CREATING A SUPPORTIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT FOR THE LIBRARY EMPLOYEE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Brady Lund
BRADY D. LUND

- Bachelor of Arts in Communication Sciences and Disorders, Wichita State University
- MLS, Emporia State University
- PhD Student, Emporia State University

Some recent relevant publications:

WHAT IS A SPECIAL NEED?

• A special need is a support need for an individual made necessary by a physical, mental, mental, or communication disability.

• Individuals who have one or more special need may be referred to as “an individual with special needs.”

• There is disagreement among medical professionals, educators, parents, and individuals with disabilities themselves as to whether it is best to say “an individual with special needs,” “an individual with disability” (both of which are examples of person-first language, putting the person before the disability), “disabled person,” or using the specific disability, e.g., “autistic person.” In my training in education and health professions, I was taught to use person-first language. However, there is a growing movement in the literature and public discussion to return to using disability-first language (because it is argued that using person-first language makes the disability seem as though it is something bad or wrong).
WHY FOCUS ON SPECIAL NEEDS AND EMPLOYMENT?

• Many disabilities last throughout the lifespan.

• There is a lot of great literature on library services to children with disabilities, but less so on adults with disabilities.

• In general, there is less research about adults with disabilities than children with disabilities, though individuals with disabilities will spend more of their lives as adults than as children.

• Very little focus in the LIS literature on employment for individuals with disabilities/special needs.
EMPLOYMENT AND DISABILITIES

• Employment is a major part of life for most adult human beings – many individuals with disabilities want to participate in this part of life and derive value from it.

• Employment can also be the only source of income for individuals with less severe disabilities; even those who receive disability assistance from the government are generally not making a good living salary.

• There are many qualified individuals who are unable to find employment due to their disability status.

• Research has indicated that, while individuals with disabilities struggle to get full employment, when they do they tend to be more loyal and have longer tenure at a single organization than peers without disability.
WHAT CAN LIBRARIES DO?

• Because libraries are service-oriented organizations, I believe library employees, on average, have a higher level of empathy and understanding than other industries.
IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES AND PROPOSING SOLUTIONS
HOW LANGUAGE IS USED IN LIBRARIES

• Unfortunately, libraries use inconsistent vocabularies that lead to many challenges for individuals with communication disorders.

• There are many reasons for inconsistent vocabularies, like regional dialect variations, that are shared among all industries, however inconsistency in librarianship likely also stems from unique challenges with different types of libraries and the division between library science and information science.

• Poor language use is an information problem.

• We should think about how using language is similar to providing directions to an information resource. If we were to give directions to a patron who has only used Dewey Decimal classification within our LCC library, they are going to struggle finding the resource. The symbols are very similar, and describe the same resources, but a small difference in notation can make a major difference in comprehension. Similarly, calling a job duty I only know as “reference services” as “patron service” could make it impossible to understand.
HOW WE COMMUNICATE

• We are always communicating.

• The speed at which we communicate can greatly effect comprehension.

• In general, speaking at a rate of 130-140 words per minute is ideal.

• Modelling communication off of classic PBS figures Mr. Rogers and Bob Ross works very well, because these figures studied communication and education and understood that the speed and intonation with which they spoke was vital to creating a sense of calm and clarity that appealed to children (and listeners in general)
ACCESSIBILITY/UNIVERSAL DESIGN

• When spaces within a library are not accessible, it sends a clear message (whether intended or not) that this is a place that does not welcome those who are differently abled.

• The same is true of a work environment that is unnecessarily too loud, too bright, too dark, too crowded (problematic for individuals with sensory challenges like hearing loss, blindness, or autism).

• The principles of universal design are a valuable guide for employers to create a welcoming work environment.
  • Principles:
    • Equitable Use
    • Flexibility in Use
    • Simple and Intuitive Use
    • Perceptible Information
    • Tolerance for Error
    • Low Physical Effort
    • Size and Space for Approach and Use
TRAINING AND CAREER SPAN SUPPORT

• Robertson (1990) indicated that modelling proper work behavior and then observing as the new employee performed this behavior is helpful for improving the quality and retention of employees.

• Particularly new employees with learning and emotional or behavioral disabilities may benefit greatly from having job duties modelled to them and then being observed to ensure that they are performing these duties correctly.

• It is certainly not good to throw someone (really, anyone) in a position where they have to just “figure things out” while they go.

Positive behavioral support (PBS) is generally used for individuals with more severe emotional/behavioral challenges (especially lower-functioning autism). The aim of PBS is to avoid harsh punishments (e.g., suspension, termination of employment) for individuals who might not fully understand or be able to control challenging behaviors (e.g., getting excessively upset when a display is not arranged properly).

PBS involves:

- Understanding the problematic behavior
- Identifying what causes the behavior
- Identifying a replacement behavior
- Teaching a more appropriate replacement behavior and providing support/reward when the replacement behavior is used
RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION
A FEW CASE STUDIES


RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS


• Dow, M.J. (1999). Toward a technology of positive behavioral support for individuals with Autism: An ideal information system. Available at https://esirc.emporia.edu/handle/123456789/3338


LIS AND DISABILITIES WEBSITE

• For those interested in further information and/or discussion, please visit and subscribe to lisdisabilities.wordpress.com. This website was created by myself for a disability special interest group within the Association for Library and Information Science Education, but has resources for anyone interested in this topic and information about upcoming events.
MAKING CHANGES TO SUPPORT AN EMPLOYEE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS HARMS NO ONE, AND OFTEN BENEFITS MANY MORE THAN JUST THAT ONE EMPLOYEE.
THANK YOU!

• My contact information:
  • Brady Lund
  • blund2@g.emporia.edu
  • 316-249-3338
  • I may not have the answer to every question, but I will always work my hardest to find someone who does.

• If you are seeking library school education, consider ESU, I am really proud of the school’s growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion in librarianship over the past couple of years (this is a unsolicited advert).