AHI article (Spring 2020): Reporting research 7: the training and development needs of staff

The development of staff is of critical importance to the success of any business and arguably even more so where the staff are required to engage with the general public in focused and positive experiential encounters. Over the last thirty years or so, numerous studies have focused upon the training needs of staff engaged in interpretation both in terms of their personal and professional development as well as their broader on-site roles. These developmental needs have often been assessed through some form of training needs analysis and a recent article offers an interesting insight into this activity in relation to the needs of staff working within the National Park Service (NPS) in the United States. The article written by Powell, Depper and Wright (2017) in focusing upon the developmental needs of these staff also assessed the actual importance of each of the skills identified thus creating an interesting measure of discrepancy between the skills needed and each skill's importance to the staff member's actual role. It is suggested that the results of this study which are briefly outlined here could be used to guide and inform the broader assessment of staff needs in other organisations as well as potentially the assessment of the 'efficacy of any training' offered (Yamada & Skibins (2019:86).

Study methodology

The research study was based around the assessment of 80 competencies (split into six broad categories) which were identified as being important to those staff involved in visitor education and interpretation (see Table 1). Against each of these competencies a number of research activities to support this study were undertaken and these are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 1. Competencies identified
(summarised from Powell, Depper & Wright, 2017:22).

Category
Audience experience (16 items)
Finding and assessing knowledge (12 items)
Appropriate techniques (19 items)
Partnering, collaboration and community outreach (8 items)
Planning and evaluation (11 items)
Professional development of self and others (15 items)

Table 2. Research study processes
(summarised from Powell, Depper & Wright, 2017:20).

Step	Activity
1.	Assess the importance of each competence against job performance
2.	Assess the level or preparedness of the employee to perform the competency
3.	Determine the gap existing between the importance assigned to, and perceived preparation to perform, each competency.

The resulting survey for this study used a 7-point Likert scale as follows: for 'importance' (1=unimportant and 7=extremely important) and for 'level of preparedness' (1=unprepared and 7=extremely well prepared). The survey was completed by 1032 NPS staff (profiled in Table 3), a response rate of 29.7%.

Table 3. Profile of respondents
(summarised from Powell, Depper & Wright, 2017:23).

Age range	46.5% were over 50. Age range from 22-78, mean=46.
Qualifications	51.7% held an undergraduate qualification. 42.3% held a postgraduate qualification.
Role at work	62% were in a non-supervisory role. 89% of respondents spent more than 20% of their working week undertaking education and/or interpretive duties.
Years of service	The mean years of service in the role was 15.56

Results of the study

Table 4 below summarises the mean results for each of the six categories of competency whilst Table 5 identifies the three highest weighted discrepancy scores for each of the six categories.

Table 4. Mean results: views of respondents on importance and preparedness
(summarised from Powell, Depper & Wright, 2017:24-8).

Category	Importance (mean)	Preparedness (mean)	Weighted discrepancy score (mean)*
Audience experience	5.92	4.78	-7.08
Finding and assessing knowledge	5.92	4.94	-6.30
Appropriate techniques	5.90	5.04	-5.87
Partnering, collaboration and community outreach	5.94	4.72	-6.05
Planning and evaluation	5.83	4.55	-7.02
Professional development of self and others	6.07	4.87	-7.13

* The weighted discrepancy score is calculated as: Preparedness minus Importance divided by Importance Grand Mean

It is interesting to note that the category of '*Planning and evaluation*' attracted the lowest preparedness score of 4.55 whilst the gap between importance and preparedness was most noticeable in '*Professional development*' at -7.13 and of least concern in '*Appropriate techniques*' at -5.87.

Table 5. Top three highest weighted discrepancy scores by category
(summarised from Powell, Depper & Wright, 2017:24-8).

Category	Competencies	Weighted discrepancy score (mean)*
Audience experience	Assess the needs of diverse audiences	-10.60
	Identify and engage non-visiting audiences	-9.89
	Update based on changing societal trends	-9.89
Finding and assessing knowledge	Update the site's story through research	-7.68
	Identify biases in data & documents	-7.53
	Remain current with issues and research	-7.49
Appropriate techniques	Develop content for park websites	-9.09
	Comply with technical & legal standards	-8.76
	Develop content for social media	-8.50
Partnering, collaboration and community outreach	Building a trusting relationship with partners	-6.57
	Collaborate with academic institutions	-6.45
	Engage personally with the local community	-5.93
Planning and evaluation	Evaluate the effectiveness of interpretation	-9.06
	Identify the training needs of staff / volunteers	-8.89
	Analyse the costs & benefits of interpretation	-8.57

Professional development of self and others	Plan for self-development / personal growth	-9.61
	Keep current on interpretive best practices	-9.02
	Develop & experiments with new techniques	-7.71

This data seems to reflect the results of other studies which have also identified gaps in training provision focused around the personal development of the member of staff. For instance, Yamada (2014) reported on interviews with 24 interpretive guides and found that their perceived training needs focused upon: 'the management of interpretation setting' (x=4.70); 'understanding the audience' (x=4.67); 'enhancing inter-personal relations' (x=4.65); 'improving communication skills' (x=4.61) and 'evaluation of their own interpretation' (x=4.57).

Commentary

In terms of the transferability of these results, the following comments are posed to encourage conversation and reflection.

The highest weighted discrepancy scores between actual preparedness and importance for the role related to the broad competencies associated with: '*developing skills related to research literacy*'; '*engaging changing and new audiences*' and the '*effective use of available and emerging technologies*' (summarised from Powell, Depper and Wright, 2017:31). These results therefore pose three areas for further exploration.

First, to consider the ability of staff to engage with and utilise current research to enhance their interpretative offering but perhaps also to enhance the ways in which staff within their organisation have the opportunity to engage in meaningful and direct evaluation of their own and other colleague's interpretative activities.

Second, to consider the skills associated with engaging with new and diverse audiences. An important question would appear to be – how well staff understand the diversity of their current audience in terms of that audiences' needs, interests, values and preferences. Ballantyne & Hughes (2001) identified this, where the skills development for ecotour guides included: 'encouraging visitors to interact with each other' (40%), 'involving visitors through the use of questions' (23%), 'public speaking and communication skills' (18%), and 'interacting with visitors from other cultures' (6%).

Third, a perhaps somewhat inevitable focus on digital and emerging technologies and the needs and interests of a modern audience which may or may not reflect the interests, abilities and current methods of engagement offered by staff.

In concluding, the work of Interpret Europe on the Grundtvig In-Herit Project in which the Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI) collaborated has provided a useful set of standards for the interpretive profession from which various sets of competencies can easily be derived which could then be used to guide the design of

distinctive site and staff-specific in-house training offerings. After all, as Christie & Mason reported at the heart of effective interpretation lies 'enthusiasm, confidence and good delivery' (2003:5).

(1,381 words)

References

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