
BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

Designing an alternative career ladder for library assistants

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INTRODUCTION

Library assistants at the Eskind Biomedical Library (EBL), like those at many academic health sciences center libraries, historically have been tied to the job classification structure and career path adopted by the main university library system. However, in order to broaden responsibilities, adequately reflect expanded status, and develop a competitive compensation system, the Eskind Library has restructured the library assistant career ladder. This restructuring has occurred concurrently with the implementation of EBL's library assistant training program [1]. The training program is designed to equip participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in cross-functional work teams. Cross-functional work teams have been implemented in many environments, including libraries [2-7]. The benefits of incorporating this team approach have been well documented. However, the existing university library system classification structure and career path for library assistants does not allow for recognition and compensation reflective of the additional knowledge and skills required for team participation. To rectify this, library assistants and management have worked together to design a new career pathway and pay structure for individuals participating in training based on defined stages of achievement, self-directed participation in library-wide projects, and demonstrated commitment to lifelong learning.

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BACKGROUND

Library leadership recognized early on that Eskind's training program, implemented in 1996, yielded clear and tangible benefits to the institution only if it was embraced by the employees who participated. Therefore, library management was faced with the challenge of enticing staff to devote extra time and effort to training while still performing their assigned jobs with precision and quality. The best incentive for professional development must be career growth. At the time of the decision to implement a staff training program, the EBL's library assistant job family was retitled health information analyst (HIA). Retitling was accomplished after a discussion with representatives from the EBL, the main university library system, and the human resources department. The meeting focused on the lack of an existing mechanism to expand library assistant skill portfolios and an incentive system to recognize enhanced skill sets. EBL administration successfully argued that responsibilities associated with the proposed HIA career ladder were significantly different than those of the existing library assistant category. The job family was retitled in order to afford it more managerial flexibility than the main university structure. However, no clear growth pattern had yet been defined. The obvious relationship between the need for HIA training and the necessity for a career growth structure resulted in a linkage between the library assistant training program and the emerging career ladder.

PROMOTION PATHWAYS PLAN

A Promotion Pathways Team, consisting of individuals from all levels of library staff, was formed to develop a career path for health information analysts. This team's mission included redefining promotion pathways for the HIA job families that, in turn, would leverage the training and expertise of the staff. The pathways developed required each staff member to achieve certain career milestones in order to be eligible for promotion (Appendix). Promotion markers for staff members included expertise within their assigned job, development of expertise in other areas not directly affiliated with their position, and participation in additional responsibilities and special projects. The former two items related directly to, and were made possible by, the training program.

Although similar in some ways to skill-based compensation or pay-for-knowledge systems, HIA promotion pathways are more of a hybrid. While traditional pay structures are based on jobs, skill-based pay is premised on the notion that individuals who know more are more valuable and are worth more [8]. In its

purest form, a skill-based compensation system rewards employees on the basis of the inventory of skills or knowledge areas they have acquired rather than for specific jobs performed [9]. With HIA promotion pathways, compensation gradations are tied to a more traditional labor relations structure. Job classifications are directly linked to responsibilities and duties performed, and compensation is negotiated within the existing university-wide human resources system. However, advancing through the pathways requires the acquisition of additional skills and familiarity with supplementary knowledge areas. This hybrid approach affords the benefits of skill-based compensation systems (e.g., workforce flexibility and more knowledgeable staff) but avoids potential disadvantages (e.g., high operating expense and employees reaching the maximum earnings level after a relatively short period of time).

All base-level HIA staff members (HIA I) must complete in-depth training modules associated with their own job, but they must also complete "familiarization" modules for all other areas of the library to be eligible for promotion to the second level of the job family (HIA II). In order to progress to the third level of the job family (HIA III), staff members must complete in-depth modules for other jobs outside their own area of responsibility. Promotion to the highest rank in the HIA job family, health information specialist, builds on the expertise gained in the previous three levels and requires completion of an internship program designed for post-master's of library science degree librarians as well as assuming a mentoring role within the library. The selection of individual modules and training emphasis is based on the employee's interest, balanced with the skill sets and knowledge areas considered necessary within the library. Each step of the promotion pathway is subject to review by appropriate groups or individuals (Figure 1).

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

A key component of any career ladder is performance appraisal. Performance appraisal serves to establish and maintain satisfactory achievement levels, identify areas of needed or potential growth, provide a review mechanism for revising position descriptions, and assist with salary administration and promotion [10]. "Unfortunately, performance appraisal systems are frequently viewed only as a managerial tool to dispense rewards or inflict punishment by determining who is doing outstanding work and who is performing poorly" [11]. In order to avoid this pitfall, the Es-kind Library has adopted a portfolio evaluation mechanism for its health information analyst job family, consisting of documentation reflective of the employee's accomplishments as well as management's expectations.

Portfolio evaluation, defined in terms of selective collections of a person's work, has become an acceptable method of assessing performance in education. Within the past fifteen years, use of the portfolio as an evaluation tool in the education arena has progressed from innovation to convention [12]. In addition to the education field, portfolio assessment has been introduced in the biomedical sciences curricula as an alternative to reflect better students' abilities and accomplishments [13-16]. Portfolio assessment has been recognized both for the perceived benefit derived from the process of creating the portfolio and the reflective nature of the end product. In addition to providing a broader overall impression of student capabilities than other methods, portfolio assessment forces the individual assembling the collection of documents to reflect upon his or her goals and achievements.

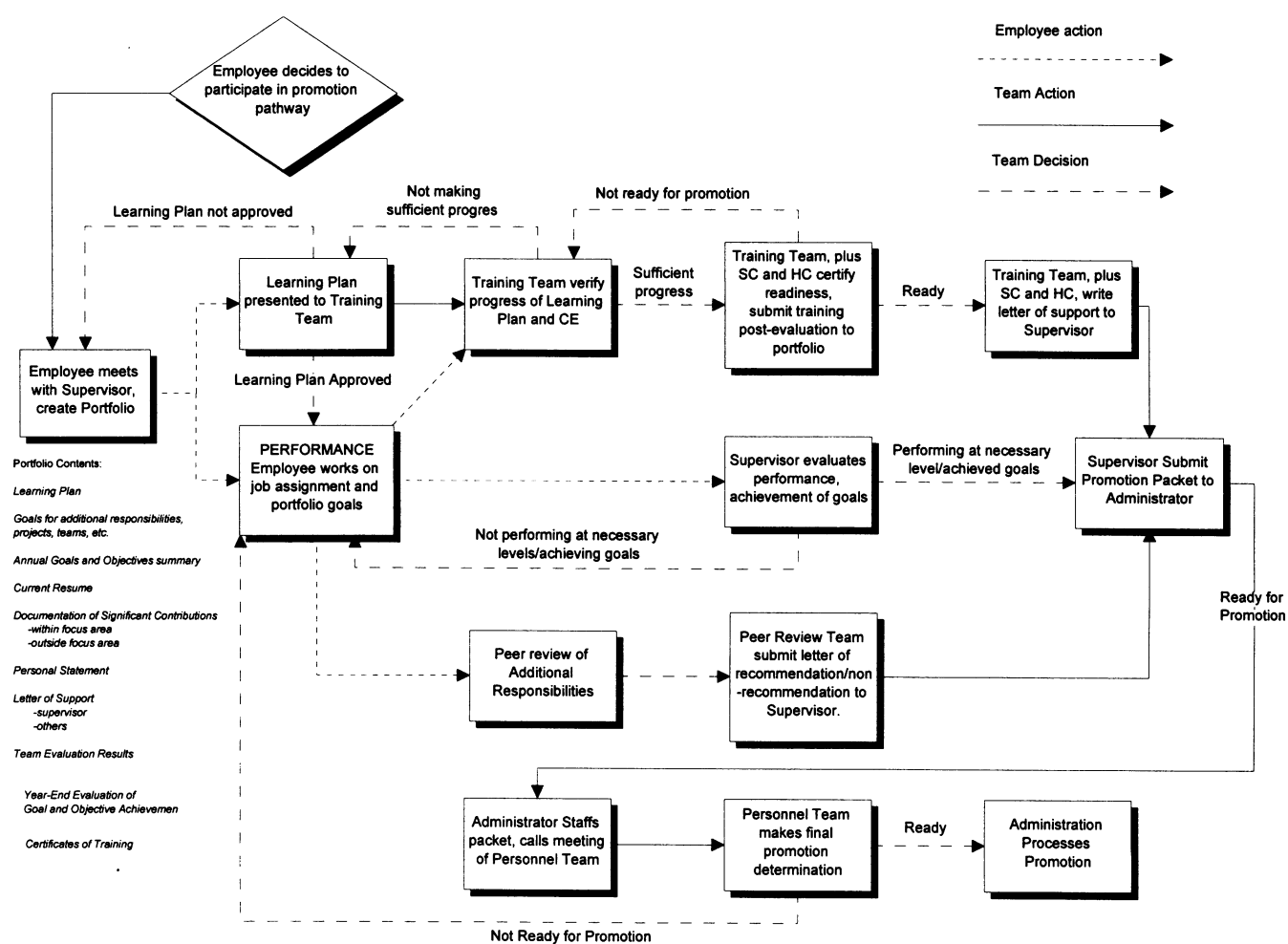
As a result of the breadth and depth in evaluative measure afforded by portfolios, this form of assessment has also begun to be adapted to, and adopted for, employment performance appraisal. "Using a portfolio allows each [individual] to demonstrate how performance appraisal goals have been met or exceeded and provides an avenue for [individuals] to market themselves. This tool identifies individual strengths and potential and promotes professional accountability and job satisfaction" [17]. A portfolio should document an individual's accomplishments and may include artifacts that illustrate significant achievements as well as written reflections [18]. The use of portfolio evaluation, as opposed to more traditional employment performance appraisal techniques, allows for more accurate assessment of a wide range of abilities that may be difficult to quantify, such as creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving [19].

Content for health information analyst portfolios has been determined based on criteria established for promotion pathways. Requirements for promotion have been translated into a set of portfolio-based materials that would constitute a valid reflection of an individual's accomplishments deemed necessary for advancement. Just as promotion pathways reflect the connection with the HIA training program, portfolio content includes training documentation as well as testimonies, letters of support, and personal reflections.

CONCLUSION

The creation of a new library assistant job family and pay structure, accompanied by an appropriate career ladder and evaluation mechanism, has facilitated the expansion of position responsibilities and elevation of vocation status. Health information analysts, formerly titled library assistants, now assume many duties previously held by librarians. In addition to more traditional support roles, HIAs fulfill a major public service function by fielding most initial patron interactions.

Figure 1
Promotion pathway flowchart



With this new classification structure, health information analysts are afforded greater flexibility relative to their roles within the library as well as increased career mobility.

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APPENDIX

Promotion pathways for health information analysts, Eskind Biomedical Library

The following descriptions indicate the minimum requirements within each health information analyst job family that must be accomplished for promotion to the next level.

Health Information Analyst I

To be eligible for promotion to Health Information Analyst II, Health Information Analysts I must have:

- achieved complete knowledge of their primary job responsibilities as evaluated by their supervisor
- completed the learning plan associated with their primary focus area as determined by the Training Team
- completed the organizational overview modules of the Library Training Plan as determined by the Training Team
- selected a new learning plan, either by using the in-depth training plan from another focus area or developing a new learning plan approved by the Training Team
- participated in additional responsibilities in their focus area or in other areas of the library as approved by the Promotion Pathway Peer Review Team
- shown an interest in areas outside their focus area to the satisfaction of the Promotion Pathway Peer Review Team

Health Information Analyst II

To be eligible for promotion to Health Information Analyst III, Health Information Analysts II must have:

- met all the requirements indicated for promotion to Health Information Analyst II
- completed the new learning plan selected previously as determined by the Training Team
- created or revised a training module in their area of ex-

pertise and served as a point person and/or trainer for one or more EBL training modules

- participated in additional responsibilities that have made significant contributions to other focus areas as approved by the Promotion Pathway Peer Review Team
- led or coordinated part of a project that had a positive outcome, with mentoring as approved by the Promotion Pathway Peer Review Team

Health Information Analyst III

To be eligible for promotion to Health Information Specialist, Health Information Analysts III must have:

- successfully completed all training modules listed in the "EBL Training Modules" document as determined by the Training Team
- become adept in either management or research science as determined by the library director
- participated in additional responsibilities in areas outside the library as approved by the Promotion Pathway Peer Review Team
- led or coordinated an interdepartmental initiative in a non-apprenticeship role within the Informatics Center or the institution as approved by the Promotion Pathway Peer Review Team
- have an area of expertise within the library for which they serve as a mentor to other library staff

Promoting interaction between organizations of medical librarians and health care professionals

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INTRODUCTION

One way that medical librarians can position themselves as information professionals in the eyes of the health sciences community is by promoting interaction between the associations of these professions. This paper will describe the outreach activities of the Alabama Health Libraries Association (ALHeLA) and will describe the outreach activities of other medical librarian associations.

Membership in ALHeLA is composed of health sciences librarians. The goal of ALHeLA is "to promote better health care for the citizens of Alabama as it is affected by the provision of health science information resources and services" [1]. The outreach activities of ALHeLA have included article submission and workshop presentation. A goal of the ALHeLA for 1995 was