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Learning During a Pandemic: The Impact of Digital Badges on Staff Training

Abstract

During the pandemic, the Spartanburg County Public Libraries implemented a new learning management system with a digital badging component. The digital badges were enthusiastically received by staff and increased training completion rates significantly. Even without an LMS, other libraries can create badging for continuing education using a variety of online resources. Digital badging is an important motivational tool to use for continuing education, especially as training goes virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords

training, badging, badges, continuing education, digital badging, learning management system, LMS

Training in a COVID-19 World

In mid-March 2020, the Spartanburg County Public Libraries, like many other libraries around the country, closed our doors due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Working from home as they could, staff were looking for online training opportunities wherever they could find them. As Director of Planning & Training, I was both surprised and delighted by the dedication to training which many staff displayed even while working at home under less-than-optimal conditions.

My department was quickly realizing that in the pandemic situation, in-person staff training would not be feasible, likely through the end of the calendar year. Prior to the pandemic, we were fortunate to have a robust in-person training program for our 215-plus staff members, with trainers from our department traveling to each location on a regular basis. But now our in-person model was forced to go completely virtual at a time when training—especially training related to the pandemic, safety, and customer service—was particularly vital.

Badges for Staff Training

In light of the increased need for virtual training and incentives to complete it, my team decided to launch new training initiatives, including building out the badging structure which was available in our recently acquired learning management system (LMS). Our LMS allowed digital badges to be assigned to learners either for completing a specific course or courses, or for completing a certain number of training credits.

Each badge had a graphic icon and a title—like the “Animal Wrangler Badge,” for completing a training on how to handle situations when animals are brought into the library. As staff collected these virtual badges, they could see their badges displayed on their homepage in the LMS. The badges were not connected to any other type of reward outside the virtual environment of the LMS.

The badging initiative launched at the beginning of June 2020, just when our library was reopening some services (with limited services and safety procedures in place), and when staff were still going through a tremendous amount of stress. At the same time, our staff also had more time built into their schedules for professional development, due to abbreviated library schedules and the cancelation of in-person programs.

Almost immediately after the launch of the LMS with badging, we began to receive positive staff feedback. One staff member wrote, “Some of us are absolutely addicted to the gamification of the new LMS—we celebrate every time we get a new badge!” Another staff member contacted me urgently after she encountered a computer glitch immediately after finishing a course—her primary concern: “I still get my badge, right?” Digital badging was clearly a hit with many of our staff.

A Brief History of Badging

Badging, or micro-credentialing, is not a novel concept. In fact, we had been hoping to implement badging for staff training at our library long prior to 2020. Our new LMS certainly made for an easier implementation of digital badging; but as early as 2015 my training colleagues and I had been discussing how to incorporate other forms of badging into training. At one point, my department was giving out physical badges—small metal pins that said things like “Together We Make a Difference” and “Leading by Example.” But digital badges were our true goal.

Badging remains one of the trends highlighted by ALA’s Library of the Future initiative. Discussing the use of badges for students in library school, Jennifer Harmon and Andrea Copeland (2018), state that badges are valuable to learners as “an extra credit of sort... based on intrinsic motivation and the personal desire for the badge because it is relevant to the student” (99). Assessing learners’ motivations is of primary importance. Students in library school are motivated by a grade and a degree, but what motivates public library staff to complete professional development training?

In 2018, Brenda Boyer wrote, “Gaming with badges is ideal for assimilating knowledge, content, and skills that are integral to the instructional program; is not incredibly difficult; and avoids expending a lot of unnecessary face-to-face class time” (25). Though Boyer was discussing information literacy classes in an academic setting, the sentiment can be applied to public library training as well. As Boyer notes two years prior to the pandemic, badging can support training outside the traditional in-person classroom paradigm—which, in 2020, has become a necessity.

Badging efforts in the library world tend to focus on patrons or on students in the academic environment. Badging for public library staff, including paraprofessional staff, seems to draw less focus. Space remains for additional experimentation and research to determine whether badging has a positive impact on public library staff training.

Looking at Our Data

The feedback I had received from our staff, as well as the conclusions of other researchers, led me to believe that badging could influence the completion of staff training. But as a director in charge of both staff training and strategic planning—which relies on data and statistics—I needed hard numbers to verify this conclusion. I needed to answer the question: Are these digital badges actually motivating our staff to complete important training?

In order to answer this question, I began by reviewing the activity surrounding the e-learning courses in our online learning management system (LMS). I selected a 45-day period from the launch of the new badging component. Out of +/-650 available courses during that time, I focused on the 493 courses with activity. Activity in the LMS was defined as a staff member signing up for, partially completing, or fully completing a course.

My goal in looking at courses with activity was to determine whether the badge might be motivation for a staff member to complete a particular course. For this analysis, I also focused on

courses which were optional, as opposed to courses which were required, in order to ensure that the staff members had voluntarily selected to sign up for and complete the course. Of the 493 optional courses with activity, 51 were optional courses associated with badges.

After reviewing the data, I found that courses without badges had significantly fewer completions—in fact, 90 of them had no completions at all. In contrast, all but one of the badged courses had completions during the same time period. It is worth noting that the badged course which had no completions was just one of a list of optional courses which staff could take to get a particular badge; so, it appeared that staff had simply chosen the other courses as routes to the badge.

An average of 8 staff completed each badged course during this time, while an average of only 2 staff members completed each of the non-badged courses during the same timeframe. Overall, a course that offered a badge was 4 times more likely to be completed than a course without a badge. Of the badged courses, 98% had at least one completion, while less than 80% of the non-badged courses had a completion—a difference of almost 20%.

In total, the 51 available badges were awarded to 201 staff members a total of 923 times, with an average of 4 badges awarded per person. Excluding badges awarded purely for credit hours completed, the badges awarded most commonly were related to health and safety topics. Perhaps due to the ongoing stress of the pandemic situation, the two optional badges with the most completions were the “Stress-Free Badge,” awarded 22 times for the completion of stress management training; and the “Mindfulness Badge,” awarded 37 times for the completion of training about mindfulness at work. Badges associated with diversity awareness and racial bias trainings were also awarded more frequently than others, likely due to the recent news coverage of Black Lives Matter protests.

Analyzing the Results

After analyzing the numbers, the answer to my question was clear: digital badging was motivating staff to complete the badged courses at a higher rate than courses which were not associated with badges. Badges appeared to be a powerful tool not only in encouraging training in general, but also in directing staff to key topics on which we wanted them to focus their training.

Because staff could see in the LMS which courses were associated with badges, they sought out and completed those trainings in order to receive the badge. By design, the courses specifically associated with badges focused on key topics for staff training—topics like racial bias, cyber security, workplace safety, intellectual freedom, and trauma-informed services, to name a few. The badges encouraged staff to take courses they may otherwise have passed over due to personal preference.

To explore the data even further, I also looked at the completion rate for several e-learning courses which were required for staff to take, but which did not result in a badge. During the same time frame, the completion rate for required courses was 30-40% lower for required non-badged courses than it was for optional courses with badges. This additional data suggests that staff are more motivated by the badge than by the idea of a training being “required” by administration.

We can conclude that the completion of required courses may be reinforced by adding a badging component. Another topic for further study is whether staff will eventually suffer from “badge fatigue” after the novelty of the program wears off, or whether they will continue to be motivated by the creation of new badges which they have not yet earned.

Bringing Badges for Staff Training to Your Library

Although our library is fortunate to have an LMS which supports digital badging, not all libraries have access to an LMS, and some do not have staff dedicated to training. Even if your library does not have these resources, badging can be adapted to almost any situation. Physical badges can include lapel

pins, buttons created with a button-maker, or even fabric patches. Digital badges can be created using software like BadgeOS, Adobe Spark, Canva, or Credly, to name a few.

Even without an LMS, you can assign a badge to a staff member via email. Once earned, these badges can be uploaded or linked to a website, including social media sites like LinkedIn. Because staff may not wish to share every badge on social media, you can also create an internal web page or even a shared online document which tracks badges and who has earned them. Whatever the format, the goal of badging is to encourage training completion by creating a feeling of accomplishment and recognition.

Badging for the Future

As the COVID-19 pandemic situation progresses, libraries around the globe will be faced with new challenges, including new barriers to training library staff. At the same time, the need for training has never been greater. Employees face new challenges as they work from home, create virtual programming, address COVID-related customer service issues, and seek to make sense of a barrage of information on current events.

Public libraries cannot afford to neglect planning and training for these challenges. We know our staff need virtual training opportunities to help them excel in their work, despite the current environment. But even if we invest our time and our resources in virtual staff training, how can we incentivize fatigued and overwhelmed staff to complete vital training? Badging offers a clear path to motivation and completion. By embracing digital badging as a training technique, we can create a better-prepared staff, ready to face an uncertain future.

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