
The debate over using paraprofessionals at the reference desk is nothing new. As Morgan points out, it has raged since at least the mid 1960s. It has perhaps become more urgent in recent years since ready-reference statistics have significantly declined and most budgets have either remained stagnant or decreased. More and more libraries are considering using paraprofessionals to help provide reference services. The only way to ensure that patrons will be well served, however, is to properly train those who will help them. This book is an excellent guide on how to do exactly that.

With reference experience in university, public, and corporate libraries, Morgan has the expertise to make this book relevant to a variety of different library settings.

She defines paraprofessionals as everyone who works in a library and who does not have a Masters of Library Science (MLS) degree. The underlying assumption of this book is that paraprofessionals should not replace professionals in reference services, but should work alongside them in order to provide the best possible service. Training Paraprofessionals is very clearly written and structured. It provides a logical progression through the training cycle. Clear overviews of what each chapter will accomplish are given at each chapter’s beginning and support materials are inserted where necessary. The author is very effective at making you think about your own situation and your library’s needs, while providing you with ideas and examples of how to address those needs.

The book is divided into ten chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the pros and cons of employing paraprofessionals in reference services. This chapter is not an exhaustive resource for making that decision, though it does include a good list for further reading.

The real strength of this book is how it deals with the actual training of paraprofessionals. The remaining nine chapters cover the complete training cycle, from the assessment of training needs, through the design, development and implementation of training, up to and including an evaluation of training.

Chapters 2 and 3, deal with the basics of what to train and how to train. At the heart of this lies the process of defining the role of the paraprofessional in your library’s reference services. Without a clear understanding of what you expect your staff to accomplish, training will not be nearly as effective. This helps the reader pinpoint training needs and prioritize the order in which to address those needs.
Chapters 4 through 8 deal with the actual training itself. A satisfyingly wide variety of different aspects are considered here, including staff orientation to the library, and the development of basic and advanced reference skills. Where necessary, Morgan has included specific training objectives, checklists, training handouts and practice questions to help the trainer. Chapter 8 deals with the all important concept of communication, including answering routine questions, providing guidance on when to refer a question to a librarian, and conducting a successful reference interview.

Chapters 9 and 10 tackle performance management and evaluation and the resultant revision of training. So often we forget to continue training. The information landscape changes rapidly, and performance evaluation will point out where further training is needed. Evaluation will enable the trainer and the trainee to reflect on how successful the original training was and how the training plan needs to be adjusted for future success.

As this is a second edition, you will be asking whether you should purchase it if you already have the first one. The answer is a resounding yes. The first edition was published in 1993, which means that it does not consider any changes to the library world that have occurred since then, most notably "virtual reference, increasing use of electronic resources, the move to single-service points, an increase of self-service for patrons, the decrease of ready-reference questions, and the general appearance of new technologies," (Morgan, ix). While both deal with the same principles of training, the additional materials dealing with these new challenges, and the updated bibliography are well worth the price of this new edition.

The examples and templates provided in this book are very useful. However, it would have been beneficial if they could have been collected as an appendix for easier referral.

Training paraprofessionals to do reference service is an important undertaking for any library. If you are looking for a book to help you decide whether or not you should employ paraprofessionals at the reference desk, this is not it. If, however, you have made that decision already, this book is an essential resource to help you train them. Libraries need highly knowledgeable and skilled personnel to answer our patron's questions. To do so effectively, those staff need to be trained and Morgan provides an excellent framework for how to do just that. Highly recommended for all libraries that require their paraprofessional staff to provide any kind of reference services.

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