

Improving customer service via online learning

Lessons from the library sector!

(First published in e-learning age magazine July 06).

In the past, dusty, quiet and uninviting might be words used describe the public's views of libraries (& perhaps those that work in them!). But times are changing and so are libraries. Like most government (and commercial) organisations libraries are faced with changing customer expectations of service and what customers "buy" , the need to respond to the role of technology and the internet , greater accountability- meeting targets and responding to demanding budget prioritizations and pressures of value and cost.

And let's not forget the library's core business – books & placing the reader at the heart of their service! Reader Development - encouraging readers to try out new book choices and to increase reader's enjoyment of reading - is a key political driver to the new face of the local library.

Challenges

Going back to basics in the 21st century means a dramatically change in job role. Those traditionally comfortable behind the check in desks are now being asked to walk the floor, talk to customers and be comfortable with marketing and promotion, A fundamental change in behavior is required of those on the frontline of library work, staff who are often working part time in remote branches.

However rolling out a nation wide skills programme to encourage change is compounded by the fact that no local training staff is available across local authorities. There was an obvious need to come up with something different that will engage both staff and those supporting the staff on a day to day basis.

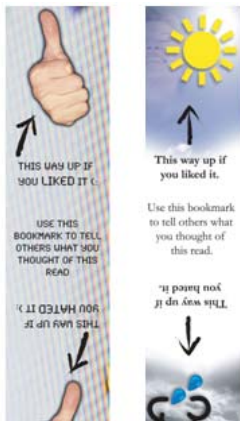
Frontline was created to address these challenges and sits at the heart of library policy of reader development. This online learning programme was created by Opening the Book, who has extensive experience of designing traditional face-to-face reader development training courses & was funded by The Arts Council Literature Department who see public libraries as the natural infrastructure through which readers can encounter new work.

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

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 behaviors had been carefully analysed by Opening the Book and the modules designed to introduce the changes. The modules use traditional e-learning techniques – useful & 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 throughout the programme to encourage new behaviors in the learners that will be critical in their jobs to further reader development. These tasks ranged from encouraging the use of the internet to build confidence in new books (the trainees had tasks linked to reading sites to broaden their range of knowledge of book choices & were asked to use discussion boards to share & comment on the reading preferences with others on the course) through to practical activities to be completed in their own libraries.

The site provides a range of downloadable tools for trainees to use within the library such as these bookmarks to encourage readers to try something new



The trainees were asked to keep their own online learning logs in the programme to record their task activities. In one task they had to talk to 5 readers in the library about the kind of books they liked, in another, they had to experiment with the techniques they had learned in the course on book display and comment on the impact that it had. All of the tasks were carefully designed to make sure that the trainee applied the new behaviors in their job and reflect on the impact. The programme also provided tools for the trainees to adapt for use in their own libraries.

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.

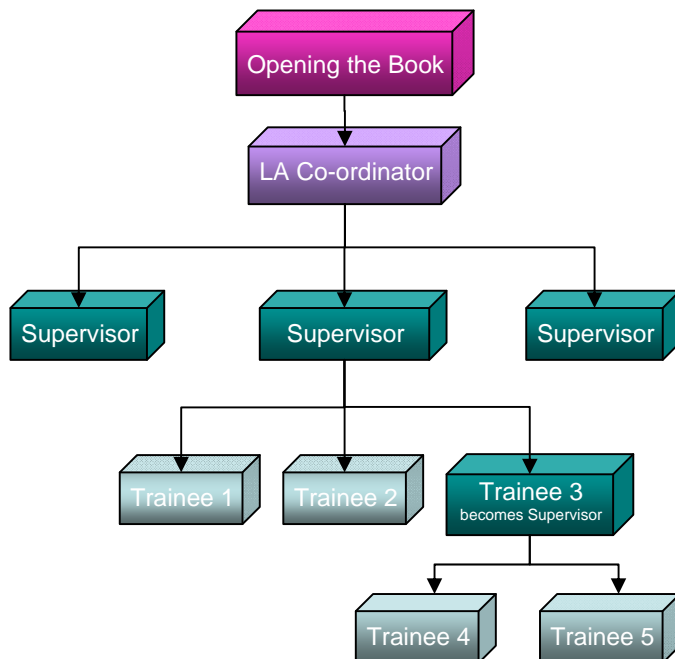
Opening the Book piloted a range of support processes during the initial stages of course development and developed a 'cascade model' of trainee support which has become integral to the delivery of Frontline.

Learner support

Trainees are supported throughout their learning experience by a supervisor who reviews their work (via the online learning log), offers suggestions and support and encourages the trainee in the learning process. Trainees who complete the course can then move on to supervising others.

The first person in an Authority to take the course is initially supervised online by Opening the Book and becomes designated as the Coordinator. Regardless of job role in the library, the co-coordinator goes through the complete programme as a trainee. In turn they then support a range of supervisors through the programme who go on to support frontline trainees. This top down cascade process models the behavior needed from the supervisors to ensure that the Frontline programme is applied effectively to encourage behavior change. It also ensures that those supervising trainees understand first hand the practical issues that trainees will have in encouraging reader development and can tailor activities to their specific authority.

Building a scalable infrastructure of support is a critical component in the design of Frontline. The Frontline site includes simple screens for signing off each trainee, specific self-help and support for Supervisors that encourage those without previous training or managerial experience to take on the role. An experience bank on the site allows supervisors to share their own tools and activities across all of the participating authorities. This has enabled a swift rollout of the course through a cascading process, whilst simultaneously maintaining the quality of learning. – see figure 1 below

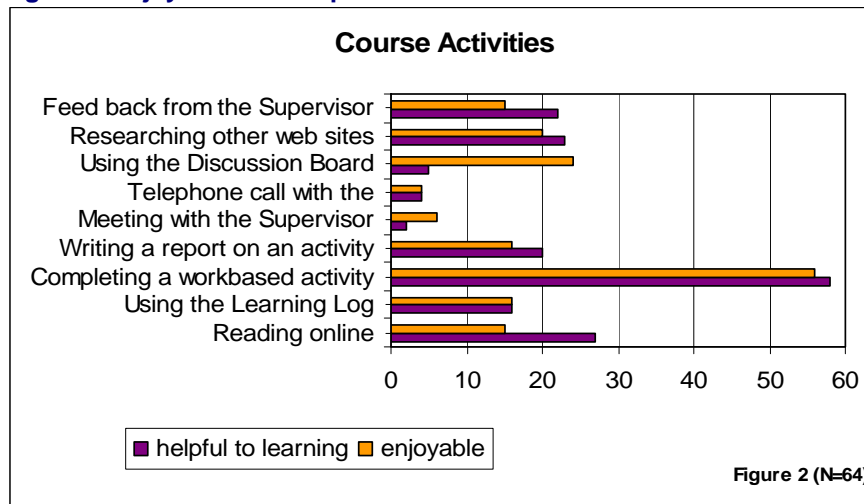


So has it worked?

Given the profile of the programme, e-skills UK work based e-learning team was asked to independently research the effectiveness of the rollout, to identify what worked well and what did not, and to draw out lessons that might be useful for other organisations.¹ We investigated the model in 7 different local authorities, gathering feedback from Heads of Service & line managers as well as the Frontline trainees, supervisors and co-coordinators to understand the potential this model has for engaging trainees and changing behavior.

Trainees were invited to comment on the course design by selecting 3 activities from a list of 9 they found most helpful for learning or enjoyed most.

Figure 2 Enjoyable and helpful course activities¹



Completing the work-based activity was selected as both helpful and enjoyable by over 87% of the trainees. 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 & 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.

"I like the learning-by-doing which trainees have to get on with It differentiates the course positively from the standard, fairly routine, half and one day classroom workshops most of them are used to" – **Supervisor comment**

Changing behaviour on the library floor

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.

Line managers 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 judgments to be made about other benefits. The anecdotal evidence for changed practice was considerable:

The disappearing returns trolley

One learner noted the following significant success in her learning log.

"We never had a returns trolley visible to the public. We are a busy City library but the vast number of books returned daily was put on it and the trolley shoved away in a room. As a result of turning the returns trolley into a promotional activity, where each day it was placed, with some eye catching incentives, directly in the eye line of customers coming into the library, we were amazed at how the books were immediately snatched off by new readers and taken out again! At the end of each day the returns trolley was empty – this is now a permanent feature of the library and branch libraries are following suit"

Can libraries teach us anything? - Lessons from Frontline

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. Some of the lessons learned are summarized in table 2.

Cascade model of learning	The support infrastructure and process behind this model could have useful implications for those working with line managers to coach and mentor learners in other job related contexts
Bridging the gap between learning and work	The design of the work based tasks within Frontline encouraged immediate application of the learning within the job. The learning log encouraged reflection and facilitated communication with supervisors.
Alignment of learning to	The programme was designed to meet a core

business process	business need within the sector which was high on the agenda of all senior management and policy makers which helped with buy in throughout.
Learner engagement and relevance	The success of the programme depended on the up front analysis and suitability of the tasks to the individuals day to day jobs.

The full case study looks in more detail at the conditions for success behind the programme, the limitations and opportunities for the cascade model of support & full feedback (the good and not so good) & recommendations for both development of Frontline and application beyond the library sector. 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 behavior change that will have a fundamental impact on the libraries of the future.

Laura Overton
Skills for Business Network e-Learning Champion
July 06
