The importance of training and development in becoming an Employer of Choice for librarians

Our research into Employer of Choice considerations began in late 2005 at an excellent Christmas function, at which we uncovered our common desire to research and write. Despite wearing antlers and Santa-hats our discussions continually swirled back towards the sombre themes of leadership, organisational culture, personal development, human resources and employment. Through our work in libraries as supervisors, managers, team members and human resource researchers, a genuine fascination for these issues had arisen. It was difficult to know where to start. Through further discussions the concept of Employer of Choice emerged as promising line of enquiry.

What is 'Employer of Choice'?

Employer of Choice is a concept, widely used in contemporary human resources management, to describe an organisation's reputation and standing as a desirable place in which to work.

Employer of Choice affects people at all stages of their career. Employer of Choice is an issue for job-seekers; in an increasingly competitive market, the savvier job-seekers will size up an organisation in detail before seeking to join it.

Importantly, it is also an issue for employees; their decision to stay put or look for a new job will depend, in part, on the satisfaction that their work environment can offer them. Finally, Employer of Choice is a significant issue for library administrators. For libraries to prosper through future decades they will need passionate and motivated employees. The future could be bleak. We have an ageing profession and may face dwindling numbers (Teece, P "Workforce planning is a long-haul challenge", *inCite*, June 2005). Elsewhere we read that all sectors of the Australian workforce face an increasingly fierce war for talent ("Opportunity Knocks", DFEEST, 2004). Recruitment and retention of talented, passionate staff will become an increasingly important issue for library managers.

Employer of Choice allows us to examine broadly many of the issues crucial to librarianship. The concept delves into the motivations, the likes and the dislikes of people moving into, around, and out of, the profession. Knowing what library workers are seeking in their profession tells us a lot about what we should be doing to recruit and retain people who will be happy to work in libraries. Should we be creating an environment of competition or collaboration? Are people motivated by professional values? Do people want mentoring? Mobility? Flexible work? Job security? High wages? Or good leadership? A survey investigating these questions gives us a snapshot of the values and aspirations of library workers. Where results are emphatic clear messages may be heard. Of course, the results will inevitably invite further questions.

Training and development

A significant example, drawn from our findings, concerns the availability of workplace opportunities for training and development. We found that more than 9 in 10 respondents considered 'T&D' to be an important factor when assessing the merits of a place in which to work. This result was consistent across all age groups and sectors surveyed. We believe that this is strongly indicative of the growing recognition among employees that to remain skilled, employable and enthused, effective training and development programs need to be provided. In turn, a highly skilled workforce will result in the provision of quality library services.

We believe that this makes perfect sense in the wider context. Our sector is being challenged from many angles. We face new and improving technology, changes in the expectations and literacies of our clients and in the demands of our parent organisations. Library employment issues such as succession planning, recruitment, retention, retirement and the changing patterns of work engagement all affect our sector. These compelling reasons require the sector as a whole to place a higher priority on the continual growth and development of its workers.

Conclusion

Staffing will always remain one of libraries' most expensive resources. But the returns on highly trained staff will also represent our most important investment. Our Employer of Choice survey revealed that most of us agree with this sentiment, and that most of us are eager for this to be translated into practice. Institutions ignore this message at their peril, if they are to retain motivated staff to tackle the challenges of future library and information services.

In addition to T&D, several other issues received emphatic responses from our respondents. We hope to publish the results of our survey in far greater detail in coming months. However, what we can say at this point is that the survey hit a nerve. We received over 800 responses from all walks of the Australian library sector, from a broad range of age groups and locations. Many people wish to be heard on the issues that we covered, or, at the very least, are curious to learn more. Given the industry-wide regard for the importance of T&D – entailing self-improvement, learning and professionalism – this curiousity, is perhaps, not a wonder.

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