



## Are You Keeping Fit For The Job, And Are You The Best Fit For The Job?

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At Christchurch City Libraries there is a focus on learning. This means keeping 'fit for the job' by keeping skills up to date and maintaining our individual employability, so that we can respond quickly to the changes in our business. The "Keeping fit for the job" programme was introduced in response to a growing awareness of the aging of our workforce and a related aging of our skills. We also recognised a growing demand for career development opportunities that are increasingly difficult in modern flat organisational structures. Key messages in the programme included 'you are welcome to stay in the organisation as long as you are adding value, and to do this you need to maintain your skills and keep learning new ones', and 'everyone needs to keep learning – it's not enough to stand still.'

We worked with an external career consultant to develop a workshop programme for all our library professionals. The workshop enabled participants to identify their preferred skills and values fit. Our team leaders and managers worked in advance to identify the 'fitness factors' colleagues need to be fit for the job and based these on changes that are affecting libraries.

'Keeping professionally fit' has now become part of the culture. 'Keeping fit' is a phrase that is heard all around our network with some colleagues taking their skills matrix from the workshop to job interviews. There is now increased internal movement, and some colleagues have even chosen to leave the organisation to find a 'better fit' elsewhere.

These are two very challenging questions for any of us to ask ourselves, but in the business we are in, we can't afford not to ask them. Whether we think of technology, lifelong learning, education, information and leisure – we need to keep up with the rest of the world if we want libraries to survive and be relevant. I want to tell you about a programme that we have running in our organisation that challenges our colleagues to ask themselves these two questions. To begin with I want to look at whether career development is the business of the library employer. Then I will tell you how we came to develop and offer the programme to our colleagues, briefly describe how the programme works, and a review of how we are going with it.

While wearing my human resources hat and supporting our team leaders and managers with managing performance issues I was hearing a similar theme that goes like this "I don't know what to do with Mr X in my team. He is feeling like he is in a rut, in a dead end and that there is no future for him here in this organisation. He has started blaming the organisation for lack of opportunity and what's even worse is that he is starting to infect other members of my team with the same sort of thinking. I don't know what to do. I'm not a career coach. I don't have the skills and I don't see it as part of my job." Or is it?

The question I then asked myself was "Is career coaching and support a part of the job of team leader and manager?" Once I put aside the possible lack of skills and fear factor we have in advising colleagues in career matters I decided that "Yes, it is a legitimate part of the role of team leader and manager. All the time a colleague spends in our organisation is part of their career development, because we expect them to be learning all the time and adding to their skill set. This is what career development is, and I believe this is true across the whole organisation from the libraries manager to the shelver."

People aren't static in their jobs. We hope that when we take people on that we take on people who will pick things up quickly and who will be good learners. We need people who will keep adding to their skill set. Why? Because the business keeps changing and we all need to grow our skills with it. Remember when we used to write memos and everything happened more slowly over a two-to-three day time span, and then how when we had to learn how to use email everything sped up into nanoseconds? Remember when only the very super smart people could construct a PowerPoint? Now these are just regular parts of the required skill set. The other reason we need to take note of career development and be able to measure it is so that we know when it is time for people to move on – either on to another job in the organisation, on to another position with either less or more responsibility, or to move on from the organisation altogether.

So once we decided that career coaching was the business of team leaders and managers we set about working out a programme of up-skilling for team leaders and managers, and a programme of self-reflection for library colleagues. As with all our development programmes at Christchurch City Libraries we place a lot of emphasis on linking any new concept to programmes that have gone before, and ensuring that team leaders and managers are skilled to maintain the learning and momentum with their teams in the long term. How do we do this? Typically when we offer a programme or event to colleagues we work intensively with team leaders and managers both before and after the programme or event to ensure the concepts and key messages are clear.

The library's project team who develop a development programme will include a senior manager like myself, some team leaders and other managers, an external consultant for specialist expertise and sometimes colleagues from library teams. With the 'Keeping

fit' programme we worked with an external consultant Sally Lewis, who is a professional careers and transition advisor. Two team leaders who had participated in an earlier leadership development programme came forward to work on the project as they cared passionately about the issue. As the concept was new and we were not too sure how it would land, and also because we had limited resources we decided to concentrate on one group - our professional librarians. These are colleagues who at some stage have acquired a library qualification. We then spent a lot of time identifying key messages for the project, and ended up with statements like

- "It's fine to keep working here until you retire as long as you keep up-skilling and learning – it's not OK to stand still or be a passenger"
- "Learning is a partnership between the individual and the organisation – it takes both to work"
- "Everyone needs to keep learning – for some it might mean a PhD, for others it will be learning how to use the photocopier – but everyone must"

This is how we ended up with the fitness analogy. Fitness isn't static. If the muscles aren't continually exercised then they go flabby. Similarly learning is cumulative – we have to keep at it.

The other valuable work we did with team leaders and the managers was to identify what we now call 'fitness factors'. This was about identifying as specifically as possible in terms of what we can see and hear colleagues doing, behaviours that demonstrate that colleagues are fit for the job. This was hard work but so valuable. Feedback from participants showed that they really liked knowing exactly what is expected instead of very woolly performance expectations. They also know that the expectations are the same in all the teams across the network because the team leaders and managers have worked together to agree on what this good performance looks like in practice. Fairness is very important to librarians. This work has also been very important in helping us tighten up the performance standards in our performance appraisal system.

**How many participated in the programme?** Qualified colleagues could sign up for a daylong workshop, and they signed up in droves – we had 100% commitment which was a bit unexpected, and we also had other groups asking when they would get an opportunity to attend. **What did the qualified librarians do in the programme?** Colleagues attended a group session that included a lot of personal individual time spent looking at values and preferred skills to help them assess their 'fit' for library work and the organisation's values. The rest of the time they spent considering how they personally matched up with the fitness factors, and which ones they wanted to develop more. For those who felt a poor match with their current job or library work, they worked on identifying the barriers that impacted on them personally and which ones they could do something about. This process helped some colleagues to think more laterally about opportunities. Some of us will only see an opportunity if it comes along with our name on it in flashing neon lights. Sometimes we need to be less linear, defined or limiting about what will meet our developmental needs.

**How do we support team leaders and managers to keep the momentum going?** Our follow up session with team leaders and managers after the workshops was deliberately scheduled for a month or two later. This allowed time for workshop participants to take their 'Keeping fit' folders to their coaching sessions to work on their action plans with the support of their team leader or manager. The 'Keeping fit' folders now owned by each

participant have provided a wealth of personal and individualized coaching material for practical work, action planning, and focused discussion. The follow-up session for team leaders and managers also allowed for the sharing of best practice and some role-playing around handling negativity and difficult situations.

We also offered paid one-to-one follow up sessions for participants with Sally Lewis the external careers advisor for participants if they had exhausted all progress with their team leader or manager. So far only three people have taken up these sessions, but team leaders and managers feel more confident in their role knowing that either they themselves or the person they are coaching can access specialized professional help if all else fails. It is important that when a third party is used in this way that the objectives of these meetings are clear to all parties. If there are severe career issues with either the colleague or team leader/manager then the organisation needs to know about this, and there should be no expectation that the third party will 'deal with the problem'.

**How do we know the programme has been successful?** One of the most obvious things is that the phrase 'keeping fit' is now part of our library's lingo. We hear people talking about 'keeping fit for the job' and we know it's not a gym programme they are thinking about! I have now interviewed two people who have brought their 'Keeping fit' folders to the interview so that they can talk confidently about their preferred skills. And wait for it ... some people have left the organisation! Some have gone on to different libraries, and two I know of have gone and set up their own businesses – not connected with libraries either!

**What about the people who are still at the library?** These people know that there is a strong expectation about on-going learning, and that we expect them to keep moving around the library network to learn new skills and make way for others. Last year we took the programme up one level to team leaders and managers. We had thought about taking it to the unqualified library assistant level first, but team leaders and managers were so impressed with what their qualified team members were doing that they wanted to do some of their own career development. The good thing about this is that it has put pressure on us managers to provide some career coaching for our team leaders, which is great for succession planning, and also ensures that the expectations of team leaders in our organisation are consistent across the library network. We will take the programme to our unqualified assistants later this year.

**What else do we do to support the programme?** I said at the beginning that when we develop programmes we place a lot of emphasis on linking any new concepts to programmes that have gone before. The need for career coaching skills was identified early on by a group of team leaders working together in a leadership development initiative. Another programme to come out of that leadership initiative was full-scale coaching training for all team leaders and managers. This has been in place since 2001 and an extensive audit last year in 2003 shows that apart from some pockets in the library where coaching is limping along a bit and some issues with the quality of coaching documentation, overall coaching is alive and well in Christchurch City Libraries. The existence of this strong coaching framework has been a big factor in the success of the 'Keeping fit' programme. The fitness factors that we establish for each group of colleagues doing the 'Keeping fit' programme have helped clarify the performance indicators in our performance appraisal process.

**Keywords:** learning, employability, career-development, performance, up-skilling