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Ask Us Anything

Engaging Library Staff in Ongoing Change

When the University of Toronto Libraries transitioned to our new Library Services Platform (LSP) in 2021, we were in the middle of a worldwide pandemic. Most of the staff at our dozens of libraries were working partially or entirely from home. The in-person training we had planned had to be reconfigured for remote delivery. We opted for a flipped-classroom model: our functional teams prepared videos demonstrating the basic actions and things people had to be able to do, followed by synchronous sessions where attendees could ask questions. But as the go-live day was approaching, we were worried that people might not be prepared (or might not *feel* prepared—which, while not the same thing, can be just as detrimental).

Our system is large, complicated, and diverse. We have between 40 and 70 libraries depending on how you count, and they range in staff size from one person to more than a hundred. Some of our libraries are centrally managed, with shared acquisitions, materials processing, and direction; some units are federated with the main university and their staff are not technically employed by the university; and some hospital libraries in our Health Science Information Consortium share nothing with the rest of us but a catalogue. Most of the libraries are on one campus in downtown Toronto (several of them are in the same building even), but we also have two large libraries on other campuses and one off-campus seminary, plus the hospitals in the consortium, which are spread out across the region. There is also diversity in terms of the types of work each person learning needed to understand: in our larger libraries some staff have very narrow scopes to work within, but at the smaller libraries people needed a working knowledge of all the system components before they would be able to work effectively.

Our concern was how to take the temperature of such a large and diverse group. How could we tell if people understood what they should be doing, and how could we intervene if there was a misunderstanding? By this point in the pandemic, many of us had spent a lot of time in large online meetings, and it was clear that many people are not comfortable speaking in that context, and those who are often avoid asking questions to save face. We wanted the tone of our sessions to be that no question is too small, and that there are no stupid questions. We initially proposed the two weekly "AMA" (Ask me Anything) sessions as a stopgap: a way to bridge the difference between what we wanted our training to be and what we were able to deliver. In the years since that time, the AMAs have grown into something different: stranger and I think more valuable. While still supporting LSP knowledge (unlike our previous system, our LSP changes so frequently that we regularly have new things

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to share), the AMA sessions have also become a space where we come together to talk about how we work as a system.

What an AMA Is, and What We Did

The AMA format was popularized by Reddit,[1] a social media site that uses fora. In it, a person (or group of people) starts a text thread saying who they are, and members of the public ask them questions. The host then responds to the most popular questions (forum members can vote to indicate popularity). Although a host may have formal, structural authority outside of the forum, they are primarily answering questions as an authority on their own experience. This makes for a less hierarchical and more personal relationship between expert and novice: as Alexis Madrigal puts it, "The point of the AMA is that human empathy exists."[2]

We knew that we wanted to be able to provide a more immediate response, so our AMA sessions were video conference calls instead of text-based, making them more synchronous. We had seven functional teams that had developed training, and we wanted to make sure the sessions were not so broad that people would feel intimidated asking questions, but not so narrow that our solo librarians would have to come to too many sessions to get all of their questions answered. We settled initially on two weekly meetings: one for Technical Services (Acquisitions, Finance, and Metadata) and one for User Services (Fulfillment, Discovery, and Reading Lists), with representatives from our Analytics team present in both sessions. We had one person in each series of meetings act as the host: keep their camera on, read questions out, and ask specific people to answer them.

Demonstrations and Noodle Time

After the first few weeks, the meetings were no longer pure AMAs—the functional teams started preparing things to say before attendee questions were asked. Different structures for the sessions emerged organically between the two groups. On the Technical Services side, the teams often prepared more formal demonstrations: it wasn't uncommon for someone to prepare a slide deck for an AMA presentation. On the User Services side, as one technical service person who attended both types of sessions put it to me, it became more of a talk show. Not only the host but also the main point person for each team would leave their cameras on most of the time, and they would have a free-form conversation before questions started and as there were lulls.

Toronto had one of the longest lockdown periods in North America, and it was very hard on people. Although we attempted to retain casual, spontaneous workplace interactions, they were difficult to engineer. In one particular User Services AMA, the chat before we got down to business was just people on the call (point people and otherwise) discussing their favorite places to get fresh noodles within a fifteen-minute walk from their office. It started with one of our regular presenters talking about his lunch plans, but soon lots of people were chiming in from the chat, suggesting other places they like near campus. It struck me that within the context of a training session, we had accidentally created that longed-for "water cooler" feeling: people casually inhabiting the same space (albeit digitally) and chatting before work happens. This feeling of casualness and ease was rare in those times, and one that was difficult to cultivate.

What about People Who Are Not in the Room?

A significant number of people attend our AMAs: we regularly get between 40 and 60 people from across our different campuses, and we even have some regular attendees from the hospital consortium. But that still represents a minority of our staff who use the LSP, and we want to make sure that people who aren't able to attend can still benefit from the discussion. We make an archival recording of the sessions, but decided early on that we would not distribute these recordings: primarily to encourage people to speak more freely, but also to minimize the exposure of personally identifiable data when demonstrating circulation transactions. Instead, we get a volunteer each time to write up minutes of the session, which we post on our intranet site with other LSP training and documentation. We also post some excerpts of the recording when a useful skill is demonstrated so we can share the learning.

How Our AMAs Have Evolved

During our first year, we continued biweekly sessions. At the start of 2022, we switched to one session per week, alternating between Tech Services and User Services. In the fall of 2022, as our campuses were returning to a full reopening, we dropped down to one session per month and merged the two groups into one big LSP AMA. I was a little nervous about how this would work—would the more formal presentation style coexist with the talk show and noodle time? It did, but it also created a new kind of venue for our institution: one where the technical side of many different functional areas could be discussed together. Take a recent example: our serials cataloguing librarian presented with a colleague about a new technical solution that had been implemented to automate the creation of holdings statements as new serial items are added (while also preserving the previous manually created holdings statements). The point of her presentation was to explain technical information to cataloguers, but because I was there representing the Discovery team, I took the opportunity to demonstrate how these holdings statements could be interpreted by users looking at our Discovery system. Our Fulfillment representative then talked about how itemization changes the ways serials are circulated and digitized, and our Analytics representative described how hybrid records affect our ability to report on our holdings. We are an organization (and an industry) where people develop a high level of specialized technical knowledge and skill in different areas, and the silos that naturally emerge in those environments sometimes mean we struggle to take full advantage of each other's work. The AMA, by virtue of having an open-door policy and also being a venue for hearing crucial information in different areas, has become one of very few places where this can happen.

The AMA sessions are continuing today, though less frequently. They're scheduled monthly (so people block the time and are available), but if a significant number of our presenters are unavailable due to another obligation, we usually cancel the meeting instead of rescheduling—it works out to about eight per year. We plan to continue them at this rate for as long as they are useful: as long as attendance is significant and our functional teams find them effective. Now that we have emerged from the lockdown and our staff have other opportunities for casual interaction, "noodle time" is a less important part of our sessions, but we have maintained a casual tone.

The AMA format would not work for every meeting, and it is in no danger of replacing our established practices. I think the time it would be most useful is when we know there

are questions in a community that doesn't regularly meet together, but it is not clear what their most pressing concerns are. This is reflected in the way the format has been adopted by our central library leaders, who had a series of AMAs before our campus reopening and a recent one showcasing our library committees. It has helped us understand each other better, and that helps us work together better as a system. ✕

Notes

1. "R/IAMA" Reddit, accessed June 23, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/.
2. Alexis C. Madrigal, "AMA: How a Weird Internet Thing Became a Mainstream Delight," *The Atlantic,* January 7, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/01/ama-how-a-weird-internet-thing-became-a-mainstream-delight/282860/.