Virtual staff orientation reduces time to bring new staff up-to-speed

Online learning tools make training available anytime, anywhere

WebJunction®

Situation

The Baltimore County Public Library (BCPL) Virtual Orientation is a tool for all new staff and volunteers of the organization. The virtual orientation contains podcasts, photos, text information and an interactive quiz to present the information to staff. Staff members may complete the 2 ½ hour program in one session or over several sessions during the first month of employment.

The virtual orientation was developed as a Web site for access by staff members at all work locations from the first day of employment, and to replace the existing face-to-face orientation program previously provided to new staff. Spread out over roughly 600 square miles, the Baltimore County Public Library System contains 16 branches, three bookmobiles and administrative offices. In 2009, BCPL brought on 68 new staff members, 60 part-time and 8 full-time. Time became the overriding factor in the need to orient staff members within a month of being hired.

Previously, new staff members were invited to a one-half day staff orientation at BCPL's administrative offices. Although they were held several times throughout the year, sometimes staff members were not receiving an orientation to the organization until they were on board for three months or more. In addition BCPL employs a diverse staff, many of whom work night and/or weekend schedules. As the orientation was held during the day, some staff members were not able to attend a full-day orientation. The final time factor constraining the in-person orientation was travel. While the orientation was located centrally in Baltimore County, staff needed time to travel to this orientation. The virtual orientation was designed to reach more staff and reach them more quickly.

"Supervisors are excited that their staff can be on-boarded so quickly and don't have to take time out of the office. They are especially excited that part-time staff—who wouldn't necessarily even get an orientation in the past—are now able to get the same orientation as full-time staff."

Program goals

The goal of this training program, as defined for learners, was to:

- Orient themselves to the ideas, values, expectations and roles within the organization. Included in the orientation are items, such as a list of common jargon, that are helpful in becoming acculturated to the organization.

The goal of this training program, as defined for the organization, was to:

- Orient new staff in a timely manner. From an organizational standpoint, on-boarding staff quickly allows them to be engaged and assimilated to the culture of the organization sooner. In addition, the organization has an interest in staff retention, staff productivity and staff efficiency, all of which can be affected by the impact of on-boarding strategies.

Implementation

The Human Resources Manager, serving as Project Sponsor for the virtual orientation, established the vision for the virtual training program. Then a cross-functional, seven-member team was convened to create the orientation. The team was comprised of members at various levels and roles within the organization. This group was responsible for determining the learning elements to be included in the

program. Much of the content of the orientation was taken directly from the existing half-day face-to-face orientation. Elements added to the initial content included: an introduction to each branch/department within the system; selected specific passages from the staff handbook, for example, communication practices, learning library principles; and a description of how to shine as a new staff member.

The virtual orientation was created as an asynchronous training. The pace of the orientation is self-directed and prescribed to be completed within one month of employment. A checklist is provided so that staff may track their progress. New staff members are encouraged to communicate with their supervisors regarding any questions they may have during the course of their orientation.

Supervisors are responsible for ensuring staff members are given sufficient work time during the first month of employment to view and complete the orientation. Staff direct their own progression through the orientation. A checklist for staff charts the areas of the orientation that they have completed. Staff members are encouraged to involve their supervisors in their orientation experience by keeping them informed of their progress and seeking them out when questions arise.

Successes

- The orientation is now available to all new hires on the first day of employment. Staff complete the orientation within one month of employment. Contrasted to the previous orientation model where staff may not have been able to attend a system-level orientation at all, the virtual orientation is a success.

- As of March 2010, 54 employees had completed the virtual orientation. Feedback has been abundant and positive, particularly from supervisors. Because they were informed of the process as the product was being created and the reasons for its creation, the supervisors supported the orientation from its beginning. The orientation is relatively simple to use, and supervisors were asked to review the product on their own before their staff started using it. Supervisors are excited that their staff can be on-boarded so quickly and don't have

to take time out of the office. They are especially excited that part-time staff—who wouldn't necessarily even get an orientation in the past—are now able to get the same orientation as full-time staff.

Advice for others using this training approach

- Keep the end goal in sight: What does the learner need to know immediately? Maintain the scope to achieve that goal.

- Creating this type of training is a process and requires an investment of time.

- Convening a beta-test group of staff members from various levels of the organization was invaluable. Allow the people who would be using the product to test it and provide feedback.

- Take full advantage of the resources in the organization, e.g., staff members, handbooks, manuals and operational guidelines.

- Don't recreate wheel—look at what others have created in the same vein.

- Keep stakeholders informed and involved in the project.

TOOLS USED

- BCPL intranet
- Podcasting tool

LINKS

Baltimore County Public Library http://www.bcpl.info/

C O N T A C T

Jean Mantegna, MBA/SPHR
Human Resources Director, Baltimore County Public Library
mantegna@bcpl.net

Melissa Hepler, MLS
Librarian III, Baltimore County Public Library, Towson Branch
mhepler@bcpl.net

Sandra Lombardo, MLS
Assistant Library Manager, Baltimore County Public Library, White Marsh Branch
slombard@bcpl.ne