

Public Services: *Or, The Library's Ambassadors*

Public Services comprises the activities and operations of a library that bring its staff into regular direct contact with its patrons, including circulation, reference, online services, bibliographic instruction, serials assistance, government documents, and interlibrary loan/document delivery, as distinct from technical services, which are performed behind the scenes, out of contact with library users.

Human Resources Are Valuable

The cost of hiring, training, and retaining staff—not just librarians, but all staff—makes up the largest part of the budget for most libraries. Since library support staff usually comprise 60 to 80 percent of the work force, it makes sound fiscal sense to motivate this segment of employees to stay.

There is an even more important reason to motivate library staff: **the front-line staff is the face of the library**. These are the first people patrons see when they come in the door, and the last ones to assist them as they leave. They are the library's ambassadors. Their influence is enormous in cementing the impression of the library as a welcoming, enjoyable, and professional place to visit, instead of an unsatisfying, confusing, or negative one. Patrons come to join book groups, surf the web, pay bills, do serious research, or just browse and meet friends, and children come for homework help or to attend special programs. Front-line workers are not only key to the success of the library, but they are also crucial to its operation. In reality, self-service has a place and is popular among some users, but many people want and need front-line attention—everything from an explanation of their fines to a good recommendation for a book.

It Is Important to Be Sensitive to Each Staff Member's Needs

Staff and colleagues may be experiencing varying levels of stress and may be at different crossroads of life; what happens outside their job will most certainly affect their performance of that job, as well as their interactions with supervisors, peers, and direct reports.

There is no single formula for motivating any employee or group of employees. Some may find sufficient motivation in a simple, private 'thank you' for a job well done; others find greater motivation in a tangible awards or public recognition. Nevertheless, staff is

generally motivated by job satisfaction; organizational growth and development; a positive work environment, and sincere recognition of individual and group achievements.

The Two Basic Motivational Approaches for Front-line Employees

- Cross training
- Staff rotation

Not only can these approaches diminish boredom and stagnation, but they can create a greater understanding and appreciation for the responsibilities of each position and how they affect the general workflow of the library as a whole. These two approaches allow paraprofessionals to determine for which areas of librarianship they are best suited, or if the profession is really for them.

Excellent communication skills are crucial to cultivating positive work attitudes. Supervisors need to listen with empathy and avoid drawing swift conclusions without the support of factual evidence. Skilled supervisors make it a personal policy to praise staff members in public and reprimanded them in private. Scolding front line staff in front of patrons is not only unseemly, but also diminishes staff morale and the public image of the library. When conflict arises between front line staff and a patron, even if the patron is in the right, the supervisor has a duty to display tact to ensure that the staff member does not lose credibility, and the patron has not gained authority over that employee.

Employees tend to feel more motivated when they to do their best work. Few enjoy being micro-managed, so front-line workers should be afforded some degree of autonomy in carrying out their duties.

They should also, whenever practical, be encouraged to contribute to discussions of procedure. Ask employees how they could make their work more efficient. After all, the staff members who actually perform an activity on a regular basis often know more about it than does the supervisor. This in no way suggests that all ideas should be implemented. But consider any suggestions and, if an idea is acted upon, acknowledge the employee who offered the suggestion.

Finally, and most importantly, libraries must value and respect staff members and the contributions they make. Without that basic respect and appreciation, library staff will—rightly—feel patronized and manipulated by the administration’s efforts to motivate them.

The number of ways to motivate front-line employees is countless and many of the above suggestions can be helpful in motivating behind-the-scenes library staff members, whose work is just as valuable.

Resources for Empowering Front-Line Library Staff Members

- **The ABLE Public Services Sequence**
 - The Reference Interview (2.0 contact hours)
 - Evaluating Reference Sources (2.0 contact hours)
 - Basic Reference Services (3.0 contact hours)
 - Ethics and Public Service (2.0 contact hours)
 - <https://libraries.idaho.gov/continuing-education/able/>
- **Reference Basics I**
 - A beginner course or a great refresher, covering topics that include freedom of information, the reference interview, and privacy and ethics. Approximate time: one hour.
 - <https://versal.com/c/e0kpyn/reference-basics>
- **Identifying Microaggressions**
 - A publication of ALA’s Office for Diversity, Literacy & Outreach Services (ODLOS)
 - http://www.ala.org/tools/sites/ala.org.tools/files/content/Microaggressions%20Webinar_TRHT_GSC.pdf
- **Introduction to Readers’ Advisory**
 - Learn the basics of Readers’ Advisory with this visual and interactive course, covering the basics of fiction genres, appeal factors, electronic

and print resources, stealth Readers' Advisory, and the Readers' Advisory interview. Approximate time: two hours.

- <https://versal.com/c/0o7mem/introduction-to-readers-advisory>
- **NoveList Plus**
 - Find fiction reading recommendations for all ages. Search by title, author, genre, or key plot points. Find information about a book series and discussion guides for book groups.
 - A great tool for reader advisory
 - https://lili.org/full-resource-index/?wpv_view_count=739&wpv_post_search=novelist&topics=0&user_groups=0&xxxxxxxxxxxxx_loads=1&xxxxxxxxxxxxx_filename=info.txt&xxxxx_xxxxxxxx_filecontent=INF0&wpv_view_count=22
- **NoveList K – 8 Plus**
 - For readers in grades K – 8, find fiction and narrative nonfiction reading recommendations by title, author, genre, series, or key plot points. Ready-to-go read-alike lists for popular titles.
 - A great tool for school assignments, Summer Reading, or reading for pleasure.
 - https://lili.org/full-resource-index/?wpv_view_count=739&wpv_post_search=novelist&topics=0&user_groups=0&xxxxxxxxxxxxx_loads=1&xxxxxxxxxxxxx_filename=info.txt&xxxxx_xxxxxxxx_filecontent=INF0&wpv_view_count=22
- **Literature Map**
 - The Tourist Map of Literature
 - Enter the name of author. The closer two writers are on the map, the more likely someone will like both of them. Click on any name to travel along.
 - <https://www.literature-map.com/>