

Frontline case study

This study is for anyone interested in skills innovation at all levels of responsibility from directors and trustees to managers, workers and trainers.

Whether you are interested from the direct perspective of the library sector itself or are providing in work based e-learning in other sectors, the Case Study contains an array of transferable messages, good practice, processes and hints and tip.

Executive summary

Frontline is an online learning programme that has been created to address the changing face of libraries and the way that staff engage with customers. It addresses the behaviour changes at the heart of the library policy of Reader Development. Frontline aims to provide frontline Library staff with the skills to shift the focus from *processes* such as issues, returns, shelving and stock, directly to *servicing the customer*, largely the adult market, to enhance their reading for pleasure

This online blended learning programme was created by "Opening the Book", who have extensive experience of designing traditional face-to-face reader development training courses. It is funded by The Arts Council Literature Department who see public libraries as the natural infrastructure through which readers can encounter new work.

Given the profile of the programme, e-skills UK work-based e-learning team was asked to independently research the effectiveness of the rollout. This case study identifies what worked well and what did not, and to draw out lessons that might be useful for other organisations.

We investigated the model in 22 different local authorities (in depth interviews in 7), gathering feedback from Heads of Service and line managers as well as 64 Frontline trainees, 17 supervisors and 7 co-ordinators to understand the potential this model has for engaging trainees and changing behaviour

1.1 What is new about Frontline? How does it work?

Divided into 7 modules the course, on the surface, appears like many other well designed e-learning programmes. It is clearly aligned to the core business drivers within the library. The new activities and behaviours had been carefully analysed by Opening the Book and the modules designed to introduce the changes. The modules use traditional e-learning techniques – useful and fun interactive exercises supplemented by revision tests to confirm understanding. Innovation however is shown throughout in the way that work based tasks have been designed eg

- > Tasks that encouraged the use of the internet to build understanding about resources available in the job
- > Practical activities are presented to be completed in their own libraries.
- > Online learning logs were used to record their task activities and to reflect on impact with their supervisor

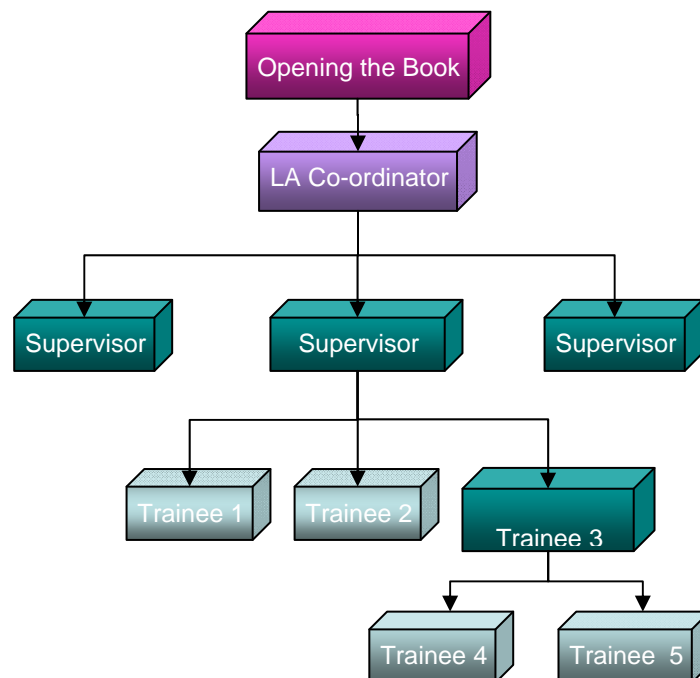
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Whilst the content was clearly designed to blend a number of technologies, tasks and techniques, it was evident that trainees would need to be encouraged and supported through the programme – a challenge for many authorities without designated training staff. Following a detailed pilot stage, a 'cascade model' of trainee support has become integral to the delivery of Frontline.

Key features of the cascade model include:

- > Trainees are supported throughout their learning experience by a supervisor who reviews their work, offers suggestions and support and encourages the trainee in the learning process.
- > Trainees who complete the course can then move on to supervising others. Completing the course allows each supervisor to understand the issues of changing behaviour on a local level and can tailor advice accordingly.
- > The Coordinator is the first person in an Authority to take the course, effective coaching is modelled by Opening the Book who act as their supervisor as they go through the programme.
- > Co-ordinators in turn then support a range of supervisors through the programme who go on to support frontline trainees (Figure 1).
- > The Frontline site supports the cascade process – simplifying sign off and supporting Supervisors with access to resources and each other.

Figure 1 The Frontline cascade model



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1.2 Case study findings

Overall trainee reaction to the programme was very positive

- > 87% of the trainees felt that completing the work-based activity was selected as both helpful and enjoyable.
- > Trainees found the combination of completing a work based activity, recording what they did and interacting with their supervisors were the 3 most significant helps in staying with and completing the course.
- > The study also reflects the high agreement in trainees that e-learning was better than both books and classrooms for this particular context.

Supervisors, who are fitting the programme into their day to day work schedules appreciated the time saving elements of the online administration and sign off process. They also welcomed the opportunity for not only encouraging reader development in their authority but also the personal development that the role provided.

Impact of e-learning at work

It is early days yet but initial findings were particularly encouraging on the impact of reader development. Trainees firmly believed Frontline would change the way that their library delivered services to their users. They were engaging with a wider range of users and were more confident in promoting books that they had not read as a result of the programme.

With a high level of work based activity, it was impossible to isolate learning from work – involvement of line management & colleagues all had an impact on the effectiveness. Managers on the whole reported that the implementation was painless and they also identified noticeable improvements on stock displays with more book promotions improved visual impact to readers coming into the library although they also felt that it is too early for any judgements to be made about other benefits. The anecdotal evidence for changed practice was considerable & is reported throughout the study.

Conditions for success

A number of conditions for success were identified

- > Work relevance – the tasks were completely oriented to the day to day job of the staff.
- > Flexibility of delivery for the trainee – location, time

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- > Previous ICT knowledge & experience existed following IT user skill training

Some of the barriers to learning included

- > Time allocation
- > Technical experience of early adopters

Benchmarking with other sectors

This study compared Frontline with established good practice for work based e-learning and identified a number of strengths and opportunities to build upon those strengths:

Frontline strengths

- > Rigorous analysis & alignment to business need strategy and day to day tasks
- > Inclusion of all stakeholder feedback in pilot and rollout stage
- > Design of content – richness of media blends
- > Implementation & learner motivation– relevance, local learner support,
- > Engagement of business support – learner not alone

Recommendations for future of Frontline within the Library sector

- > Review some aspects of content design (improved trainee navigation)
- > Support increased management awareness and engagement
- > Frontline is a proven catalyst for improved career development well being and raising of career aspiration. We recommend steps are taken to capture this enthusiasm and perpetuate the momentum effectively.
- > Inclusion with CPD – induction process and potential qualification for non professional library staff
- > Consider options for scalability – ensuring quality is maintained, appropriate use of infrastructure for other programmes etc it is important not to overload the system without testing.

Recommendations beyond the library sector

The study provided a unique opportunity to get under the skin of implementing a national blended learning programme to engage remote often part time workers in delivering core business changes.

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For other **employers** (in both the private and public sector) lessons learned include:

- > Ensure strong alignment & integration with work activities, Frontline's success was partly due to the 'business support' it provided through the tasks.
- > Learners were supported in their tasks but should not be constrained by the system
- > A model for the engagement of coaches within business in a structured format – cascading good practice (both in the tasks that need to be performed and in how they are learned.
- > Use of learning logs which encouraged completion, motivation, evaluation & impact
- > Integration of investigate & explore processes (use of resources, web etc) as part of formal learning provision to encourage ongoing informal learning.

For **FE /Adult learning providers**, Frontline also provided a number of useful lessons for those implementing e-learning within formal vocational learning. In addition to the lessons above the study highlights:

- > The need to clearly understand the business need of the sector and day to day activities expected but to build in flexibility for 'local' adoption.
- > The opportunity that the cascade model might offer to link FE tutors with business managers
- > Use e-learning to encourage interest in learning & development

Frontline is not perfect, the study identified where improvements could be made with both implementation and design, but the programme provided a unique blend of peer to peer input, supervisor support and work based activity that is delivering motivated learners and behaviour change that will have a fundamental impact on the libraries of the future.

