OFF THE GRID: 30 HOURS TO GIVE IT A SHOT

Every library is full of clever, creative and passionate people with great ideas. But how do you make a difference when you're bogged down with procedures, policies, workplace culture and personal workloads? FIONA WATKIN tells us more.

Off the Grid is an innovative staff development program at QUT Library. In 2015, all staff members were offered 30 hours of 'creative time' over six months to work on projects and ideas that they wouldn't normally get around to, or which were outside their job description. Feedback from staff surveys indicated they wanted to feel more involved in workplace strategies and decision-making, and managers wanted staff who are innovative and constantly improving their services and workflows.

The only outcome required was a poster outlining the project and the process – no KPIs, no reports – and an attitude that embraces risk and failure.

The program was inspired by the famous Google and 3M '20 percent time' for independent projects that has resulted in innovations such as Post-it notes, Google News and Gmail. Both companies have policies that allow staff the freedom during work time to develop new personal projects. The concept was further shaped by an article in the March 2007 issue of *Harvard Business Review*, 'Leading clever people' by Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, which discusses the motivations and rewards that inspire 'clever' people, such as professional respect, autonomy and freedom from bureaucracy, rather than financial bonuses or promotions and titles.

'Idea Hamster' Lauren Woodlands with her poster

QUT Library staff showcase the Augmented Reality project from Off the Grid at the QULOC University Librarians' Forum in November 2015

Twenty-one staff took up the offer, individually and in groups, from nearly every level of the library – from management to library advisers – working across 14 projects from May to October. The participants – also known as 'Idea Hamsters' – were brought together to share and encourage idea development at voluntary meet-ups and online through a dedicated SharePoint website. Some attrition occurred, but 16 participants and eight projects were presented and displayed in posters by the end of October. These were presented at informal gatherings for all library staff to view and discuss the projects with the Hamsters. A great deal of interest was shown in what everyone had been up to. A sample of the 2015 projects include

- Higher Degree Research (HDR) Library Support Stories video. Film interviews with a number of HDR students to create a short video of 'HDR library support stories' for the Science and Engineering Faculty online orientation module.
- A Creative Space: Supporting and enhancing a dynamic library environment. Developing a creative and dynamic space where learners feel energised and supported to undertake their studies. A review of Kelvin Grove Library's spaces and the potential for their artistic development resulted in the installation of small art features to surprise and delight users.
- Augmented Reality was explored. The goal was to create something generic that can be used by anyone. Examples created included augmented staff photos, interactive book collections and displays, interactive storytelling and interactive anatomy maps.
- Digital collection exhibition with Old Government House in 2017. Together with the QUT Old Government House a proposal to highlight one part of the QUT Digital Collections service maintained by the QUT Library via an exhibition in 2017.

Feedback showed that participants achieved the original aim of the program – to gain a sense of autonomy and freedom to explore. A high level of collaboration occurred among the library staff:

'Try[ing] something new in a space that people wouldn't just slam it down as silly – the space to make mistakes on my own and learn.'

'It was good to meet staff from other areas in the library. Sometimes working in our own hamster wheel doesn't encourage collaboration and it can get a bit tired.'

'A wonderful opportunity to explore an idea and not feel guilty about doing so in work time.'

'We didn't achieve any of the "deliverables" that we had hoped to. But maybe the big win was getting some attention to what I think is a gap in our services.'

Nearly all participants said they appreciated the managerial support they received and the access to resources needed. Most Hamsters already had ideas, and the 'no pressure' approach to work on them was the main attraction, proving that, as suspected, library staff were already innovative and creative. Time management was a crucial skill: two-thirds said that they didn't get anywhere near enough time! All of those who dropped out still loved their projects, but they didn't have enough time to really develop them.

Where to from here?

A new round of Off the Grid will be offered in 2016; it will be open to everyone, including the 2015 participants who want to keep working on their ideas. Extra help with project and time management will be provided to help

'Idea Hamster' Sharron Stapleton with her poster

staff achieve their goals within the 30-hours allotted. Some of last year's projects will be developed further and implemented more formally, either through library funding or external sources, including government grants.

Half of the 2015 Hamsters said that they would participate again or encourage other staff to participate. For minimal cost and with limited time, we achieved some exciting outcomes for both the staff and QUT Libraries, all thanks to having a little time to go 'off the grid'.

For more information, go to library.qut.edu.au/about/management/.

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