Virtual colleague support and better digital skills as a way to cope with the changing world

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Tampere City Library holds a regional development responsibility in the Pirkanmaa and Central Finland regions. The purpose of this responsibility is to support the development of the public libraries and the professional competence of library staff as well as to promote cooperation between the libraries within the area.

When the virus outbreak hit Finland in early March, many libraries were closed. The normal library work disappeared immediately or changed to something yet indefinable. However, we made a choice to transform all our professional training and colleague support to various digital platforms. Training sessions and days were organized in different applications, for example Skype, Teams, Google Hangouts and Zoom. The realization was that this was an opportunity to learn and collaborate using new tools while adjusting to the crisis.

Numbers show that the level of attendance in our sessions in spring was booming like never before. We conducted 50 different types of learning occasions which gathered 3506 library workers. The amount of participants increased by 137 percent compared to the same period last year. During the spring we also launched a virtual meeting concept called “Solution coffee breaks” that took place in the Teams application. We arranged these informal gatherings 9 times during shutdown and 1351 employees took part in the discussion. The social networks of employees also widened when people could easily contact each other in these new channels.

These virtual social meetings were designed to discuss ideas about the closing time of libraries and the changed daily working life. During the sessions we reviewed current issues related to the impact of the corona epidemic on libraries. We considered the solutions from the perspective of library services in small and large municipalities. The most important observation was that the coffee breaks in Teams provided a virtual room and place for people to build strong connections and be part of a community. We received feedback that the meetings were vitally important to employees' wellbeing.

Up to date digital skills will be in the core of future librarian’s toolbox. To address this we developed a “Digital driver’s licence” - a program for librarians to learn to use e-services needed in their work, give digital guidance to customers and produce a variety of multimedia content. During COVID-19 shutdown, the skills were much needed in promotion of remote library services. After completing the program library workers are more aware of the services the libraries should provide online. If libraries aim to provide customer service in digital channels, the development of digital skills is crucial. Furthermore, inspiring librarians to find new ways and channels to contact future customers is essential.

Because of the pandemic our personnel learned something fundamentally new about the meaning of work and the importance of colleague support. At the same time, they were motivated in taking a massive leap in digital skills. These will definitely have a positive impact on libraries’ services in the future. It is worth noticing that when times are hard people will find new ways to communicate and build better solutions together.

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