

Fitting research into your day job. Open space session at the EAHIL 2015 Workshop in Edinburgh

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Abstract

The aim of the session was to make the participants discuss and aggregate ideas and inspiration on how to fit research into your busy working schedule. By using ideas from the open space method participants had the opportunity to, at their own pace, discuss a number of issues regarding this topic. This paper describes the methods used in the session, the outcomes and the usefulness in everyday practice.

Key words: libraries; medical research; library science.

Introduction

Open space is a method that is often used to explore a subject [1]. In its purest form it is up to the participants to decide on the subject/s to be discussed, and the discussion is self-moderated as all participants move between subject areas at their own pace. The subject of this session was initially broken down into five areas for discussion by the session leader:

- My boss doesn't support my research efforts ...
- I find it hard to prioritise research projects ...
- I lack the needed research skills ...
- My colleagues doesn't support my work ...
- I lack the motivation, what's in it for me?

A total of 33 people had signed up for the session, and approximately 25 participated. At the beginning of the 60 minute session, the session leader explained the aim and the method, having prepared five flipcharts with the subject areas listed above and two empty flipcharts for the participants to add new subject areas to discuss.

During the session the participants moved around the room, forming new discussion groups and adding suggestions for solutions to the flipcharts. To some extent, the subjects overlapped as described below.

Discussion outcomes

On the topic of having a **boss who doesn't support** you doing research, there were a lot of interesting ideas to take home, including identifying what's in it for the boss; tweaking what you want to do to make links with the boss' priorities; showing the boss the advantages or new skills that you

learned in your research, as well as involving your boss in your research work. There were also comments that medical librarians *should* participate in the research projects of the medical faculty, adding information about the value of this [2, 3].

During the discussion about **prioritising research projects** it was noted that research is not (officially) included in job descriptions, making it feel like you "steal" time from other tasks that need to be done. The focus of this subject area was time management, and that if you have a good structure you might get time for research, e.g. setting aside the first 30 minutes of your working day every day for research/writing. If you are able to set up a research objective as part of your personal development plan, it will help you not to set your own limitations. An important opinion regarding this is that academic librarians should know how science makes progress, and one way is to do science yourself, and make errors along the way. You need to integrate research projects into your routines and use project management methods (e.g. Agile [4]), action research, evidence based practice and incorporate this into your everyday practice. A way forward could be to start up international collaboration projects with libraries of different sizes and in different settings. For overcoming the threshold of writing up your research for publication you could use writing retreats, for individuals or groups.

The discussion about **lacking the needed research skills** got the longest list of suggestions for solutions, not surprisingly considering the overall workshop topic. A number of suggestions

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were discussed: collaboration to get started; internationality; forming “nurseries” for research projects, both nationally and internationally; networking with researchers, becoming part of their projects; but also starting on a small scale, making poster presentations and writing in your own language. There was also a strong sense of encouragement: the need to build confidence to do our own research, and also to connect with faculty/researchers to dare to put our skills into practice. Perhaps it would be easier to do your own research if you didn't call it research? Maybe the label “development work” (as in R&D) would make it easier to have the courage? Some participants felt the lack of knowledge in certain areas of research, e.g. statistics and excel, and suggested ways of overcoming this: find colleagues that have the skills; participate in lectures for undergraduates on methodology, statistics etc. if it is ok with the teacher; MOOCHs and other online learning resources could be valuable; and of course practice, practice, practice ...

The topic “my colleagues doesn't support my work” was changed into “**my colleague/s doesn't support my work**” acknowledging that some librarians work in small medical libraries and have no colleagues. A lot of the discussion was along the lines of making your enemies your allies; finding out what part of the job your colleagues think is important and researching that, collaborating with your colleagues making them co-authors. To market research and research work you could use journal clubs, exchange practices, market research ideas/projects, add research as a standing item on work place meeting agendas to build a research culture.

The fifth topic “I lack the motivation, **what's in it for me?**” was also changed, into “what's in it for me?” at the very beginning of the session, giving a lot of examples of positive effects of doing research on the job:

- personal satisfaction;
- time for reflection;
- credibility with other professional groups/students, adding value and trust to the library (if I teach EBM classes, shouldn't I be an evidence based librarian?);
- wage increase;
- advancing your career;
- promoting your institution;
- increasing the quality of your library services as well as your professional competency;
- project → conference presentation → travel!! →

meet colleagues → new ideas/new projects.

Someone also suggested establishing the fact that research is what you do might get you off tasks in the library that you find less interesting?!

Given the possibility to add one or two additional questions/problems to discuss, we ended up with a list of new challenges: “I don't get travel money to meet other researchers” (to this someone added the solutions of travel grants and/or scholarships); “I don't know my research gaps”; “When and where to start” (organisational challenge); “No time to *read* research”; “Making ideas *doable*”; “How to be legitimate to do research in an academic environment when we don't have PhD degree”.

At the end of one of these flipcharts someone added the information – that could fit under more than one of the initial five topics – that when researchers apply for writing a Cochrane review, it is more likely that it will get approved when they state that they can collaborate with a medical librarian. An excellent opportunity to involve yourself in a research project and start learning.

Summing up

It was a very active session with all participants taking part in discussions, even though the method was new to many of them, being more used to someone giving a lecture with all the answers. The complete list of suggestions were distributed to all the participants after the workshop. The author hopes that EAHIL members will find this paper useful in their daily practice, even though you didn't participate in the session.

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