

What happens when the baby boomers go?

This paper was originally presented in full at NLS4 2008.

Fairfield City Council's vision to be an employer of choice is spelled out in *Our People Our Future: a human resources strategic plan 2007-2011*. Several key components of this plan are developing a positive organisational culture, growing and rewarding our own talent, and fostering workforce flexibility, innovation, and diversity. We needed to implement these strategies into our thinking and planning for the Library Service to remain relevant for our community and the future. In order to get some clear data we conducted a staff survey in September 2008. We used Survey Monkey and each staff member was emailed the link to the survey online.

Summary of Staff Survey Results

There were a total of 56 responses out of a possible 70 staff including casuals. Approximately 51% are over 45, reflecting statistics collected by the Federal Department of Employment (McCarthy, 2005). 10.9% of our staff expect to be retired in 5 years' time and 25.5% in 10 years' time. This means that we need to consider how we are going to fill these places most effectively.

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING STAFF – GROWING AND REWARDING OUR OWN TALENT

Attracting younger staff

How do we recruit younger staff? One method is to employ young people in partnership with local high schools. One of our staff employment agencies worked with the careers advisor at a local high school to recruit students to work in the library. A group of students were tested and interviewed by the agency. Five young people, aged from 15 to 18, began training in May 2008. Training was held after school hours with the proviso that school work came first. These students are now working regular weekend shifts and longer hours in the school holidays. None have dropped out and all are keen for more work. We pay above award rates and as they turn 18 they go on to the standard Library Assistant rate.

Secondments

On-the-job learning environments can be developed through temporary secondments to vacant positions. An expression of interest in the position is circulated and suitably qualified people are encouraged to apply. The secondment is usually for six to nine months and gives the staff member the opportunity to learn and develop skills while being supported in the new situation. Sometimes, of course, the secondment process clarifies for the staff member concerned that this is not an area they want to pursue long term.

Rotation

Another way of staff upskilling is through our rotation process. Every two years staff are moved to another location or team within their existing position level. This allows them to experience the very different demographics and customer bases of another location. It also gives them the opportunity to work with a new team and to learn new skills. At our main library, staff can move into specialist teams such as IT, Housebound, and Collections and Assets. Some of our positions are non-rotating due to the specialist skills required (e.g. our outreach librarians and direct report positions), but most staff, including our branch librarians are on the rotation schedule.

Mentoring

We use Events Teams to plan, manage, promote, and evaluate the major events we run each year. These include HSC lectures, Summer Reading program, Library Lovers Day, and Library and Information Week. A staff member from each branch is part of the team. The team brainstorms ideas for the event then decides what training and mentoring is required. Team members with the requisite skills and experience – writing press releases, designing fliers, booking presenters, caterers, venues, and equipment, uploading information to the website or intranet, etc – buddy with less experienced staff to help build skills and confidence. The aim of this process is to give as many staff as possible the opportunity to learn and practice new skills.

Cross-organisational teams and projects

Library staff can feel distant from the overall vision of the organisation they represent. This can be due to geographic separation and a lack of understanding of how the library fits in the overall strategic plan. One way to improve this is to encourage staff to join cross-organisational teams and projects including IT planning, intranet co-ordination, culture coaching, cultural planning, OH&S committee, and EEO/Diversity Working party, to name just a few. These projects raise the library service's profile with other staff, leading to new partnerships and projects as well as an appreciation for the range of skills and experience that library staff members bring to a broad range of community issues.

DEVELOPING A CONSTRUCTIVE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Organisational culture

Attracting staff in the first place and then offering them suitable, timely learning and development opportunities is still only part of the answer to creating and managing an effective workforce. Another key area is that of staff morale and sense of belonging. Fairfield City Council has been actively working on improving its organisational culture since 2000. "Culture coaches" were introduced to facilitate the process of change within each department and workplace across the organisation. The Library Service has two culture coaches who work with library teams as well in other divisions of Council.

Fun days

Full staff meetings are held twice a year and both a morning and afternoon session are run to ensure all staff (including casuals) can attend. We cover the usual information but also try to make the meetings very interactive and lots of fun. Staff enjoy the opportunity to use their creativity. An example from a recent staff meeting was that staff were asked to design the library worker of the future. Teams used collage, gluing, cutting, and pasting, but also needed to think through what was important to our profession now, and what would continue to be important in the future. Even such dry topics as OH&S can be enlivened with a board game or quiz and, of course, prizes.

WORKFORCE FLEXIBILITY, INNOVATION AND DIVERSITY

It is important that our staff reflect the diversity of the community. Our survey showed that our staff spoke 19 languages other than English between them. 58% of our staff were born overseas. This is obviously an important component in helping our customers feel valued, understood, and respected, but it also places value on the cultural diversity of our staff.

The variety and diversity of our staff provides amazing potential, but it is not always easy to encourage staff to think and work creatively in their day-to-day work. We use games as the basis of our staff development. First 'BINGO' to encourage staff to be involved in thinking about the services, programs, and resources we offer and promoting them to our customers. This was designed around some of our key functions – Cultural Awareness, Marketing, Team Work, Training, Technology, Personal Development, Fun, Sustainability, Readers' Advisory, Innovation, OH&S, and Motivation. For each heading there was a task for staff to do which encouraged them to reflect on their own work practice. We are currently working through 'Hopscotch' – an interactive process that builds staff readers' advisory skills.

CONCLUSIONS

While we have taken measures to try to ensure that we recruit and retain staff that will have opportunities to develop their potential, these measures are not enough to ensure that we have a well trained workforce that will meet the growing needs of our community into the future. Individual organisations need to strive to be 'employers of choice' so that prospective recruits are attracted to our industry. We also need to recruit and keep staff that have a genuine interest in people and events, flexibility, innovation, initiative, are IT savvy, and have a desire to learn and encourage that ability in others. We need to do effective, long-term planning to ensure the ongoing viability of the profession. More flexible work practices may be one possibility. Salary levels need to be reviewed so that skilled people are retained in the Library Sector rather than moving into more lucrative positions in other sectors. If we don't act we may face a situation where we simply cannot staff our library services in the future. Libraries are an essential part of providing an increasingly diverse population with equitable, accessible information and learning resources as well as

a welcoming place to use regularly throughout their lives. Libraries are too important for us to risk their future by lack of planning and foresight.

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Food for fines

In the lead up to Christmas, Hobsons Bay Libraries ran a four-week Food for Fines campaign. After hearing of the success of the program at Geelong Regional Libraries in 2008, we were keen to try it for ourselves and what a wonderful experience it was!

Food for Fines is a variation on the traditional fines amnesty and gives customers the opportunity to donate items of food instead of paying for their fines. In our campaign customers could have \$10 of overdue charges waived for each item of food.

Permission was obtained for the amnesty from Council in August 2009 and the positive press coverage began immediately with articles in three local newspapers. When the campaign began in November, another two articles appeared in the local media.

The Councillors at Hobsons Bay were very supportive of the concept. In the lead up library staff were assisted by Community Development Staff in building relationships with the relevant Community Groups who could distribute the food.

We worked in partnership with local Emergency Relief Agencies. Library staff collected the food from the community and waived the fines, and then their volunteers collected the items from our branches, packaged them up as hampers, and distributed them the week before Christmas.

During the four weeks of the amnesty, just over \$5500 in overdue charges were waived and almost 1300 items of food

were received. As well as customers taking the opportunity to clear long outstanding fines we also welcomed many donations from customers and council staff just wanting to contribute to their local community at Christmas time. The hampers created reached more than 200 homes in our local community.

During and after the campaign I received lots of positive feedback from customers and great stories were shared amongst the staff. Some customers were appreciative of the opportunity to clear their fines and other customers were glad to have a convenient location to make a charitable donation.

Overwhelmingly the requests were for a follow-up in 2010...and this month approval was received to make Food for Fines an annual event!

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