Qualitative Evidence Guiding Modification of a Local Health Department Library Program

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Problem

An established partnership (PHIA) providing library services to a local health department from an academic health sciences library was experiencing an unexpected drop in utilization three years into the program. Our objective was to identify factors leading to the decline in use and determine which features of the program were and were not functioning as intended.

PHIA Program Description

Partners:
- Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD)
- University of Pittsburgh Health Sciences Library System (HSLS)

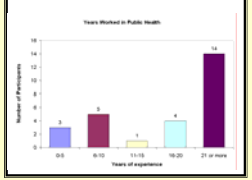
Services:
- Program Website
- Literature searches
- Reference assistance
- Training
- Document delivery via the Internet
- HSLS borrowing privileges
- Interlibrary loan service

Program Website Before Study

Methods

Study Type: Qualitative research using focus groups.
Interview Script: Ten questions were designed to promote discussion of information seeking preferences, need for information at work, barriers to information access due to workplace and library program characteristics, knowledge of the library program, and suggestions for improvement.
Recruitment: Participants were recruited through health department program directors.
Participation: Supervisors and front line staff from 10 health department programs participated in one of 5 focus groups. There were 27 participants in total.
Focus Group Sessions: The focus groups were facilitated by a librarian unaffiliated with the PHIA program. They were held in ACHD offices. Each lasted approximately 1 hour.
Session Documentation and Analysis: Recorded sessions were transcribed, coded thematically, and analyzed based on LaPelle's method.[1]

Participant Data



1. LaPelle, Nancy. Simplifying qualitative data analysis using general purpose software tools. Field Methods. 16(1): 85-108.

Results

Focus groups produced a detailed picture of health department employee thoughts about, use of, and nonuse of the library program. Results showed a need for:

- Changes to Website navigation and vocabulary
- Tailored Website content for each health department program area
- Increased visibility of the library program
- Further training, tailored to program areas
- Attention to time sensitive information needs

Website Navigation

Focus Group Quotes

"…but I just find the whole thing - too many acronyms, too much stuff to sort through, so its like, do I have to go to PubMed for something?"

"I wouldn't know, (Yeah) I wouldn't have any idea that it meant catalog. " [Referring to PittCat, the online catalog]

"It just seems like a lot of navigating and clicking to find what you want."

"...user help field at the first page would be very helpful "

Actions Taken
- Consolidated help section
- Reduced jargon on website
- Simplified navigation
- Changed link names from nouns to action oriented ie, change PubMed to "find articles"
- Changed home page navigation to emphasize program-specific content

Program Website After Study

Website Content

Focus Group Quotes

"…if they can customize the PHIA website by our discipline, by our programs, that might be a lot, that might cause us to use it more often, that might be much more user friendly."

" … is there a service available ..through the library that would set up an individual tailored account for a person would survey certain publications, and certain articles of interest and notify you that by email or otherwise that articles from that particular journal had been published on that topic?"

Actions Taken:
- Identified topics of interest to programs
- Created automated searches in PubMed
- Training on My NCBI and auto alerts

Program Area Webpage Example

Program Visibility

Focus Group Quotes

"Those were helpful [the Tuesday tips], I keep them in a file because sometimes I remember I read this somewhere I know that I know this was something let me see I'll put out my clips."

"…but when you only hear it once. I mean we even have the stickers on all our computers, the PHIA how to contact you know, I think it's just something that needs constant reminding.."

"I just think that it fades from their radar screen because they have so many other things to do, so even though they may think they want information"

Actions Taken
- Increased frequency of Tuesday Info Tip emails
- Added shortcuts to the program website on health department computers

Future actions
- Revise and distribute print publicity – flyers, posters, stickers

Training

Focus Group Quotes

"The only thing I would probably do is have some way that the staff knows that it's there. Whether that's some quick and dirty training, 30 to 45 minutes once a year or something."

"I'm still trying to learn PubMed. Every time I go to a training class its fine while I'm there, but I forget it because I don't use it. "

"I don't know if its clear to people exactly what they have to do, and what they can find and what they can't find, I think that more people are concerned with technology they don't quite understand."

" Google is fine for just general stuff but you need to know how to do advanced searches of the scientific literature for the kinds of questions I have."

Actions Taken
- Refresher classes tailored for each program initiated
- One hour library program overview added to all new employee orientations
- Increase number of Tuesday Info Tips

Time Sensitive Information Needs

Focus Group Quotes

"If you file a request it's like 24 48 hours before you get a response and the actual article if it's something other that the abstract, and by then you know, you say to yourself how bad do I need it, you know, how much time do I have to devote to this."

"…I don't have time to sit there and do all these different searches, but the staff had questions..."

"I get questions occasionally from our public information officer, and if he wants the information he does want it very quickly within that day usually because he has to give out a report or he needs the information to give to our director."

Actions Taken
- Educate health department employees on document delivery realities
- Collect links to free resources, publicize them
- Reminders to health department employees of the availability of reference assistance.