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StaffShare

Creating cross-departmental connection in the library

Employees of large academic libraries are usually segmented into discrete departments. This is the polite word; the more pejorative term is *silos*. In siloed environments, staff can become overly invested in the individual goals of their particular department, causing them to lose sight of the overall institutional goals.¹ This disconnect between departments hinders the effectiveness of staff who are potentially duplicating work or working in opposing directions.

Without intentional initiatives to foster cross-departmental communication, staff may not connect with colleagues in different roles. Geographic and functional separation, and an increased reliance on email communication, results in colleagues never meeting face-to-face. Additionally, although many departments work together, the variety of work in a contemporary academic library can result in departments that have no contact with one another at all. Technical services librarians, for instance, may never meet instruction librarians. Addressing these divisions by increasing employee engagement and creating learning opportunities can be a major factor in increasing employee retention.²

With a staff force of more than 500 individuals, the University of Michigan (UM) Library is divided into several units and departments. After staff across our library expressed a desire to learn more about the responsibilities of other departments, the UM Library developed a three-pronged StaffShare program to create connections between staff, foster a cohesive institutional identity, and increase employee engagement.

StaffShare consists of three different programs: SkillShare, SpeedShare, and SpaceShare. Each program offers a distinct flavor of employee engagement across a spectrum of exposure and time commitment. These programs provide a model of staff engagement that can be tailored to departmentalized institutions of any size and structure.

StaffShare Programs

SkillShare

SkillShare pairs library staff from across departments and divisions for a two-way job shadowing experience. Participants express which area of the library they are interested in and are then paired according to that interest, resulting in diverse partnerships between, for instance, a systems programmer and a technical processing specialist. Partner pairs are encouraged to meet from four-to-twelve hours over a two-month period, sharing their job descriptions, demonstrating key duties, and involving each other at any level possible.

SkillShare participants at our institution have broadened their library horizons by serving at reference desks, attending meetings, observing instruction sessions, and learning about new library systems. After the

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dual observation period, participants share with other colleagues by blogging and giving a panel presentation.

SkillShare requires a multiweek commitment and creates deep connections between individual staff.

SpeedShare

With the success of the SkillShare program, the library decided to experiment with new models of driving connections between staff members across the library. A second program was developed—SpeedShare, a high-energy, fast-paced speed-networking event. In each SpeedShare event, about ten people from a particular area of the library are invited

contact information needed to find out more.

The structured networking provides ideal scaffolding for employees just beginning to develop networking skills. Sharers are talking to small groups while seated, so the preparation and commitment minimizes public speaking nerves.

Speedshare involves a very short time investment, giving attendees initial exposure to multiple faces of a department or initiative.

SpaceShare

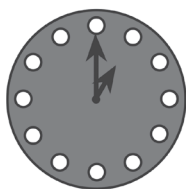
Another model implemented to encourage engagement across departments is SpaceShare. SpaceShare facilitates communication by inviting library employees to take a guided

tour of different library areas. A SpaceShare event starts with a dedicated, short amount of time for participants to chat and have refreshments. Next, participants are led to each designated location



StaffShare

SpeedShare



SkillShare



SpaceShare



A visual representation of the three StaffShare programs.

to participate as sharers, and enrollment of listeners is limited to about three times the number of sharers, due simply to lack of space around the tables.

Sharers sit on one side of a table and give a three-minute speech about their role and work in the library, followed by three minutes of questions and discussion to engage the listeners. When time is up, a bell rings and listeners move on to the next table to hear from the next sharer. These events typically last an hour and include networking and follow-up discussions at the end. The goal is for attendees to get an overview of one department (for instance, Technical Services), become familiar with faces from that area, get a broad overview of the roles and jobs in that department, and leave armed with the

to hear a brief talk from a volunteer sharer about what work is done in the space, who uses it, and how staff in the space work with other departments across the library. The event moves quickly with participants spending about ten minutes with each presenter, depending on the content they have to share.

SpaceShare is a short time commitment that gives participants the opportunity to venture outside of their offices and observe other workspaces.

StaffShare outcomes

Employee engagement is difficult to both define and to measure.³ The StaffShare program is designed to foster specific elements of engagement: personal connections across the organization, a holistic view of the orga-

nization, and commitment to developing in the organization.

Personal connections

Overwhelmingly, evaluation surveys gathered from the three StaffShare programs have been full of positive feedback. When asked if they had met a new colleague, 86 out of 92 respondents from 7 StaffShare events answered yes. A frequent refrain was, “I met a colleague in person for the first time, but we’ve been emailing for years.” By providing an initial in person introduction, StaffShare positively contributes to colleague to colleague relationships.

Holistic views

StaffShare helps library employees connect various library activities and see the big picture. After talking to a colleague working on 3-D printing or publishing technology, employees can think of that innovative activity as part of their organization. One SkillShare participant commented that, “This helped me to get a better idea of how all parts of the library must work together to provide fantastic service to our patrons.” StaffShare shows that each job is important not only to the department but to the library at large.

StaffShare participants also came away from events with an increased sense of pride in their work roles. One survey respondent said the best thing about the program was a “chance to . . . demystify my part of the library operation for colleagues.”

The StaffShare program provides employees an opportunity for holistic reflection, as one employee explained, “One of the things that really struck me about sharing is that it made me focus on what we do and why—things I take for granted on a day-to-day basis.” StaffShare participants were able to contextualize the value of their work by learning the impact on colleagues and the library as a whole.

Career development

StaffShare also encourages employees to think about the different career opportunities

available throughout the library. SkillShare especially allows staff to explore what different jobs entail because of its extended time allotment. Feedback from participants, such as, “The time spent on SkillShare was valuable to my career in the library,” confirmed that participants appreciated the opportunity for personal and professional development.

Challenges and best practices

Demonstrating value to participants

Employees are often reluctant to devote time to “extracurricular” activities, including sharing their work with colleagues. Some think others aren’t interested in hearing about their work, and others feel they don’t have enough to say. To overcome this challenge, organizers have encouraged sharers by telling them about past feedback, by describing stories of people showing interest in their particular department, and by connecting them with past sharers to hear about the program and how successful it was. The organizers have found that after participating in one event, the value of the program becomes apparent to staff and they are more likely to participate in other StaffShare programs.

Navigating siloed environments

Because the StaffShare program was conceived as a way to break down departmental barriers, organizers are challenged to ensure that departments are being highlighted evenly to safeguard against new barrier creation. To overcome this challenge, organizers must look broadly at organizational charts and campus maps in order to strategically feature a diverse range of people and spaces. Making an effort to showcase many people and spaces over the course of a year has meant that no one department or set of spaces is overexposed or left out. Organizing in this way has raised awareness around more traditionally behind-the-scenes people and spaces, something participants have valued highly.

Scheduling and timing

Because these kinds of events involve many people, logistics and, in particular, scheduling,

can be problematic. Some groups or individuals may express interest in participating in a particular StaffShare program and then become hard to reach or schedule for any number of reasons. A key contribution to StaffShare programming successes has been the persistence of the organizers in managing communications with event participants. Organizers act as the logistical guide for events, coordinating dates, locations, event timeline, and refreshments, while sharers need only provide the content they will share and attend the event or meet with their partner. By distributing the work between organizers

leagues and is therefore worth taking some time away from other duties to participate. Organizers can help leadership stay committed to the program by periodically assessing the program and updating leadership on the valuable interactions and staff development results the program creates.

Conclusion

StaffShare meets the challenge of a siloed library environment head-on. By encouraging engagement through increased communication and interaction across departments, StaffShare helps employees make the connection

Organizational Concerns

	SpeedShare	SkillShare	SpaceShare
Departmental Silos	Grey	Grey	Grey
New Organizational Structure	Grey	Diagonal	Diagonal
Geographic Distance	Diagonal	Diagonal	Grey
Limited Participant Time	Grey	White	Grey
Onboarding New Staff	Grey	Grey	Grey

This graph illustrates the strengths of each type of StaffShare program in addressing common organizational concerns.

between their job and others across the library. Any or all of these programs could be implemented at other libraries. A large library looking to create quick connections may employ SpeedShare, while a library with multiple buildings or campuses would benefit from SpaceShare. The

and sharers in this way, organizers have been able to motivate sharers to participate. Clear communication of responsibilities and persistent follow-up through meetings and emails has ultimately pushed plans into events.

spectrum of activities offered through the StaffShare program allows employees to engage in ways that allow each individual to gain the benefits of connecting across departments.

Buy-in from library leadership

Organizing and attending StaffShare programs takes work time, which could be a challenge for libraries, as staff are pulled away from daily tasks and projects. At the UM Library, the leadership has been vocally supportive of the StaffShare programs, and buy-in at this level has increased participation levels. Leadership support is critical in ensuring employees understand that attending a StaffShare event is a valuable way to learn more about themselves and their col-

Notes

1. Shelly Naylor, "Organizational Structure Can Enlarge Your Role," *Information Outlook* 16, no. 3 (2012): 13–15.
2. Rebecca C. Masson, Mark A. Royal, Tom G. Agnew, and Saul Fine, "Leveraging employee engagement: The practical implications," *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2008): 56–9.
3. William H. Macey and Benjamin Schneider, "The meaning of employee engagement." *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 1, (2008): 3–30. *zz*