MULTI-SKILL ME
SECONDMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND ISSUES AT QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY LIBRARY

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Abstract

"Be not afraid of growing slowly; be only afraid of standing still" (Chinese Proverb). The Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Library has embraced their staff's fear of standing still by offering opportunities for multi-skilling through secondment. Through secondment, staff have an opportunity to learn new skills, gain from new experiences and work in different teams, resulting in a "big picture" view of the organisation. This paper will present an overview of the secondment experience through the analysis of qualitative data gained through interviewing staff who have taken part in a secondment opportunity, managers and supervisors who have lost and gained staff through secondment, and teams who have had members come and go. Issues such as benefits for the individual and the organisation will be covered, as well as the effects on supervisors, management and other team members who then need to cope with constantly changing staff and new team dynamics.

Introduction

From my personal experience of being a practicing Library Technician for over ten years there comes a time when the career ladder stalls and there is no further chance to climb higher with the same qualification under your belt. The discovery of secondment opportunities available to me at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Library ensured that I would continue to learn and gain more skills as I acted in roles both internal and external to QUT. Secondments enabled me to continue to develop my career and grow as a Library Technician. This paper will present an overview of the secondment experience through the analysis of qualitative data gained from interviewing staff who have taken part in a secondment opportunities, managers and supervisors who have lost and gained staff through secondment, and teams who have had members come and go. Issues such as benefits for the individual and the organisation will be covered, as well as the challenges faced by those involved.

Secondments at QUT Library

According to Hamilton & Wilkie (2001) secondments are the temporary transfer of a staff member to another organisation, or section of their own organisation, to perform a specific job or project, to cover someone else's job, or to fill a gap in service.

At QUT Library it is a requirement of the university to advertise all on-going positions and any fixed term appointments greater than 6 months in duration. Advertising for positions of HEW7 and higher must be advertised externally while positions up to HEW6 may be advertised internally or externally (dependant upon whether there are suitable internal candidates). Jobs advertised internally are usually referred to as secondments as they are temporary and allow a staff member to fill the position for the duration and return to their substantive position upon completion. Only when an applicant has gone through the interview process and are offered the position can they ask for a secondment to be considered.

There is no formal policy, each request is based upon its merits and is at the discretion of the Associate Director - Library Services (Development) and the employees Section Manager. QUT Library is a party to the arrangements in place for Queensland University Libraries Office of Corporation members and use the standard *Queensland University Libraries Office of Corporation Inter-Organisational Experience Program Form* (n.d.) to formalise arrangements (Appendix A). The principle to granting a secondment request is to gauge whether QUT Library can manage to release the applicant at the time and for the duration of the request, and in what way will QUT Library and the applicant benefit from granting the secondment.

Secondments offer a number of benefits and challenges for the individual involved, the supervisors, the teams, and the organisation. To assist in writing this paper, a number of QUT Library staff, that had direct contact with secondments in some way, were interviewed. Following is their responses concerning benefits and challenges of secondments as well as my personal opinions and experiences.

Benefits for the Individual (secondee)

As one would expect, there are a number of benefits for those individuals participating in secondments. Other than the obvious gain of new skills and knowledge from working in other units or organisations, there is also the increase in skills levels. These can then be brought back to their section on return and the team can learn from the secondee. It also allows for the secondee to be better equipped to apply for jobs both within and outside the organisation.

It builds the secondees confidence due to obtaining further skills and knowledge, and the challenges of learning the new position can stimulate an individual that may have become stagnate in their former position. Skills that the secondee may have developed in a former position or through study can also be refreshed and reused depending on the position undertaken.

Developing networks within or outside the organisation is another benefit. By moving around the organisation and working in different teams, the secondee develops new working relationships and knowledge of specialised staff as well as who to approach when needing assistance on a specific topic/task. The team/organisation hosting the

secondee can also gain from the skills and knowledge of the secondee in the same manner (Morris 1993).

For some individuals, the main benefit of the secondment experience is that there is always the job safety/security of keeping your substantive ongoing position, as at QUT you can not participate in a secondment unless you are employed on an ongoing basis (Hamilton & Wilkie 2001).

Benefits for the Supervisors, Teams and the Organisation

As well as being a personal challenge, growth and professional development for the secondee, secondments also offer benefits to supervisors, teams and the organisation as a whole (Bond 2002).

Due to the nature of secondments the work place is more dynamic due to the constant change of staff and teams. This allows for new ideas and fresh motivation ensuring the maintenance of a highly skilled and innovative work team. As mentioned in benefits to the individuals, teams hosting a seconder benefits by learning from the secondees experiences and knowledge, (Critchley 2002). The original work team the secondee came from also benefits when the secondee returns with the new knowledge and skills gained from working within a different team.

Once the secondee is trained and skilled in many different areas, they can be called upon to fill in when other staff members are on leave - this can assist supervisors when it comes to replacing staff and in successional planning (Kish 1996). Having staff that have experience working in higher level positions assists in replacing staff as they retire or move on.

The development of procedures can be assisted by the secondee who has worked in many different areas or organisations. They will be looking at procedures with a "new set of eyes" and have seen other sections and organisational workflows (Reitz 2004). This can assist a supervisor in writing procedures that can be used for training those with no experience in the area.

Overall, the organisation gains a reputation of having highly motivated, highly skilled, capable and competent staff that have experience, skills and knowledge in many different areas and organisations (Kish 1996). As a result, less time is spent on training as staff are multi-skilled and there is improved service to customers as staff are able to provide assistance in many areas.

So now that you all want to go out there and get a secondment or offer secondments to your staff – are you ready for the reality check??!! There are many challenges to overcome when offering and participating in secondments. It is important to be aware of these before jumping headlong into the secondment game!

Challenges for the Individual

For an individual partaking in a secondment, the biggest challenges to overcome are the feelings of uncertainty and insecurity of starting in a new position and work team, and trying to fit in and get the job done. From my own experience, I found this to be the

greatest challenge. When first participating in a secondment, I had many expectations about the new position. These ended up being quite different to the expectations of the organisation/area I went to. The same can be said about the team. The team may have unrealistic expectations of you, the secondee. The secondee may work differently to person they are replacing especially if they are still in the section and this can cause tension or conflict (Pierce 2000). So it can be quite tough to overcome especially as some work teams/organisations are more supporting than others. One tip is to make sure both parties know where they stand from the beginning.

Getting the secondee up to speed can be a challenge for both the secondee and the team. Training of the secondee is a lot of hard work for both the secondee having to learn the new skills/knowledge quickly and the team who is training them. Being able to "hit the ground running" is one skill you quickly gain after participating in a number of secondments.

Lack of ownership of the position you are going into is another challenge for secondees. Usually secondments are only for a short term period. This means that the secondee often cannot commit to any long term goals or projects. This can be frustrating for both the seondee and the team as the secondment may be extended numerous times but only for short periods which still does not allow for the planning and completion of projects. This also affects the secondees certainty of status (Hamilton & Wilkie 2001).

Then there are the challenges of returning to your substantive position. It is almost like learning a new job, e.g. fitting back into the team. Sometimes the secondment position is better than the substantive job so the secondee can have negative feelings on return, or they may feel that they will lose the skills and knowledge gained during the secondment.

Challenges for Supervisors, Teams and the Organisation

Just as it is important for you to recognise the challenges for the individuals involved in secondments, it is equally important to acknowledge those for supervisors, teams and the organisation.

The main challenge is the disruption to a section through either losing a staff member or gaining a new staff member who then has to fit into the dynamics of the team. This can create a domino effect which results in changes in more than one team. At QUT Library we once had a secondment experience that started in a management level position and dominoed down to a lending services position. It certainly was a challenge for our staffing officer as well as those involved.

Disruption of rosters due to not knowing when the staff member will return to section/leave section, and delay in planning for future team changes or implementations of new services/procedures are other challenges faced. This is a big issue for areas such as lending services where it is impartible to have rosters organised for peak periods. If people are coming and going or if you are unsure of when a person is due to return, this can create a headache for all involved.

Dynamics of a team can be harmed greatly by having staff come and go. Not only does it take a lot of hard work and time to train new staff, but the team may not like the person replacing the team member and vice versa. This creates not only a challenge for the

team members involved, but the supervisor who must use their skills to ensure they have an effective and productive team.

As mentioned previously, QUT Library once had a domino effect secondment. This equalled a nightmare for the staffing officer and those having to deal with the subsequent paper work. Ensuring staff are paid appropriately, that the human resources department has up-to-date contact/pay/leave details of the staff can frustrate all involved. It is only through effective communication between the library, organisation and human resources department that this area of secondments can be successful.

What makes a successful secondment program?

What makes secondments a success at QUT Library is that staff are clear on what is involved in the process of applying and supervisors of the person wishing to be seconded are approached and permission sought before commencing secondment.

By basing the secondment program on the QULOC Inter-Organisational Experience program (Appendix A & B) ensures that there is standardisation and processes to be adhered to. The QULOC program also allows for staff from other institutions to partake in secondments at QUT Library and vice versa. This, in turn, allows for the establishment of networks and partnerships across institutions.

Conclusion

QUT Library is a good example of how secondments can be successfully integrated into the workplace. Not only do these opportunities provide increased personal and professional satisfaction for the secondee but they can also be advantageous to the organisation as a whole. As outlined in the paper there are many benefits for all involved in the secondment process, but it is important for secondees and supervisors alike to be aware of the challenges secondments present as well as having a clear understanding of their requirements as a part of the secondment process.

On a personal note, secondments have allowed for my own personal and professional development through the obtainment of further skills and experience in many different work areas. I'm unsure of where I'm going next but "I'll go anywhere as long as it's forward."

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Appendix A

QULOC Inter-Organisational Experience

The Inter-Organisational Experience Program aims to provide opportunities for people working in member libraries to:

- _Learn how other organisations respond to business challenges to inform local practice._
- _Facilitate career development by enhancing their expertise and awareness of other jobs, management and organisational work practices._

This will be achieved through a range of flexible placement or visit options.

Possible strategies for inter-organisational staff development activities include:
- _Secondments_
- _Short term placements, for example one day per week for two months or two weeks_
- _Individual or group visits._

Appendix B

Queensland University Libraries Office of Co-operation (QULOC)

Inter-Organisational Experience Program

Application Form

Applicant Details

Name: ....

Position: ....

Home Organisation: ....

Section: ....

Phone Number: .... Email: ....

Activity Details

What are the objectives of your Inter-Organisational Experience activity proposal?
....

....

How will undertaking this activity add value to your organisation and to you?
....

....

....

What sort of activity do you propose to meet these objectives? (Include preferred dates and preferred host organisation if known.)
....

....

....

Who will be involved?

How will you apply the learning from undertaking this activity?

How will you know if undertaking this activity has been successful?

Applicant's Signature:
Date:

Comments and Endorsement

Home Organisation

Area Manager:

Name: Signature:
Date:

Director:

Name: Signature:
Date:

Application approved by Home Organisation: Yes   No

Host Organisation

Area Manager:

Name: Signature:
Date:

Activity Co-ordinator:

_____

Name: Signature:
          Date: _____

Director:

Name: Signature:
          Date: _____

Application approved by Host Organisation: Yes   No
_____

Notes

_____

_____

Queensland University Libraries Office of Co-operation (QULOC)

Inter-Organisational Experience Program

Evaluation Form

Applicant Details

Name: _____

Position: _____

Home Organisation: _____

Section: _____

Phone Number: _____   Email: _____

Activity Details

What Inter-Organisational Experience activity did you undertake and what were the objectives of the activity?

_____

_____

Were the objectives of the activity met? Please provide comments on how well your objectives were met and factors that contributed to that outcome.

_____

_____

_____

How will you apply the learning from undertaking this activity to benefit your organisation and yourself?

_____

Based on your recent experience, how would you rate?

Rating					
The value of the Inter-Organisational Experience Program overall?					
The value of the Inter-Organisational Experience Program activity as a developmental activity for you as an individual?					
The value of the Inter-Organisational Experience Program activity as a developmental activity for your organisation?					

Do you have any other comments?

_____

_____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

_____

Comments

Home Organisation

Area Manager:

Name: _____ Signature: _____ _____
  Date: _____

Director:

_____   _____   _____

Name: Signature:
        Date:

Application approved by Home Organisation: Yes   No

Host Organisation

Area Manager:

Name: Signature:
        Date:

Activity Co-ordinator:

Name: Signature:

        Date:

Director:

Name: Signature:
        Date:

Application approved by Host Organisation: Yes   No

Notes

QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES OFFICE OF CO-OPERATION (QULOC)

GUIDING PRICIPLES FOR SECONDMENTS

Staff who have been employed by their home institution for a minimum of 12 months are eligible to apply. Secondments will normally be of six months duration, but may vary from a minimum of three months to a maximum of twelve months.

Payment Arrangements

- Staff members will formally be on secondment to the institution in which they are placed (the host institution) but shall continue to receive their salary and other benefits from their employing institution (the home institution).

  As a general principle, the secondee should not suffer any less favourable conditions of employment than at his/her home library.

  If conditions of employment vary markedly between the home and host institutions, it might in exceptional circumstances be more desirable for a secondee to be granted leave without pay from his/her home library and engaged as a fixed-term employee by the host institution. However this would be envisaged as a rare solution to meet extra-ordinary circumstances.

- Staff shall continue to accrue leave entitlements, salary increments and all other benefits from their home institution whilst on secondment. Recreation leave may be applied for while on secondment, and it is expected that recreation leave accrued during the secondment will be taken before it terminates. Where possible, prospective secondees shall disclose on their application what leave they intend to request during the period of the secondment. All leave (recreation, sick, special) shall be approved by the home and host institutions.

- It is important that both home and host libraries, and the secondees, be quite clear what arrangements will apply in relation to weekend or evening work, particularly in relation to hours of work and the remuneration and allowances payable for such shift work, etc. The general rule is that the conditions applicable to the home library obtain, along with the appropriate allowances for them; but clearly some flexibility and compromise will be required in specific cases of difference. It is important that any inconsistencies be discovered <u>before</u> appointments are taken up, and agreement reached on their solution then.

- Home institutions will continue to make salary payments and to invoice host institutions (including overhead costs) quarterly.

Reviews

- It is anticipated that both the home and host institutions will review secondment placing's and the effect thereof in accordance with their normal procedures.

- Secondees will be subject to the normal review processes of the host institution.

- Should it develop that continuation of a secondment is considered undesirable, by either the home or host institution, its termination should be negotiated between the two institutions. Secondees should be given two weeks notice of the termination of their secondment.

Staff Secondment Agreement

1. The secondment is according to the general principles of the QULOC Staff Secondment Agreement (Attached).

2. The period of secondment will be from (date) until (date) unless otherwise negotiated by the Libraries.

3. (name) remains an employee of (home institution), and will work under (home institution) conditions of appointment, except where variations are agreed upon by both institutions.

4. (name) will continue to be paid at her/his current salary of $0000.00 per fortnight until (date) when her/his increment to $0000.00 is due.

5. (Host institution) will reimburse (home institution) for salary and normal on-costs and shift allowances on a quarterly basis.

6. (name) will send her/his time sheets to (home institution) every fortnight after initialling from (host institution) supervisor.

7. Applications for recreation leave, sick leave etc. during the secondment should be submitted to (home institution), signed by the (host institution) supervisor.

8. X days recreation leave accrued by (name) during the period of the secondment should be taken during the secondment.

9. X days sick leave will be billable to the (host institution). Should there be more, it will be not be charged to the (host institution)

10. Costs of any training and staff development support during the secondment will be borne by the (host institution), unless otherwise agreed by (home institution).

Signed in agreement

Secondee: _____ / /

**For
(host institution)** _____ / /

**For
(home institution)** _____ / /