

Training - it should be a top priority

Bridget Shine

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Bridget Shine says that it is time to reimagine professional development



When trading conditions are tough and businesses seek cost savings, the training budget can be one of the first things to go. It is a soft target: measuring return on investment can be difficult, and it may be hard to demonstrate how better trained people increase sales or profits. But from where we sit at the Independent Publishers Guild (IPG), training is one of the most important aspects of publishing. Our regular surveys of members always identify training as a top business priority. Managers can usually see the gaps in their company's skill sets, and they know that good training can fill them. At small independent publishers in particular, where people might be expected to turn their hands to a host of different jobs, a few hours spent learning new skills can make a significant difference to productivity.

For most IPG members, it is not a lack of will that restricts investment in training, but a question of access. The cost of courses is naturally an important consideration for independent publishers on tight budgets, but so too is the capacity in the business. Sparing a key member of staff for a whole day's training out of the office may well seem impossible when there is so much work to be done.

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Location can be another barrier. Publishers outside London or a handful of other major cities will often find they have to travel long distances for face-to-face training, which puts more strain on time and resources. This acts as a drag on regional diversity too: our members are based far and wide around the UK, but if they cannot readily access training they are at an immediate disadvantage in terms of staff professionalism and retention.

It was these barriers of cost and geography that the IPG sought to take down when we launched the IPG

Skills Hub in 2017. Two years on, our online training portal hosts more than 100 pieces of content, from multi-module courses in key publishing disciplines to bite-sized chunks of advice, FAQs, directories and glossaries.

The big strength of the Skills Hub is its accessibility. Use is free and unlimited to every member of staff at every IPG member, which means people can log on at a time to suit them, and whenever they need a shot of knowledge about a certain subject. It has proved hugely popular among members who do not have the time or capabilities to provide structured in-house training, or the resources to pay for external tutors.

A lot of the Skills Hub content has been provided by independent publishers themselves, which illustrates the remarkable generosity of the IPG's community. Some of it is adapted from sessions at our conferences, which is an excellent way to preserve speakers' expertise, and extend it to publishers who aren't able to attend events.

We are keen to extend this spirit of collegiality even further. Our friends at the Australian Publishers Association already license the Skills Hub so their members can enjoy the same access, and we are exploring more opportunities to open up content to others.

Ultimately, everyone involved in providing training has the same simple goal of making publishers better at what they do. It makes it easier to recruit, retain and motivate staff, and improves the industry's image. Even if it does not pay immediate dividends in financial terms, it represents an investment in the long-term ambitions of a business, and demonstrates commitment to the care and development of the people in it.

No one is too experienced or gifted to learn something new, and money spent on training and professional development is invariably money well spent. That is truer than ever at a time of great change - when digital technology is transforming publishing workflows and the supply chain, and placing new demands on the people involved in them.

This, then, is an ideal moment to reimagine the notion of training in publishing, to think about ways to deliver it better, and to identify more consistent structures and accreditation for it. Learning platforms like the Skills Hub make online professional development interactive and effective, and will have a crucial role to play in this - but of course there remains a very important role for face-to-face courses too.

The balance of digital and physical training continues to shift, and the future configuration of all this provision remains to be seen. But for now, the IPG and independent publishers are excited to be part of the training conversation.

Bridget Shine is chief executive of the IPG. Visit ipg.uk.com for more about the work of the IPG.

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