The Training Model of the Information Resource Centers

By Muhammad Umar Farooq

I can't forget the year 1997 when I joined the American Embassy Islamabad's Information Resource Center (IRC) as an Intern. After my graduation in Library and Information Sciences from a remote university of Pakistan, it was quite amazing for me to join a Foreign Mission whose lending library was going to transform into a state of the art resource center. I began to find the gap between what I had learned from the university and the environment in which I was supposed to start my work. I was expecting to do manual cataloging and classification of library materials, whereas I was involved in downloading the MARC records. I was preparing myself to use print volumes of encyclopedias, almanacs, directories and other information sources but I was asked to consult CD-ROMs, Internet and the online databases as well to provide the value added reference and research services. I had learned about the Books In Print and Ulrich Directories for the selection and ordering of books and magazines whereas here the acquisition librarian was more reliant on Amazon.com, Baker and Taylor website and other virtual vendors and publishers. I also saw for the first time the use of barcode reader at the circulation desk for the issue and receipt of library materials and verification of the library members. My vision about the application of information technology in libraries was limited to the use of library software for acquisitions, cataloging, and circulation. Whereas, here I learned that the smart application of information technology in libraries also depends upon the leadership, strategies, resources, and communications.

"Competencies for Information Professionals" -- Key Professional Document:

I also remember the day when the Director of the IRC called me in his office and shared a Special Libraries Association's (SLA) popular document "Competencies for Special Librarians of the 21st Century." He was of the opinion that every information professional in Pakistan should compare his/her professional and personal skills with the competencies that were highlighted in SLA's document. When I thoroughly read it, I again found myself way short of the SLA standards. However, good leadership, excellent working environment, and professional training helped me a lot to follow the SLA's professional standards.

Now we have its revised version called "Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century" that seems to be broader in its scope. As Library and Information Science (LIS) students and practitioners, we come across a variety of literature on librarianship, however, I would say that the SLA's "Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century" should be considered as an essential part of the Library and Information Sciences educational curriculum and training courses.

Continuing Professional Training – Key Learning Tool:

When Molly Dinneen asked to me to write down something about my job, I started to explore the strong features of my career with the Information Resource Center. I came across a couple of facets of my organization like human resources, information resources, information technology, information services, and professional training etc. I have to place the training at the top, as it was one of the features of my organization that helped me in bridging the gap between the traditional theory at Library and Information Science (LIS) program and the modern practices in a state of the art and technology equipped library. The professional training is also vital to understand, digest and follow the policies, principles, and mission of the parent organization. For me the training, particularly the group training, is not only a means to improve the professional skills or to learn the new technologies, but it also helps us to study, observe, and understand the others cultures, values, and psychology. So in a way the training also promotes understanding and tolerance among the diverse cultures and societies.

Training System of Information Resource Centers (IRCs):

The programs and operations at the Information Resource Centers (IRCs) are special and unique, therefore, good staff, and not simply a degree, is required for the job. The right person can learn to manage the IRC operations with proper training. Another justification is that the State Department spends approximately $ 1 million annually for access to online databases; therefore, the training to effectively use these resources is also a priority here at the U.S. Mission.

The training at the U.S. Embassies begins with a foundation course, with a follow-up course related to the needs of particular regions. Although a new IRC employee has an LIS degree, he/she also needs to have an overview of the values, history, and government of the United States.

There are 170 Information Resource Centers at American Embassies and Consulates around the world. The information professionals working at the Information Resource Centers do enjoy the diverse training prospect. There are following types of training opportunities at the IRCs:

1) Standard Training: This training program brings together a selected group of information professionals from the IRCs of different countries in Washington D.C. every year. The participants spend two weeks at Foreign Service Institute (FSI), where they learn about American culture and values and advancements in online databases. The training includes visits to popular libraries of Washington D.C. They are also given a chance to join a library school for a week. They participate for one week in the annual conference of Special Libraries Association (SLA) or American Library Association (ALA).

American supervisors at their posts select the participants for this program. I consider myself lucky to have availed this opportunity in the year 2002.

2) Focus Training: Although the mission of the IRCs in different countries is the same, however, they operate in different IT infrastructure, languages, cultures, security environments, and public diplomacy concerns. Therefore, in addition to the annual training program, there are many other regional and more focused opportunities for the IRC staff. For example, many information professionals are responsible for the maintenance of homepages at their Embassies and selected webmasters from time to time come together at Regional Program Office (RPO) in Vienna, Austria to learn the Webmaster skills. Similarly, many IRC staff members attend special courses on advanced use of the Internet and on communications and presentation skills. There are some project-based trainings like the training on how to plan, establish, manage, and evaluate the American Corners in different regions.

My first training was on "Communication with Key Audiences" at RPO Vienna in 2000 and it was the turning point for my career in the LIS. The other more focused course was "Working with the Press" which I attended in the same year at the U.S. Embassy Bangkok, Thailand. Perhaps, as the result of this training, I was selected to work with the White House Press Advance Team during the Vice President Dick Cheney's visit to Oman in March 2002.

3) Virtual Training: Equally important are the online training courses through using the Ms Office, Internet, E-mail, Multimedia and other online resources. This kind of training is very useful to improve the business communication skills of librarians. Each online writing course comprises different lessons and assignments covering a wide range of written communication in routine office work like drafting letters, fax messages, memos, weekly result reports and cables. The participants of such courses are selected from the IRCs of different countries and they are also involved in the cross-cultural debates.

I completed the advanced online writing course in August-October 2000. I learned about selection of appropriate words, clear and to the point communication with the target persons. Moreover, it provided tips for reviewing articles in newspapers and to make their accurate summaries and this is helpful in preparing the weekly reports of the IRC.

Conclusion:

The traditional LIS education is also essential as it provides the foundation for our profession. Also, the LIS theory explores the history and evolution of the librarianship in different era. The library science educators do review the LIS courses from time to time, because it isn't one time job. As the nature of information sources changes, the sophistication of information technology advances, and the quantity of knowledge explodes; the job market of librarians itself demands revision and expansion in the curricula of the LIS.

Even if the curriculum of an LIS school is up to the mark, the institution is required to train its new information professionals. Every type of library (i.e. public, academic, or special etc.) has to impart a proper training to its employees for better performance and productivity.

At the same time, it is true that not all the libraries or their parent institutions can afford the expensive and sophisticated training model of the IRCs. However, if they put the professional training on priority and spend some resources and time on it, they can get best out of their employees. One way is to arrange the in-house training sessions at their libraries. Moreover, the libraries of the same kind or in the same region can coordinate training on different LIS modules. The Internet is itself a good learning, teaching and training tool. The information professional can improve the professional skills through reading the professional literature, becoming a member of professional association, and consulting the value added professional websites.

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The author is reference specialist at the Information Resource Center (IRC), U.S. Embassy, Islamabad- Pakistan. He can be reached at:
farooqmu@state.gov
umarmuhammad@hotmail.com