "get out there" to learn the art of the possible. Attendance is up and our topics are hot.

Consider a balance between practical vs. visionary conferences. Everyone needs to be stretched even though there may be essential conferences for critical tools. Review both the for-profit / tracked conferences and the not-for-profit / association / grassroots conferences. Each fills a niche and both can be quite leading edge but also offer practical skills training. Is the conference academic, practical, both? How big is the attendance? Large can mean lower costs and more choice, or very impersonal. Small can mean greater focus but seem cliquy. Are you learning outside your box? Is the conference design challenging? Are you stretching yourself? Are you attending sessions that are different but not immediately relevant?

Worry if your attendee avoids the pre-conferences and books flights that miss a large portion of the last day. Conferences are planned as a total experience and going half-measures to save a \$100 room night during a larger training investment is truly short-sighted.

Conference programs can look like a hodgepodge with their mélange of tracks, meals, events and keynotes. Work with your colleagues and direct reports to review getting the most out of the conference experience. I am amazed at how many people arrive at a major investment like a 3-5 day conference without a clue about what they want to do, see, achieve! Look into the role of the keynote and setting tone. Everyone goes so that everyone has something to talk about as we meet new people. Encourage attendance at the networking and social opportunities. Introversion is not an excuse or a good reason to avoid events. These are not trivial aspects of the conference. Plan your attack on the trade show and what you want to say, see demo'ed or hear. Are you supporting strategic niches in your organization? (Foundation work, e-learning, leadership development, website design, HR, etc.) Are some important staff feeling left out or undervalued?

### **3. How do you supplement the in person experience?**

There are many ways to supplement the in-person conference experience. And not just for the person who was there. Stuff can be brought back to the office, shared and reported to all interested staff over brown baggers. The conference experience has changed radically since the Internet tools have been adopted. Here are just a few ideas:

- a. Conference proceedings are quite different now. Contributed papers are often online in pre-prints or the speaker's website. Hard copy proceedings still exist for many conferences although these are sometimes just PPT's in print for note-taking but at other times they are scholarly articles and research.
- b. Blogs are normal for nearly every conference now - either the official conference blog(s) or your Google and Technorati alerts on the conference name or (official / unofficial) tag.

- c. Twitter has emerged as one of the more exciting tools for conference attendees now. You don't need to be there physically to play.
- d. PowerPoints are usually posted to the conference webpage quickly after the conference. This saves trees and makes them easy to see in color! Don't forget that PPT: and PDF: are commands in Google and makes these resources more discoverable – even if you weren't at the conference.
- e. Many conferences provide Webcasts from the conference (e.g. the SLA 2007 keynotes). You can view those at your leisure.
- f. I love the plethora of YouTube videos from conferences (e.g. The CIL InfoTubey awards) appearing now. You get a fun flavour of what went on.
- g. Many conferences are offering podcasts of major conference sessions. Cool.
- h. We continue to have great web link lists on websites and blogs. (Steven Cohen, Jenny Levine and Sarah Houghton-Jan are three who are really good at this). Then you can just go ahead and play with the new, cool tools that are mentioned.
- i. Visit the various conferences' Flickr accounts (just to get a flavour of the fun). Often there's a fun meme going on. One conference had a series of pictures with giant calculators and another started a trend towards pictures in the washrooms. Silly but fun with camera ubiquity.
- j. Watch your discussion lists since they often cover key sessions, especially if there is a discussion list associated with the session host.
- k. Recently we've seen the emergence of conference wikis (e.g. CIL, ALA, etc.) that pull a lot together in one place. The emergence of a team of attendee reporters at conferences has changed the dynamics with real time blogging, reviews, commentary, link lists and articles.
- l. Lastly, don't forget that you can e-mail the speaker(s). I've found this a good way to get notes, clarification, links, etc.

#### **4. What are the recommended conferences?**

I often get asked what my favourite conferences are. Since I go to so many – hundreds over the past three years, I do have an opinion about what I see working for the most people. You'll also note that SirsiDynix invests our limited sponsorship funds and staffed trade show presences in those events where we feel the best work is happening.

*Examples of conferences that try to be forward thinking:*

Internet Librarian, Computers in libraries, NetSpeed, Access,

*Examples of grassroots conferences that try to be mostly practical and do a great job:*

ALA, OLA SuperConference, CLA, SLA, IFLA, state and provincial conferences.

*Examples of conferences that stick to a topic and do it well:*

KM World, Code4Lib, Web 2.0, SEO, Streaming Media, Masie's Learning Trends, World Future Society

*Examples of conferences that are topically focused:*

SirsiDynix SuperConference, Blackboard, user group conferences)

## **5. What other suggestions do I have for increasing capacity?**

- a. Invite key speakers that you liked at conferences to your staff professional development days. If they informed or inspired you, chances are they'll do the same magic with quite a few of your colleagues.
- b. Build a long term program around the free or low cost events offered by :
  1. SirsiDynix Institute (If the timing is a problem, use the archived webcasts and podcasts)
  2. Education Institute by the Partnership (Canada)
  3. OCLC's WebJunction
  4. Special teleconference or web-based training events offered by your vendors.
- c. Search iTunes, PodScope, Podzinger, etc. for podcast training sessions and audiobooks. Make recommendations for your staff.
- d. Work on regularizing lunchtime seminars and brown baggers. Simple and complex learning can happen here either through your own staff or local experts like genealogists, teen YouTubers, local MP3 player stores, etc.

Of course I still recommend Learning 2.0 and doing the 23 things (or whatever number works for your team!) or the 5 weeks to a Social Library program done by our client, McMaster University. There's so much to learn and costs is no longer the problem it once was. Inertia is.

Anyway, here are some ideas from a 10 minute notepad exercise. I'm sure you have lots more. Learning is fun. Let's make our own sandbox and learn through play. Are there limits to childhood? I hope not. My one great personal discovery as I hit my fifties was to rediscover playing. I am so excited to be learning so much again. (I will also admit, somewhat guiltily, I rediscovered reading again with a good prescription set of glasses. HA!)

Play nice.

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