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An Evaluation of the New Opportunities Fund ICT Training Programme for Public Library Staff, UK

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Abstract
Public library staff in the UK are being trained on an unprecedented scale. The ICT Training Programme for Public Library Staff is financed by the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) and aims to equip staff with the ICT skills essential to assist the public. The programme consists of eight outcomes and aims to develop competence with ICT, including the Internet. This paper considers some of the training methods for the Internet received by staff. Specifically, the results of a study at Loughborough University, which included surveys, focus groups and interviews with managers, are described in relation to staff training preferences and perceived strengths and weaknesses of a variety of methods. A survey completed by staff from 14 public library authorities found that external training was rated most favourably. The use of online delivery in one training course is detailed and the potential of the online delivery of training for public library staff is considered.

Introduction

The NOF Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Training Programme for Public Library Staff, is currently underway in public libraries in the UK. The programme aims to make sure that all library staff are able to use ICT effectively in the workplace. The eight outcomes first laid out in *Building the New Library Network* (LIC, 1998) and stipulated by NOF in relation to the training are:

- Competence with ICT
- Understanding how ICT can support library work
- Health, safety and legal issues relating to ICT
- Using ICT to finding information for users (including evaluating information)
- Using ICT to support reader development

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- Using ICT to support users to ensure effective learning
- Effective management of ICT resources
- Knowing how to use ICT to improve efficiency

Outcome 1 of the NOF staff training programme includes word processing, utilising spreadsheets and databases, presentations, managing files and using network services including email and the Internet. According to NOF, Outcome 1 forms the core of the training programme (NOF, 2000). The components of Outcome 1 are encompassed by the ECDL[i] qualification, although some public library authorities in the UK have pursued alternative routes acceptable to NOF, for example, the Learning Line[ii] programme in Birmingham City Libraries and City and Guilds in North East Lincolnshire libraries. Outcomes 2-8 include using ICT to support staff's work in the library in finding information for users, supporting reader development and learning, managing ICT and using ICT for efficiency and administration. Outcomes 2-8 are covered in the NOF and CILIP Public Libraries ICT Training Educator course[iii], for example. The latter includes a variety of learning approaches including face-to-face sessions and independent learning using the Internet.

Evaluation of Outcomes 2-8 includes work by NOF (Dodd et al, 2002). In addition, recent PhD research at Loughborough University has considered staff evaluation of different training methods, assistance and support for use of the Internet embodied in Outcome 1 (Spacey, 2003). This was achieved using a questionnaire completed by over 900 public library staff in England generating both quantitative and qualitative data in relation to Internet training and staff attitudes towards the Internet. Questionnaire data was supplemented with qualitative data from management interviews, focus groups with public library staff and an online bulletin board.

This paper will discuss the Government funded ICT training of public library staff undertaken in the United Kingdom. It will focus specifically on staff evaluation of a variety of training methods, assistance and support for use of the Internet including classroom based learning, informal methods, self-study, and tutor led online learning. The potential of online training delivery for public library staff will be considered.

Background to the NOF ICT training programme for public library staff in UK

Public libraries in the UK have undergone a period of rapid transition in relation to ICT. The People's Network funded by NOF and managed by Resource (The Council for Museums, Libraries and Archives) is a national strategy to install the Internet in all public libraries by the end of 2002. This has been accomplished and approximately 3000 ICT library centres are currently operational[iv]. The initiative was reinforced by Public Library Standards, which came into force in April 2001 in England (DCMS, 2001). The standards are designed to ensure public library authorities provide a 'comprehensive and efficient service' to the public. They stipulated that every static service point was to provide public Internet access by the end of December 2002.

The initial impetus to provide Internet access in UK public libraries was formalised in an influential report, *New Library: the People's Network* (LIC, 1997) that considered the role of the public library as part of the *National Grid for Learning* (DfEE, 1997) an electronic network of information in all libraries, schools, colleges and universities in the UK by 2002. The report proposed that public libraries embrace ICT as its introduction in the sector had been slow (Aslib, 1995; The Audit Commission, 1997). The UK Government supported the LIC proposals in *New Library: the People's Network. The Government's Response* (DCMS, 1998). Public libraries were visualized in the context of other government initiatives such as the IT for All

programme designed to provide high quality learning in the home and in learning centres to be directed at adults not targeted by other initiatives (COI, 1998). The latter proposals are embodied in UK Online Centres of which there are more than 6000 at present in public libraries, colleges and community centres[v]. Public Library ICT learning centres offer access to equipment and online resources such as the Internet and email facilities, community information, government services, learning materials and a range of office software applications. The Internet is the focal element of the project in providing access to digitised materials, government information and learning as the Library and Information Commission envisaged: "We propose to develop a New Library Network which will initially be based on the Internet" (LIC, 1998).

Building the New Library Network, the successor to the *New Library* report, detailed how The People's Network could be achieved by considering the three strands of the programme: content, network and training. Public library staff would need expertise in the use of ICT to support learning and assist the public to perform basic ICT operations and were 'the key' in helping people to learn (LIC, 1998). It was recognised that some public library staff were ill equipped to perform even basic ICT tasks because training had been sporadic and the responsibility of individual library authorities. For some staff the Internet was a new addition to the library whilst staff in some larger and central libraries were familiar with it[vi], as some authorities were successful in securing DCMS/Wolfson funds in the latter 1990s for the purchase of PCs with Internet access (DCMS, 2000).

ICT literate public library staff were to be achieved by local authorities applying for a share of the £20 million set aside by the NOF for programmes of staff training. In addition to the £20 million allocated to train public library staff in the use of ICT, £50 million was set aside for content creation to allow for the digitisation of the educational and cultural resources found in libraries which public libraries could bid for (COI, 1998).

Staff Views of Training for the Internet
Research carried out at Loughborough University explored the attitudes of public library staff to the Internet and staff opinions of training. Questionnaires, focus groups, an online bulletin board and interviews with management figures responsible for ICT and/or training in the authority were the research instruments used to gather staff views.

Fourteen English public library authorities were involved in the survey stage of the research including eight authorities that permitted all of their staff to be surveyed and six who allowed a proportion of staff to be involved. These authorities included six unitary, two metropolitan, four county and two London boroughs from the smallest to the largest to provide some kind of representativeness. Of the 1870 surveys distributed, 964 were completed and returned representing a response rate of 51.5%.

Eleven of the authorities surveyed were training staff for the ECDL qualification for Outcome 1. This involved staff attending local college courses often organised with the authority's IT training department. Staff in some authorities were encouraged to practice in work time using the ECDL CD-ROM. Four of the authorities had staff with low-level ICT skills. To prepare staff for the ECDL, two sent staff on CLAIT[vii] courses and two provided internally run computer basics training whilst one unitary authority followed the City and Guilds course in local centres as an alternative to the ECDL on account of the lack of basic ICT skills in the authority. Two of the authorities surveyed followed a programme called the Learning Line, provided by an external training provider, which included online components developed especially to provide staff with relevant ICT skills for all eight outcomes.
One aim of the research had been to record public library staff's opinions of the training they had received for the Internet. The survey hoped to provide an exhaustive list of typical training methods staff might encounter

as they learned how to use the Internet. Based on a comprehensive literature review, training included traditional library methods such as 'on the job' and cascade training and formal courses, both in-house and external. Although not necessarily considered forms of training, methods of support and assistance were also included to comprehend how relevant staff perceived them to be. Examples included mentoring, coaching and support from managers and colleagues in emails and discussions. Materials produced by the library in the form of newsletters and updates were considered whilst staff's own efforts in reading relevant books or guided reading were detailed. A large section on self-study was included in the survey, which included learning at home, when the library was closed, and in spare time off the desk using notes, books or a tutorial such as a CD-ROM. In addition, staff were asked to rate the usefulness of training projects and activities to help them acquire the skills to use the Internet in both work and personal time.

Respondents were asked to indicate if they had received a particular kind of training, assistance or support for learning how to use the Internet and to rate its usefulness in gaining the skills required on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents *poor* and 5, *excellent*. Numerically more staff experienced on the job training for the Internet than any other method (64.5%). Over 40% of respondents judged on the job training to be a good way of learning how to use the Internet (fig. 1). The least reported method of training or support received was mentoring with a designated mentor arranged to meet with the respondent at set times (4.9% of respondents).
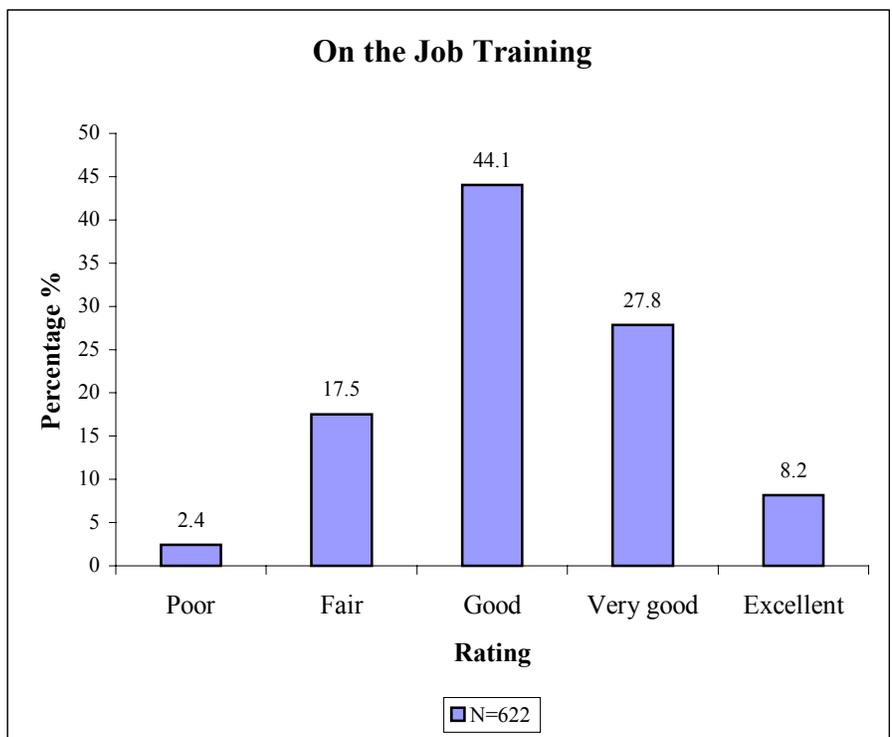
Figure 1 On the Job Training for the Internet

Generally, respondents opted for the middle option of *good* when asked to rate the effectiveness of a training method but external courses were rated as *very good* (fig. 2). The popular rating for all other kinds of training, assistance and support with just one exception was *good*. The exception to this was newsletters, which most respondents felt were *fair*.
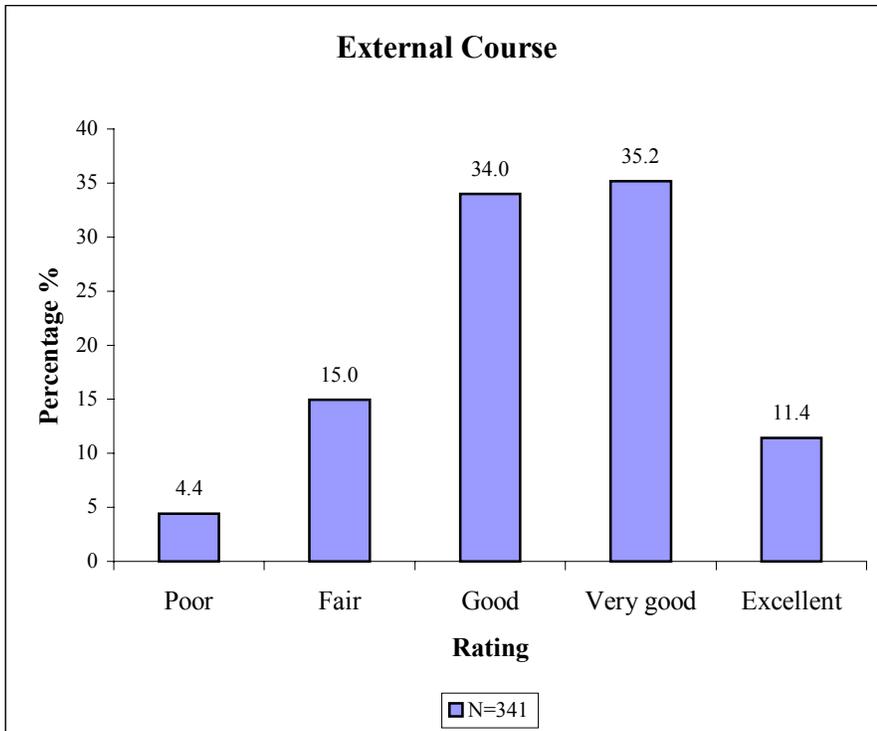
External Course

Figure 2 External Training for the Internet

Classroom Based Training

Attendance at external classes whether provided by the IT department of an authority (in house course off site with internal trainer) or an external provider (course provided off site with external trainer) were popular choices with the authorities surveyed. Managers felt that staff benefited from being away from the workplace to learn where colleagues and library users could not interrupt training. The low ICT skills of staff were another factor in this decision as self-directed learning might be problematic for staff. As one manager explained:

"We operate it as a release system by getting people out of the workplace and they feel much more confident about not being interrupted all the time by phone calls and being told 'this is more important you've got to get on and serve the customers', they are away from that kind of environment. And they also have one to one, well, one to seven access to a tutor, which means there's always somebody there that can help them whenever they get stuck and that's been really important" (Manager A).

One disadvantage in attending external training for staff in larger authorities was the time spent travelling to colleges and test centres, a problem raised in both focus groups. Staff also needed time to practice what they had learnt at classes and finding the opportunity to do this was often difficult especially for staff in libraries without adequate PCs before the full rollout of the People's Network. Staff from one authority noted in the focus group that there had not been enough PCs available for staff to use in the first year of training, although the management had introduced laptops for staff to use as a means of overcoming this difficulty:

"I know some of the first felt (it was) more of a struggle because they didn't have the facilities to do it everywhere at the right time. It was impossible to do it like that" (Librarian).

"Some of them have actually been given laptops to take home and practice on, because there's no other way for them to get at them which is really good, a real huge change in what libraries expect to be given. It's a big culture change and long may it last!" (Team Leader).

Participants in both focus groups had followed the ECDL programme. Staff from Authority E thought that the training had been a success overall and praised the authority for thinking through the best course of training for staff and choosing tutor led programmes. Training was continually monitored and suggestions put into place to improve the training for successive groups of staff. In addition, training was undertaken quite slowly to give staff the opportunity to pass. Staff in Authority G had mixed opinions about their training; they had followed the ECDL programme at local centres and felt that the training had been rushed. Suggestions for improved training from this group included more time to practice and study and tailoring training to practical tasks staff had to perform.

Self Study

The modal value for all forms of self-study was 3, *good*. Over half (53.7%) of respondents indicated that they had learnt at home on a PC by themselves or with the help of family or friends (fig. 3). Almost a fifth of this group felt that this was an *excellent* way to learn how to use the Internet (16.2%) whilst nearly a third thought it was *very good* (31.1%). Only 0.2% judged this approach *poor*.
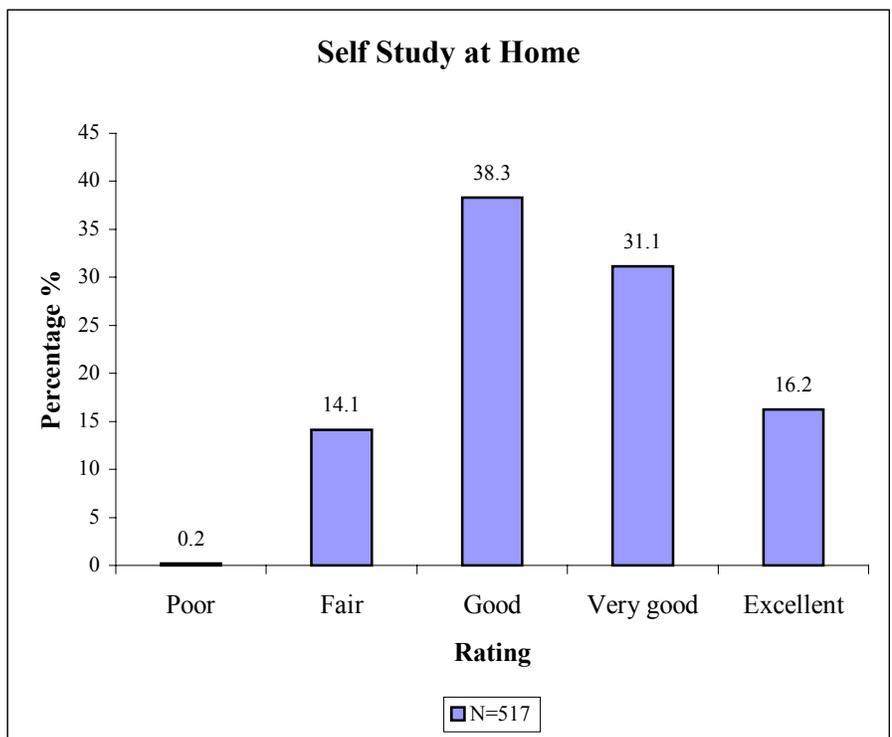

Figure 3 Self Study at Home

For some respondents, learning at home was the only option available to them, as they had not attended any training whilst for others learning at home was simply more enjoyable:

"I am self-taught through extensive use of Internet at home. This has been far more effective than any of the training at work" (Librarian).

"I invested in the Internet for private study but have found that having it at home was the best way to learn" (Senior Library Assistant).

Learning in one's spare time in the workplace was rated well, although not as emphatically as learning to use the Internet at home (fig. 4). Almost 300 respondents had utilised this approach using a tutorial package such as the BBC Web Wise or ECDL CD-ROM to learn how to use the Internet. The popular rating for learning in spare time/time off the desk with a tutorial package was *good*, (41.9%) whilst similar proportions rated it *fair* (23.3%) and *very good* (24.7%).
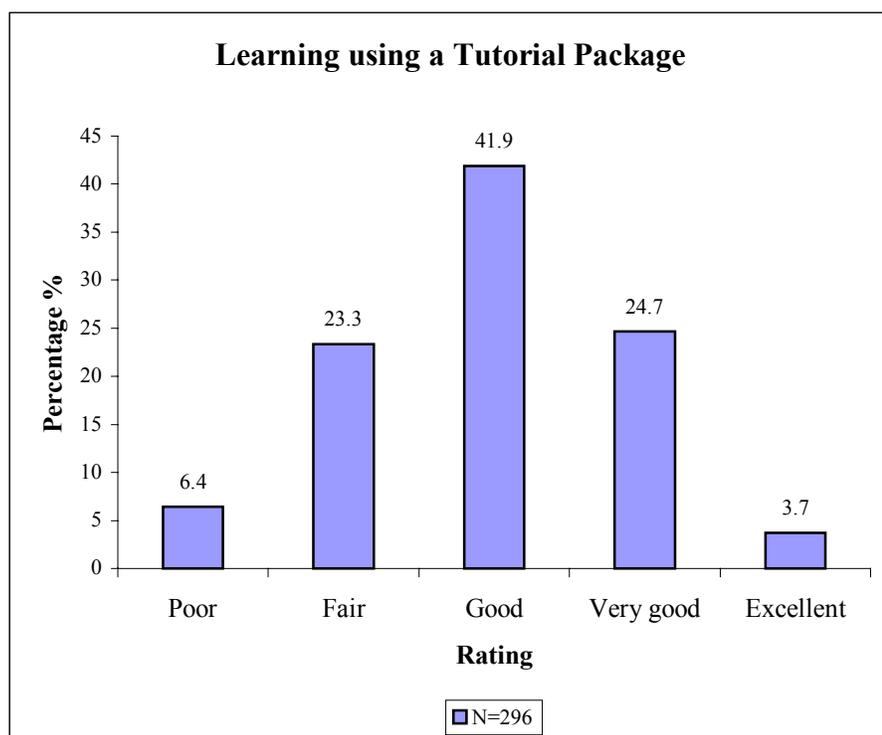
Figure 4 Learning using a Tutorial Package

Tutor Led and Online Training

Authorities B and C had opted for the Learning Line programme for their staff's NOF training. The Learning Line, a course created by Belle Associates, involves attendance at two seminars, the completion of work-based activities, support through an online conference and email and in house tutors. Tutors are other members of staff trained by the company who then deliver the course to the rest of staff. Staff may follow an eight, 12 or 16-week course and have access to the tutors for support online. The course covers aspects of all eight Expected Outcomes. For Authority C the programme meant staff would learn how to use ICT in practical ways with tasks suited to their jobs. Furthermore, the authority had more than seven hundred staff and this option was the most cost effective. Authority B had chosen the Learning Line because it was deemed impracticable to take staff away from the workplace in terms of the time involved in travelling and providing relief staff to cover those attending training:

"The route we went down was to try and minimise the impact on the service because if we were sending people off to college they'd be out of the service quite a lot longer whereas this way its two hours a week within work protected time" (Manager B).

Consideration of the 212 respondents who undertook the Learning Line reveals that staff views did not greatly differ from the overall sample. The most popular views of formal training, in house and external were all *good*, compared to *good* for the total sample for all internal training and *very good*, for external training. External training is included because some respondents followed the Learning Line programme at a different library. Similarly, ratings for projects carried out in work and personal time both had ratings of *good*, the same as the total sample. Respondents' comments about the course were mixed and included staff who felt they benefited from it and those who were less impressed:

"The Learning Line course was very enjoyable although possibly more seminars would have been useful. However it did give me more confidence using computers and the Internet" (Library Assistant).

"The Learning Line course was very good but parts of it were not relevant to the job; doing something with word processing and publisher I find would have helped with our job. Also the time factor to do all this was not enough" (Library Assistant).

"NOF ICT training for library staff was terrible" (Senior Library Assistant).

Interestingly no respondents commented critically on the actual nature of the training including the online aspects. Some respondents were disgruntled that the NOF training was compulsory, particularly if they already had Internet skills but no respondents indicated that online training was an inappropriate way to learn.

The managers in Authorities B and C believed that the Learning Line programme had been a success to some extent:

"I've stood there listening to people's testimonies, and for what we could afford, I think it's opened people's minds up a lot. It hasn't trained them fully in everything they need, but no training course does that, but because the emphasis was on practical work, practical assignments relevant to their job, staff understood how ICT skills can be used in (the) public library situation and for that alone I think its been successful" (Manager C).

"We have had a 100% success rate of everybody who's been on the course has finished the course those that haven't have transferred onto the next course. I would hope that most people say they'd got something out of it" (Manager B: management interviews).

Both authorities had encountered difficulties from staff with high-level ICT skills feeling that the course was aimed at a lower level. In Authority B, initial problems stemmed from limited access to the PCs to study, which created some negativity, but as the roll out of the Peoples Network continued, this problem was eradicated. Authority B also found that limited access to the tutors was problematic for some staff as tutors operated outside normal library working hours:

"I know it has been very frustrating for people who can't get hold of their tutor during the day because

they're only tutoring out of work hours" (Manager B).

Managers were pleased with the resources that staff produced on the Learning Line courses for both the public and colleagues. This was regarded as a favourable shift in the way in which public library staff would work and utilise ICT in the future and was also noted by some authorities in Dodd et al's evaluation of training[viii] (2002):

"The other attitude that's changing, thanks to the Learning Line, is our own production of presentations and introductory materials. PowerPoint, in particular, is popular and easy to use and staff can see the benefits of each of them, running or composing a short presentation which can be run presumably on plasma screens these will all be in libraries shortly" (Manager C).

Furthermore, both agreed that utilising this particular method of learning had opened up possibilities for future training[ix]. Manager C noted that the Learning Line online conference was being used for a custom made enquiry package for staff to access, whilst Manager B felt that this approach would be utilised in the future:

"NOF training (is) bringing them more round to the type of on-line training and using the staff confidence that we've now got to develop other forms of training, looking at customer care training perhaps through a similar method. So I think it's probably made them more open to different forms of training" (Manager B).

Time, or lack of it, was a problem encountered by staff irrespective of training methods. Two authorities were involved in the NOF and CILIP Training for Educators designed to cover Outcomes 2-8. This course also involves some on-line participation. The manager from Authority G had found that staff taking the CILIP course were not completing their work because of time pressures, which was creating a backlog of staff waiting to be trained. Staff in the focus group echoed this sentiment arguing that it was difficult to find time to practice and complete training whilst trying to provide a service to the public:

"There are 33 Outcomes, which is too much, and can be a bit tedious. Thirty-three are difficult to do when you've got 2 trolleys worth of shelving to do. If the shelving needs doing then you do that. So it's hard to enter the Outcomes. I've only entered 21 Outcomes, because by the time I get home, the last thing I want to do is switch on the computer and start entering my Outcomes" (Senior Library Assistant).

The problem of timing the training and practice was noted by the People's Network. It was acknowledged that it was a challenge for some library services, "New ways of learning – and in particular unfamiliarity with learning online has resulted in an under-estimate of the time needed to complete training and the need to build in more time for staff to practice and consolidate learning" (The People's Network, 2003).

Learning Styles

The comments made by respondents and the insights offered by managers suggest that it is difficult to offer a training method acceptable to every member of staff within an authority. Individuals learn in different ways and have personal preferences about the methods they find satisfactory. A recent evaluation of training for Outcomes 2-8 by NOF noted, "Formal sessions rather than distance learning methods are preferred by most staff" (Dodd et al, 2002). As Manager A noted, although classroom based learning was often considered appropriate for staff because of their low skills and the need to take them away from the workplace, some staff found this approach difficult as they had not undertaken formal education for a number of years and this initially made them quite negative about the training:

"Some people did have a very steep learning curve, and it does feel, it is an imposed training, something that you've got to do, and its like going back to school for a lot of people, having to sit a qualification. The training is not so bad it's the exam at the end of it, passing the modules in the ECDL that people do find difficult. That is a big turn off for a lot of people" (Manager A).

Similarly, in spite of the success of using the Learning Line, Manager B acknowledged that this approach was not universally popular with staff and some would have preferred classroom-based learning:

"There were certainly lots of training preferences, a lot of people kept saying they wanted one to one, even now they come back and they prefer one to one. There were quite a lot of people who liked to do it at their own pace provided there's a support mechanism there for them. But it just wasn't realistic to send people away to college to do it" (Manager B).

Evaluation and Realisation of Outcomes

One measure of the success of the NOF training programme is the completion rate of staff within an authority and most managers interviewed were happy to cite their authority's completion rate as a measure of the NOF training's success. NOF monitors the progress of the staff training programme[x] and staff's own awareness of accreditation and monitoring, it could be argued, contribute to a successful outcome. In the Loughborough study, 55.2% of respondents indicated that at least one form of training for the Internet was accredited or that they received a certificate or qualification whilst over 60% of respondents indicated that this was monitored and/ or evaluated.

In addition, the Loughborough study included a survey question which asked staff to consider how they felt about helping the public use the Internet at work, an important indicator of whether NOF training and the changes currently taking place in public libraries were positively affecting staff. As Sharpe notes "It is relatively easy to measure the number of staff who have completed training to the level of expected outcomes; or the number of workstations available for public use. However the quality of ICT support for users, and the efficiency gains made by more use of ICT to manage and deliver services, are vital aspects and at the same time the most difficult to quantify" (2001).

More than 900 respondents indicated how they felt about helping the public use the Internet. The most popular feeling in relation to helping the public was *generally positive*, with the majority of those answering feeling that way (51.5%). Over 1/5 of respondents, felt *equally negative and positive* (21.2%) whilst less than 1/5 felt *very positive* (19.3%). Those with negative feelings constituted less than 10% of respondents in total; 2.6% felt *very negative* and 5.4% were *generally negative* about this role at work (fig. 5).
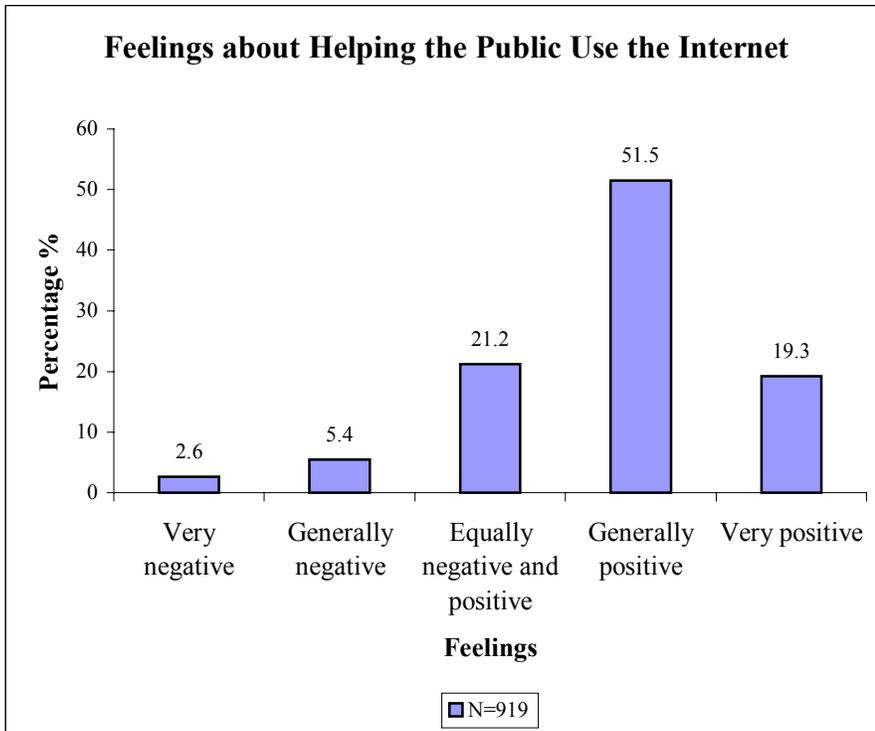
Figure 5 Feelings about Helping the Public use the Internet

For many respondents, NOF training improved confidence and willingness to use the Internet. In Authority G, for example, although some staff were quite critical of the training, they acknowledged that it had improved their confidence. The People's Network noted that successes of the NOF training included the confidence and enthusiasm of staff and the general culture change within the service (The People's Network, 2003). Dodd et al's survey of training, which included telephone interviews with 61 public libraries authorities in UK found "Boosted confidence levels and greater team spirit are evident though sharing the training experience" (2002).

Manager's perceptions of the NOF training also included a combination of views and feelings about its value and usefulness. Most agreed that it had been successful in changing attitudes and improving confidence but at the same time, it was hard work, problematic and some staff had not enjoyed it. In response to a question asking whether managers felt the training had been a success, one manager responded:

"Yes, yes and I think you'll see from those comments that people feel it has as well. It might not have been at the time there's been a lot of anguish and a lot of agony and a lot of tears through it but I think in the end it has" (Manager D).

Another stressed the challenges involved:

"It has been a long haul and hard work for those delivering it. For some staff it was a real problem as their capabilities were not what they should be, and the training had to be altered to adapt for these" (Manager H).

However, the numbers of staff passing exams and completing courses was promising and repaid the effort

invested:

"Its gone pretty well really, generally speaking there's loads of testimonies to how great it's been" (Manager C).

Conclusion

NOF training will familiarise public library staff with ICT and provide them with the skills for the effective use of the Internet, bringing many staff with little or no ICT skills at present, into a position where they can assist the public in their use of ICT. Training has taken place in conjunction with the roll out of the People's Network "the largest ever investment in the 150 years of the public library service" (Brophy, 2003) and represents a fundamental change for public library staff and users. PCs are now available to all staff providing opportunities for learning in new ways, for example, *learndirect*, the online learning and information service[xi]. The numbers of respondents in the Loughborough study who learned how to use the Internet independently at home and in work protected time and were happy to do so, suggests that future training programmes could take advantage of the willingness of some staff to learn on PCs by themselves.

Managers interviewed whose authorities had pursued NOF training with online elements felt positive about the benefits this approach had on both staff and the public. Furthermore, it was seen as opening up new possibilities for future training. One authority was already using the online conference to host a new course on enquiry skills for staff to access. Managers were pleased with the online materials staff were creating. This development suggests that some staff are close at hand to the situation envisaged in a recent DCMS report, "Libraries could become local mediators, helping people develop their information literacy skills, facilitators, aggregators and publishers of online content" (DCMS, 2003).

The research paper has demonstrated that individuals have personal preferences in relation to training and that it is impossible to please all staff. However, a more confident library personnel, familiar with the online environment may welcome its continued use in the future. Initial indications suggest that the future for online training in the public library workplace is a positive one.

Acknowledgements

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[i] For details of the European Computer Driving Licence, see http://www.ecdl.co.uk/

[ii] For details of the Learning Line, see http://www.belleassociates.co.uk/LearningLine/aspects.html

[iii] For details of the NOF CILIP Public Libraries ICT Training Educator course, see
http://www.cilip.org.uk/training_events/laict.html

[iv] For details of the People's Network, see http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/

[v] For details of the UK Online initiative, see http://www.dfes.gov.uk/ukonlinecentres/

[vi] For example, Derbyshire libraries have had Internet access since 1998 (DCMS, 2003).

[vii] For details of the CLAIT programme, see http://www.clait-training.com/

[viii] "Staff now produce material using IT including reading lists, staff newsletters, power point presentations, publicity and a web site for children known as the 'the zone for reader development'" (Dodd et al, 2002).

[ix] Jean Beck, Director of Belle Associates Ltd also notes that the Learning Line are involved in further programmes using the same methodologies (Beck, 2001).

[x] For details of NET base for public libraries, see http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/progress/libraries.asp

[xi] For details of the learndirect service, see http://www.learndirect.co.uk/