Competency building in a busy working day for librarians and for libraries

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Abstract
Medical librarians know very well that they must build new competencies to offer relevant services and develop new library services. In a workshop at the EAHIL event 2023, suggestions for competency building, and how libraries can build competency, were discussed. Positive and enthusiastic participants came up with many ideas: different types of clubs, webinars and courses, knowledge sharing with colleagues, regularly block out time, or just solve your tasks in a new way. The experiences showed that competency building in a busy work schedule is possible. The initiatives have in common that they portray an attitude to learn more, but also the willingness to organise activities and share competency with colleagues.

Key words: *librarians; professional competence; libraries, medical; learning.*

Introduction

Due to continuous technological development and changed research policy requirements, libraries have to adapt their services and develop new services. In medical libraries new services have emerged within open science, systematic reviews, user experiences, clinical librarianship, and research data (1-5). Librarians are well aware of areas of expertise where they need to build or update competencies. There is a great need for competency building and specialisation, and therefore, recruitment in the sector can be a challenge (6, 7).

Library organisations have developed competency frameworks and offer continuing education courses and certifications for librarians (1-3). However, many countries have no framework nor certification, and librarians have to rely on occasional offers for continuing education.

Building competencies requires extra effort, initiative and motivation by the individual librarian. In a Norwegian survey from 2022, medical librarians reported that time, financial situation and internal organisation of the library influenced on their possibility to build competencies through continuing education and courses (5). The survey showed further that workplace learning, self-studies and learning from colleagues were often used to develop skills and knowledge to offer new library services. On the other hand, librarians reported a great interest in sharing knowledge with colleagues and patrons, they participate in committees and organisations, and they perform own research (5).

In a workshop at the annual EAHIL (European Association for Health Information and Libraries) event 2023 (5), we elaborated on how individual librarians can enhance their competencies and how knowledge building activities for employees can be organised in libraries. Finally, we discussed how librarians can fit competency building into a busy working schedule.

In this article we want to share the ideas and suggestions from the workshop. Several of these suggestions have been successfully implemented at some libraries.

Methods

25 librarians participated at the workshop titled "Ready to take on new roles - How can librarians build new skills?". After a brief introduction (5), they discussed one of three questions in groups. Each group made notes anonymously on a common digital platform, padlet.com. They also commented on other groups'

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contributions. Finally, in plenary, the groups presented the main points of their discussions. All notes were shared with the participants after the workshop.

Results

The three questions and ideas and suggestions discussed in the workshop are shown in *Table 1*. Some activities, which already are in use and found beneficial by the participants, are further described in the following.

Questions	Suggestions
How can individual employees enhance their competencies?	Participate in journal clubs, survival clubs, search clubs, training clubs
	Participate in workshops, webinars, conferences, courses
	Use material from institutional learning portals
	Shadow users or colleagues
	Pick up ideas from other libraries
How can knowledge building activities for employees be organised in libraries?	Knowledge sharing during internal meetings
	Invite experts for internal seminars
	Organise a journal club, survival club, search club, training club
	National networks
How can librarians fit competency building into a busy work schedule?	Small changes to practice
	Prioritising of tasks
	Time management
	Leader's support

Table 1. *Ideas and suggestions discussed in the workshop on the three questions.*

Join a Club

Several participants mentioned that they participate in different clubs: Journal Clubs, Survival Clubs, Training Clubs and Search Clubs. A Journal Club aims to read an article and critically appraise or discuss content and implications for own practice. A Survival Club aims at learning about and testing tools and discussing experiences. A Search Club performs and discusses literature searches often for systematic reviews. A Training Club focuses on developing pedagogical skills.

The participants talked about their experiences of organising clubs. The club meetings are held from one hour per week to four times a year. Different techniques are used for choosing topics: SWOT-analysis or asking for colleagues' ideas. Clubs can benefit from introductions from an experienced colleague or an expert from another field, i.e., a statistician. Participants mentioned possible obstacles such as lack of confidence, time and money. Further, you need a core of motivated people to sustain a club.

Shadowing

Another method mentioned was shadowing which means following another person at work. You gain insights into how other people use different tools or perform tasks. One hospital library shadowed clinicians when they used UpToDate and Lexicomp, and gained different insights compared to their anticipations. Shadowing a colleague might be another possibility. Participants experienced that even if the role didn't seem to overlap or be relevant, the connections might become visible, or at least the insight or empathy might increase. It is also possible to shadow internationally, where you can be part of a session or appointment digitally.

Workshops, webinars, conferences, courses

Since the COVID pandemic many webinars and conferences are offered digitally and free of charge. Thus, more than one librarian from the same institution can attend events.

Besides external courses, many institutions have their own learning portals with courses and webinars. Such courses may vary from personal development courses to more subject-specific introductory courses. Participation in institutional courses is important as the librarians will meet researchers and colleagues from other departments. Thus, the librarians will gain knowledge about their own organisation, about researchers' needs, besides the possibility of marketing library services.

One library talked about their 20-minute morning sessions for researchers, once a week. Librarians used the opportunity when preparing these short sessions to read and learn about something new, and thus increase their knowledge and skills.

Share knowledge with your colleagues

Knowledge sharing and learning from colleagues was mentioned by several participants.

Topics to share were resources, tools, experiences, new things learned this week, top tips for using software, or highlights from relevant conferences, courses, mailing lists, blogs, networks etc.

The participants mentioned several ways of organising sessions, i.e., internal meetings, case & practice zoom discussions, problem-solving meetings, short presentations by a person or a team, this week's FAQ, short discussions like a weekly stand-up, or contributions in a survival club. Some organise weekly 30-minute meetings before the library opens, others hold 30-minute presentations once a month. Discussion lists, blogs or channels in Teams are also used. When one colleague has attended a course or event, he/she share brief notes of the highlights. Colleagues then can pick up new ideas or tools efficiently at their own pace. One librarian said that they took turns checking mailing lists or blogs, thus, not everyone has to read up on everything. Another emphasised the importance of time and format for sharing sessions. Be creative, and open to schedule hybrid meetings for allowing more colleagues to join.

Networking and international cooperation

Participating and using networks was mentioned by several groups. This could help build knowledge across libraries especially for the smaller institutions with fewer librarians. Some clubs are organised as a network, i.e., the German survival club (www.agmb.de/de_DE/ag-evidenzbasierte-medizin); one of the organisers participated at the workshop and invited to join as guest, if you're comfortable in German.

Find time in a busy schedule

Competency building in a busy work schedule is a challenge. However, the workshop participants had several important thoughts and practical adaptations related to librarians' attitudes and organisational culture, management support and time management. First of all - start small. Small incremental changes to current practice are a good way to incorporate new practices. One group suggested proactively blocking out time in your schedule for competency building activities.

Another piece of advice from a participant was to give up or at least pause or minimise other tasks. How urgent is it to perform ALL your tasks before you engage in competency building activities, can some of your tasks wait just a little bit? Stop putting such pressure on yourself. Take an hour to read a paper, or experiment with that new software. The day-to-day tasks can wait till tomorrow.

One participant claimed that there are two opposing ideas that might require a cultural change in mindset. Librarians are not so important that their team cannot survive without them while they go on a course or learn a skill. Plus - librarians are valuable, if someone needs to wait a day for a reply, because librarians are on a course, they can wait. How often do librarians not get a reply from an academic! Is it a competency to say "no"? A technique that needs practice.

Get your leader's support

The need for competence building requires support from the leaders as well, they need to help you prioritise what's most important right now. You should make it clear for your leaders that you need to build competency, not just for your own sake, it's beneficial for your workplace. You can negotiate work time for learning and development by demonstrating value to the workplace and service. Examples mentioned were new tools or techniques that users or library services will benefit from, or new publisher products that are of interest to users.

Leaders are usually positive about projects, courses or ideas. Colleagues may take over your tasks for a while. However, the workshop participants consider it important that everyone in a team gets the chance to build competency or participate in projects or similar activities.

Concluding remarks

We have described some initiatives from the workshop. The suggestions vary from actions one librarian can do, to national or international collaboration. There are many opportunities to participate in and organise competence-building activities. The beliefs and experiences of the participants showed further that competency building in a busy work schedule is possible.

The initiatives have in common that they portray an attitude to learn more, but also the willingness to organise activities and share competency with colleagues. Hopefully, the results from this workshop can be of inspiration to other librarians.

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