

Impact of IT trainees in rural communities

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Abstract:

Using established State and Federal government traineeship schemes and special grant funding, a program of IT traineeships was developed to assist rural communities improve their skills to access online services. In the Get Connected @ Your Library project, young people from the community were offered traineeships in Certificate II or III in Information Technology and were placed in the local public library. Outcomes to be considered include the impact of predominantly male IT trainees in the library environment, the response from the younger demographic of library users and the development of informal mentoring relationships sponsored within the library context.

Background

The SA public library network consists of 140 libraries throughout the state. The IT network is managed by Public Library Services (PLS), formerly known as PLAIN Central Services, and its role is to ensure cost effective IT service delivery for all SA libraries which include:

- Free internet access
- Access to and support of P2 system
- Training and support.

The delivery of equitable IT based library services is complicated as it is in other states by population size and distribution. South Australia's population is comparatively small with a total of 1.5 million and it is also highly urbanised with 1.2 million concentrated in Adelaide. Several regional centres cater to very small communities scattered throughout the remainder of the state clustered around agricultural and mining activities. With this particular geography, providing standardised and adequate IT services to rural and remote public libraries has presented challenges.

There is an effective South Australian IT network in place with 75% of public library sites linked to ADSL or regionally equivalent services. The continuing upgrade of the IT infrastructure has been a primary focus for several years supporting free internet and database access. While IT infrastructure is critical, the strategic plan for SA public libraries *Towards 2010: Developing the Public Library Network of South Australia* flagged investment in people and their IT skill development as vital to ensuring continued equity and access.

Some IT skills development for staff within the SA network has been mandatory. Library personnel are required to have a working knowledge of the various functions of the P2 system which is the purpose built software package delivering online selection, acquisitions, supplier payments, Inter Library Loans and so on. Without skills in managing P2 functionality, participation in the network is not possible and with this level of incentive plus formalised and ongoing training, competency in the product has been achieved.

The primary barriers to the delivery of other IT based services in rural public libraries have been identified as staff resources, both in terms of number of hours available and in levels of expertise in information technologies. As these skills have not developed at a comparable pace with P2 competencies, the need for this next phase of professional and service development has been apparent.

The project

Several strategies were developed as part of the strategic planning process to target the issues of both staffing and IT skill development and one of the most wide ranging was the implementation of an IT traineeship program for public libraries.

Traineeships have been available via state and local governments for some years but public libraries had not been noticeably involved. Part of the role of the project manager for the Get Connected @ Your Library project was to assess and link established resource options and present them as a package to libraries. Marketing the concept and gaining user support was a crucial element during the set up phase with the emphasis on meeting the needs of extra staffing hours and IT skill requirements in libraries.

The use of trainees had the potential to provide an additional pair of hands and with trainees Studying for a certificate in Information Technology, there was an opportunity to address the skills development and IT service delivery issues. To promote the concept to councils and other decision makers, the traineeship program had the added benefit of linking with state and local concerns around youth unemployment. While trainees would only be employed for 12 months, they could provide a kick-start to IT skills development, deliver specific training to their own community and gain valuable workplace experience.

Funding

Financial viability was investigated in great detail as one of the barriers to participation in traineeship programs by rural public libraries. It was crucial that the project was financially feasible for our client libraries including those with discretionary budgets of under \$5,000. Based on the National Training Award 2000, a school leaver's wages during a traineeship would be a minimum of \$15,000 per annum, which is a significant sum in comparison with the resources available.

State government traineeship funding was available to compensate for rural disadvantage and some Federal funds were available as IT was identified as a preferred skills development area. By accessing all eligible incentives, a trainee's wages and employment costs could be minimised. Libraries, however, had not accessed such schemes in the past, so the employment of a trainee needed to be made as appealing as possible.

The Local Government Association (LGA) of SA was approached and provided grant funds of \$2,500 per trainee, on the understanding that all trainees would be trained in Unity, a web content management tool being rolled out to local councils. Libraries were required to contribute \$3,000 and these monies combined with the incentive payments from State and Federal government made the payment of trainee wages feasible.

The payment of incentive monies from State and Federal governments, however, was divided into commencement and completion payments, which did pose some cash flow issues towards the end of the traineeship. The grant from the LGA partially addressed this issue and the project was deemed feasible for a 12 month trial.

Choosing a project model

While some very successful initiatives involving trainees have been implemented in SA, most had resourcing that public libraries could not emulate. The high profile federally funded Networks For You project provided an initial project model for consideration albeit it was apparent that the public library version would have to be adapted to match our more modest resources.

In the Networks For You program, the State Government was the employer with a variety of organisations acting as hosts for the trainees for variable periods of time. It had strong regional as well as centralised structures with project managers, senior project officers and regional co-ordinators.

Initially, patterning the public libraries traineeships on this model looked promising because of its clear structure and demonstrable success. However as we investigated further, several issues arose which suggested another way would have to be found.

Following consultation with all participants and drawing on the collaborative nature of the network, a model was adopted that made the local council or school the employer, with the libraries taking on the day to day supervision role. The Libraries Board granted an additional \$2,000 to councils and schools per trainee to cover any additional overheads they might have to bear and the role for PLS was redefined to focus on co-ordination, reporting, marketing, communication and liaison rather than as the employer.

What did our partners want to achieve?

Working in collaborative models requires a clear understanding of what the partners wish to achieve and involves making realistic choices about what can be delivered. Libraries wanted IT skills and resources for their staff and communities, State Government required IT skills development within communities to facilitate online service delivery and the LGA supported all of the above but was focused specifically on the development of Unity skills. On examination, these aims were mutually compatible and it was agreed that the partnership approach could provide complementary outcomes.

A formal Expression of Interest was sent to all regional and rural libraries, councils and schools with 18 indicating their willingness to participate. For a first call, this number was surprisingly high especially considering that the model had changed and individual councils and schools had been asked to take a more proactive role. One library manager observed "...if the resource wasn't so badly needed we wouldn't have felt confident to continue." This was the first indication that many libraries were prepared to go to considerable trouble to address the IT issues they saw developing in their services, and what was required was leadership and support to get practical outcomes.

Finding our trainees

To this point we had secured a sound financial framework, a workable project model and ascertained that there was sufficient interest in councils and schools to move the project forward. We had forged strong links with our key government employment agency, the Government Youth Traineeship Program Unit and the broad aims of the project had been articulated. All that was needed now was the trainees.

This part of the process was more time consuming and difficult than had been anticipated. Sourcing of potential trainees is done centrally via the State Government Youth Traineeship Unit, which compiles a database of applicants to be presented to employers. Traineeships have specific criteria for eligibility including an age range between 17-24 years.

Several sites such as Roxby Downs in the far north had very few eligible young people due to the range of competing employment opportunities within their community. Others had a very small pool of applicants as their schools had limited Year 11 and Year 12 students with most going to Adelaide to complete their secondary education.

There were administrative issues which added a degree of complexity to the recruitment process. One site received resumes for 5 applicants only to find that none were currently available for a traineeship. Some selection processes were carried out but were unable to source a candidate that matched the organisation's needs.

To address the issue of finding quality candidates we supplemented the advertising campaign run by State Government with specific advertisements in local papers for each community. In several instances this proved successful but in a couple of cases, no suitable candidate was found.

We had anticipated 15-20 trainees in the first intake and actually recruited 12 by the end of the process. The table below summarises the regions that were canvassed and the results of the recruitment process.

Regions	Formal EOI	Trainees sourced	Trainees not sourced
Far North	Leigh Creek Pt Augusta Orroroo Roxby Downs Whyalla	Leigh Creek Pt Augusta Whyalla.	Orroroo Roxby Downs
Eyre Peninsula	Cummins	Cummins	
Yorke Peninsula	Pt Pirie Kadina Minlaton Maitland	Pt Pirie Kadina	Minlaton Maitland
Fleurieu Peninsula	Yankalilla Adelaide Hills	Adelaide Hills	Yankalilla
Near city	Barossa, Clare	Barossa, Clare	
Riverland	Nil	NA	
SE	Bordertown Mt Gambier Kingston Millicent	Bordertown, Kingston, Mt Gambier	Millicent

The most successful recruitment was done by the libraries themselves using their school and community connections to find suitable young people. One entrepreneurial library negotiated a trainee from their regional development board; another used the local computer shop to source a suitable young person while others tapped into their secondary schools and informally promoted the program.

Recruitment was a lengthy enterprise requiring flexibility and persistence. Libraries chose their own trainee through locally run selection processes and this fostered a strong commitment to the trainee's success by libraries. It did not make for a neat process but it did mean that libraries had an investment in the success of their trainee from the outset.

Training the trainees

Eligibility for incentives under State and Federal schemes require that the trainees undertake formal and nationally accredited training by a Registered Training Organisation. PLS chose TAFE as it had an established regional presence across the State and offered the relevant qualification. To assist us, TAFE provided a project co-ordinator whose role was to track the

progress of the group within the TAFE system and to provide a single contact point. This approach was helpful though the issue of delivering distance education to the more remote sites had its challenges.

Unlike the Networks For You project where training was delivered in blocks and in a single group, our trainees started at different times as the selection process dictated. They then had to be integrated into an established training program over a period of months. This was not always feasible and both TAFE and the trainees experienced some frustrations. Both the libraries and TAFE were willing to use this first experience to inform decisions for the 2006 group and the second intake of trainees benefited from the lessons learned in 2005.

Project review and preliminary findings

Part of the project review process involved ongoing communication and feedback from the participant libraries. This took the form of written, formal monthly reports on key outcomes and a description of the activities undertaken by the trainee during the reporting period. Other methods were informal and involved telephone and email conversations with library managers, staff and the trainees. Additionally, some site visits occurred as time and resources permitted. The information provided by libraries and trainees informs the following discussion.

Male / female trainees

The project recruited a high ratio of male (9) to female (3) trainees. Gender ratios of staff in public libraries in SA are overwhelming female and like other occupational groupings are aging. This reversal of an established trend was worth investigating in terms of the impact, if any, this had on both library staff and library customers.

PLS was interested in finding out if the male IT trainees conformed to the stereotypical notion of being “IT nerds” or if they had brought a range of skills, especially communication skills, to their libraries. When surveying library managers, most of the male trainees were rated as having very good to excellent communication skills. Library managers had chosen their trainees with a keen eye to their people skills. Some managers had rejected more technically competent applicants if they did not score well in the communication area during interview.

Managers made it clear that communication and interpersonal skills were non-negotiable in their libraries and while conceding that in a larger service these skills may not be as critical for a technical person who does not interact a lot with the public, they uniformly stated that in their small services, these skills were essential. The choice of predominantly male trainees seemed to be the product of the larger number of males who applied for the traineeship in IT rather than a proactive stance towards equal opportunity or gender balance.

The female trainees also rated very highly on their communication and interpersonal skills, which confirms the importance that libraries place on these attributes. As the project continued, however, it was apparent that the selection for communication skills had sometimes resulted in trainees with less experience or aptitude with IT. Just under a half of the trainees renegotiated their training contract to do a Certificate II qualification rather than Certificate III as they found the latter too demanding.

Having young people working in the library however, has had unexpected spin offs for library services. A stable team can be energised by a younger person coming into the mix particularly when their contribution complements areas where the library has previously struggled e.g. using databases and the internet. The impact of trainees would seem to be because of their youth and the perspective this brings to a group, rather than because of their gender.

IT Training to the community

IT training and support to community members has been delivered in all the library services. In some cases, the IT trainee began one on one training within a month or so of starting work and in other cases considerable support has been needed to ensure the trainee had sufficient technical and personal confidence to take on this role. All sites had delivered at least 30 hours of community training in the first 8 months of the project.

Some libraries indicated a reluctance to embrace community training programs in earnest as it might be seen as raising service expectations which cannot be sustained over the longer term. However, the option of having a series of IT trainees has been considered by several sites which have seen the benefits of community training programs in targeting new customer groups.

One of the issues raised by sites is the desire to get a trainee as good as the one they currently have. Customer satisfaction with the training delivered has been high and this is in no small measure due to the individual trainee. It reinforces the need to get a sound match between the trainee and the service and as this is largely dependent on who is available and the selection process itself.

Unity training

All trainees received Unity training either in a large group or in smaller groups at their worksites. This training was sponsored and delivered by LGA trainers who regularly present to council staff on this web design and content management tool. Local government in SA is committed to a state wide rollout of the product to individual councils to promote a consistent approach to managing local websites and the information and online services they access.

Upon completing Unity training, several trainees were given opportunities to work on their council's websites to update information and also to create a stronger library presence. Two libraries had no web presence until their IT trainees designed and published a site with follow up training to permanent staff on how to maintain the information.

The links between libraries and councils were strengthened via a common interest in the Unity product and by having a skilled resource that could be accessed by both. Some libraries had found that the physical location of council had discouraged them from maintaining links with their council and that this was an opportunity to revitalise the connection. One trainee became the backup person for information management on the council website while the permanent employee was on leave.

Role of PLS

Once the fundamental elements of the project were in place and the trainees appointed, the project manager role became more diversified. Regular reporting, problem solving and overseeing the progress of incentive payments and course work were fundamental. A marketing strategy was developed and implemented to promote the project to potential participants and key decision makers.

While all the elements for a successful initiative were in place within State and Federal spheres, it was essential to designate someone to bring these elements together in a cohesive whole and present the program in a way that would be enticing and practical for libraries. Having a project manager meant that the first point of contact for libraries was clearly defined regardless of the issue. Navigating the various units within government was undertaken by the project manager and this proved effective rather than having sites independently attempt the same process.

Influencing and promoting the project were key elements of the project management role particularly in order to secure a second year of traineeships. The project manager was responsible for the liaison component of the program with the various government agencies, funding bodies, libraries and stakeholders. Without these leadership and co-ordination functions, the implementation of the program would not have been possible.

Role of Library Manager

Complementing the project management function was the role played by library managers. Trainees reported that this person was crucial in their traineeship experience both in providing appropriate workplace goals and supervision and also in support and mentoring during the course of the year.

Many trainees had limited or no experience of workplaces. Library Managers played a crucial role in assisting trainees to develop appropriate workplace behaviours and to adapt to busy working conditions which required a significant degree of personal initiative and responsibility. Developing the trainee's skills and confidence so that they could contribute effectively was a key role for managers who reported that the initial effort was well rewarded with later performance.

Case studies

Leigh Creek The community

Located 567 km north of Adelaide, Leigh Creek is a mining company town on the edge of the desert. NRG Flinders mines coal at an open cut site 22 kilometres north of the town. The town has a population of 1,600 and is a modern township built to house the mine workers, their families and supporting service staff.

With few employment opportunities other than the mine, many students do not see their future within the town. A substantial proportion of students re-locate to Adelaide to complete Yr 11 and Yr 12 so in terms of sourcing young people for such initiatives as the IT traineeship project, the pool of eligible young people is relatively small.

There were no young people registered with the Government Youth Traineeship Program when the public libraries project commenced; however, a trainee was found by the library manager, who used her school and community connections to identify a suitable young person and persuade them to give the program a go.

The public library is co-located with the school of approximately 245 students, which means regular demand from students and teachers as well as community members for IT support and assistance along with more traditional library services.

Issues

- Library IT software and environment in need of assessment and standardisation
- Lack of consistent IT expertise within the library to deliver IT based services
- IT documentation either out of date or non existent
- High use IT environment with few resources for timely problem solving
- Hardware and software purchases meant increased demands for items such as digital cameras but few staff able to service or trouble shoot the equipment
- Transient customers asking for library services that could not be delivered eg assistance with internet banking.

Outcomes

- IT environment streamlined with defunct software and documents removed.
- Library staff using IT trainee to support access to new equipment, resolve customers' application issues and to manage the software on library PCs
- Desktop support available during library opening hours which has meant a more stable and usable environment for customers
- Customers receiving one on one assistance with digital equipment and informal tuition in accessing electronic services
- IT skills transfer from the IT trainee to library staff has not been particularly evident
- Informal mentoring of the IT trainee by a community member to address the issues associated with distance education.

Cummins

The community

Cummins is a typical small Eyre Peninsula wheat belt town located 644 km west of Adelaide. The town itself has 800 residents and it services a community of approximately 4,000 residents. The public library is similar to Leigh Creek in that it is a joint use library co-located with the school, which teaches from kindergarten to Year12 with 400 students in all.

Issues

- Younger customers not using library IT services particularly outside of school hours
- Library website outdated and not functioning particularly well as a promotional tool
- IT skill set and confidence within the library needed strengthening
- Community training in IT not had a strong uptake in 2004

Outcomes

- Marked increase in library visits by 10-15 year olds both for IT related services and for traditional services.
- IT training to community has been successful with 56 hours of formal training delivered to 30 patrons. Informal assistance and training has also increased dramatically with high repeat custom.
- Library information reviewed with links to both school and council websites
- Trainee has run inhouse training sessions on website maintenance with library staff.

The Cummins trainee has been particularly successful in integrating with the library, school, council and the community, which has meant a very positive climate for another trainee in 2006.

Pt Augusta The Community

Located 300 kilometres north of Adelaide, with a population of approximately 14,000, Pt Augusta is part of the Iron Triangle group of towns, traditionally associated with ship building and mining of iron ore. The town is experiencing population decline as part of a regional trend but has had some economic cushioning with the opening of the Darwin-Adelaide railway. It has a comparatively high indigenous community and combines an urban centre set in semi arid countryside.

Issues

- Council had ambitious program for upgrading its IT infrastructure in 2005 which demanded additional IT resources
- Library wanted to offer more IT services to the community particularly training and saw an opportunity to work with council.

Outcomes

- Library's IT environment has been assessed, upgraded and is operating more efficiently
- Individual customers have received one on one assistance
- Trainees have developed IT based promotional tools for the library
- Links with council have been strengthened with trainees being mentored by council IT staff

Informing future initiatives

The first year of the IT traineeship program provided a range of insights many of which were used to inform the second year's program.

One of the most significant issues is that each council / community / library is different as are the trainees so there is little merit in the "one size fits all" model. The use of a generic framework for funding, project management and marketing, while necessary and appropriate, does not detract from the notion that each set of circumstances will produce slightly different outcomes. Setting priorities for outcomes is driven by communities and the libraries within them. The challenge is to integrate key stakeholder requirements into this varied environment while encouraging site - specific approaches.

Getting the match and balance right for each site rests firmly with the trainee selection process, and devolving this to the libraries has proved a positive move. Providing support to libraries to select only when they are confident that a strong match has been made is vital, as is assuring them that it is appropriate not to employ a trainee if there are doubts about suitability. In small and isolated libraries, the personnel issue cannot be underestimated.

A review of all the processes undertaken during the project has resulted in a timelier project management structure particularly now that a workable model has been trialed successfully. With experience, more realistic timeframes have been developed and clearer guidance given to participant libraries.

Change takes time, and with this project it is apparent that to get the sustainable outcomes required across the network will require more than one project's success. There is considerable virtue in starting with small steps and taking the longer view to achieve strategic objectives on a project by project basis. All projects devoted to a sustainable IT skill set in public libraries will reference each other but they must each target specific barriers and address fundamental issues such as resourcing.

Several participant libraries have recognised the cumulative effect of having trainees in their libraries and have expressed interest in another trainee. Several of the trainees in this second year will be self funded by libraries and will not rely on external grant funding.

Support from key-decision makers is essential, particularly the council CEO and school principal. These people make the difference between a traineeship being initially considered and funded and with their support, the various issues encountered tend to be resolved in a timely way. In the second year, the project will have a stronger focus on engaging these decision-makers through both formal and informal communication channels.

Reporting has not been as regular for all sites as PLS would have anticipated, so this is an element that has been strengthened in the second year. To support improved reporting processes, the initial site visit will highlight the importance of accurate and consistent information about the project's progress. Simplifying the formal reporting forms has been completed and use of the forms will be supplemented with additional informal contact for the 2006 trainee intake. There is a fine balance between being supportive in delivering reporting outcomes and being perceived as prescriptive so the regularity and kind of contact will be negotiated with individual library managers.

Some of the most valuable outcomes are difficult to measure because getting a baseline is difficult. PLS anticipated that the project would improve the visibility of libraries within their councils and in some cases this has happened via the use of Unity. However, there is still work to be done in this area and consultation with the libraries will be a key factor in developing a workable strategy for each site.

Trainees reported that the traineeship had been valuable and provided them with useful skills and experience. The small remuneration for their traineeship was an issue though this was counterbalanced by the achievement of a qualification and the positive experiences of the workplace. The dissatisfaction with the pay regime is not an issue we intend to address except to continue to flag it as early in the selection process as possible to ensure trainee expectations are realistic.

Implementing a more formalised transition process is an element that will be further explored in 2006. Induction to the workplace has worked very well but as trainees near completion of their 12 month term there are strategies to be implemented, particularly for those trainees without a clear direction in terms of their future.

Initially, we underestimated the administrative burden associated with the project, and this has been addressed for the second year with additional project resources allocated. The project management role is crucial in initiating and delivering outcomes and without this dedicated resource the project would not be feasible.

The project has produced many of the outcomes we anticipated as well as some we had not. The most significant outcome is that it has provided regional libraries with the chance to explore opportunities presented by IT within a public library environment and to gain valuable information about their community's needs in this area. Using a continuous improvement model, the program has become more streamlined and delivered IT outcomes to some of South Australia's most remote locations.