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# Data Stewardship Week in an academic library

## An overview

In the information age, data stewardship is crucial for individual and organizational productivity. It is easy to get overwhelmed by vast amounts of information being created every second. Information overload has become a common occurrence in the workplace to the extent that people “spend more time searching for the right information, leaving them less time for proper analyses using the acquired information.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the excess of information in the workplace can lead to stress, lack of productivity, and information fatigue.

In response to the overabundance of data in the information age, many organizations are attempting to implement data governance programs. Gwen Thomas of the Data Governance Institute defines data governance as the “exercise of decision making and authority for data-related matters.”<sup>2</sup>

A crucial component of data governance is data stewardship, which involves the organization of data. Data stewardship is not only useful for individual productivity but can also be a beneficial method for organizational accountability. Traditionally known as the keepers of information resources, librarians have a responsibility to not only organize information resources for patrons of the library, but also to manage administrative data for the benefit of library administrators, faculty, and staff.

In an attempt to improve personal and organizational productivity in our own library, a library-wide event called Data Stewardship Week (DSW) was created at the University of Memphis (UM) Libraries. The idea stemmed

from a conversation about our need to manage increasing amounts of administrative information in each of our professional positions. We shared frustrations about being overwhelmed with incoming data in emails, disordered storage spaces, and an increasing number of disparate platforms and newly emerging technologies. Thus, with the goal of functioning more efficiently, becoming better organized, and responding more coherently to staffing changes and user needs, we reached out to library administration about hosting a data stewardship event for all library personnel.

## Background

UM Libraries is comprised of the main library, Ned R. McWherter Library, and three branch libraries, Music, Health Sciences, and Lambuth. The Music and Health Sciences libraries are integrated into disciplinary buildings nearby, but the Lambuth Library is located 90 miles away at a branch campus. In years past, all University Libraries employees would meet at the main library in the spring for Personnel Development Day,

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a day of workshops that focused primarily on professional development. University Libraries administration received faculty feedback that closing all libraries, even for a day, was not well-received on campus and should not be continued. When we first proposed DSW, it was as a Personnel Development Day replacement. Although we could not close the library for the day, we could still provide relevant and useful professional development training over the course of a week and schedule it such that most University Libraries employees could attend. With the approval of University Libraries administration, we surveyed all library faculty and staff to gain an understanding of our library's perceived data stewardship needs.

### **Planning Data Stewardship Week**

University Libraries employees were surveyed to determine which areas of data stewardship were of the greatest concern. Survey participants were advised that topics under consideration for data stewardship sessions would not focus on "tips and tricks" or "how-to" but on best practices for data stewardship related to those systems or processes. Of the 66 people surveyed, 22 responded and identified three main areas of interest: email management, internal documentation, and file storage, locally called Information Technology Network Attached Storage (ITNAS).

Each of us was responsible for coordinating or developing content for one of the presentations. Arrangements could be made with speakers within or outside the university, or they could prepare the presentations themselves. The presentation regarding email management was arranged through the UM's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). On campus, CTL provides instructional "sessions on technology use for on-ground and online classes, support, and consultations of campus applications."<sup>3</sup> An instructor from CTL worked with us to develop a presentation on email management and best practices that was customized for the needs of University Libraries' employees.

The content for internal documentation was developed and presented by the user interfaces librarian, who provided recommendations based on his professional experiences and knowledge of University Libraries organization. For the ITNAS presentation, a local support provider (LSP) from the Information Technology Services (ITS) department was recruited. Two LSPs are stationed in McWherter Library and serve the needs of University Libraries' employees, but are ITS employees. Because the LSP providing the Data Stewardship Week session works closely with University Libraries' employees, she was able to create a presentation highly tailored to the concerns and workflows of workshop participants.

Scheduling the DSW sessions to accommodate the most number of employees was of great concern. It was undesirable for Music and Health Sciences libraries to close for an hour each day to allow employees to attend DSW sessions, and impossible for the two staff 90 miles away at the Lambuth branch library. Additionally, the evening and late-night schedules for many McWherter Library employees prevented them from attending DSW sessions at times that were convenient for those working normal business hours. Therefore, we opted to record all DSW sessions and place the files in a network location that all employees could access. This allowed for some freedom in scheduling the sessions and made the valuable content available to all University Libraries employees.

Attendance was not mandatory for University Libraries employees, in part for the scheduling concerns detailed above, so we agreed there was a need to incentivize attendance. Unable to wield authority over others, we settled on providing food at each of the sessions to lure the hungry and restless from their desks and hopefully impart some useful knowledge in the process.

Sessions were scheduled at the same time each day from Tuesday, May 15, through Thursday, May 17, 2018. This week in May is part of UM's "Pre Summer Part of Term,"

commonly referred to as “Maymester.” At this time, McWherter Library has reduced hours and patron demand is relatively low. The reduced hours affect evening employees’ schedules and more library employees are available during business hours. It was around this time of year that the previous Personnel Development Day was typically scheduled in order to effect the fewest library patrons or employee schedules.

## Discussion

Casual headcounts indicated that roughly half of the University Libraries personnel who work in the main library attended each of the three sessions. All personnel were invited to provide feedback on the sessions via a simple email survey. Because the final DSW session had to be postponed, the initial feedback survey was distributed after the first two events, and the final feedback survey was distributed immediately after the last DSW session. The survey simply asked: “What would you like to share with the organizers about the [day of the week] session on [topic]?”

Survey responses ranged considerably in length and depth. Most feedback was positive and indicated that the content was indeed relevant to the work that respondents do within the University Libraries. Some personnel replied that the session inspired or motivated them to make specific changes, for example, organizing their email so that it is more usable and manageable. Some highlighted the importance of DSW within our organization: “This event was helpful in that it opened the dialogue of accountability and departmental competency. The content was engaging and potentially beneficial.”

Some respondents expressed negative feedback about the format, content, delivery, or a perceived lack of relevance. The committee had expressed some concern that personnel, having previously attended several “how-to” sessions, would be primed for content that was similarly focused. We reiterated throughout the planning and marketing process that the sessions would be

focused more broadly on data organization, but most of the negative comments were related to a perceived thwarting of expectations for “tips and tricks” on using email and university file storage systems, or “how-to” write documentation.

The final survey posed one additional question: “What ideas do you have for future Data Stewardship Week events?” Most respondents were enthusiastic about continuing this new tradition and urged the committee to hold DSW annually. One respondent even suggested that the library host such events for the entire campus. The positive survey responses, as well as the enthusiasm expressed in conversations among our colleagues, have generated great momentum for DSW at University Libraries.

## Conclusion

DSW sprung from our commiseration about the need for dedicated time to clean up our data, and training on best practices for doing so. The resulting workshop series turned out differently than the committee originally intended, but was nonetheless a largely positive experience. The committee and library administration do plan to support DSW in the future and will work to strengthen the event with feedback garnered from various channels. Data stewardship is an increasingly important part of our work and lives. Given our professional charge to be stewards of information, it is critical that librarians develop into capable and confident data stewards.

## Notes

1. Guus Poijpers, *Information Overload: A System for Better Managing Everyday Data* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2010): 19.
2. Gwen Thomas, “Definitions of Data Governance,” The Data Governance Institute, [www.datagovernance.com/adg\\_data\\_governance\\_definition/](http://www.datagovernance.com/adg_data_governance_definition/) (accessed August 8, 2018).
3. University of Memphis, “Center for Teaching and learning,” last modified January 6, 2018, [www.memphis.edu/its/about/ctl.php](http://www.memphis.edu/its/about/ctl.php). ¶¶