

# Creating a Web-Based Staff Orientation Program

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Imagine having the time to give new staff a thorough orientation program. What would that program include? Besides the specifics of the job, maybe an orientation program would also include an understanding of the “in’s” and “out’s” of the larger organization, who the patrons are (whether they are students, professors, attorneys, or judges), what their lives are like, and what the culture of the larger institution is. Is this too much to ask?

The staff at Harvard Law School Library does not think so. It is not that we have an unlimited amount of time. Rather, we decided to develop a self-guided, Web-based orientation program so new staff can acquire introductory information on their own and can have a place to return when they need to refresh their memories. This project is a work in progress, but we share here the successes and shortcomings of our innovative project.

Harvard University is a large and difficult world in which to navigate. The law library staff is large, and the various departments are dispersed throughout a huge building. At least half of our 90+ staff members work in a building where they can go for days without seeing a faculty member, students, or even each other, making it difficult to understand what others in the library do. The difficulties of understanding the institution are compounded at the law school level with its multiple buildings and total staff approaching 400. The standard tour the first day of work accompanied by introductions just isn’t a sufficient mechanism for making the staff member feel a part of the institution.

## A Simple Idea Becomes More Detailed

As a result of various library management group discussions about these problems, Terry Martin (Director of the Library) suggested the concept of a Web orientation page to be located on the library’s intranet. He developed a skeletal format for what he called “Working at the Law Library.”

The original Web page concept was a collection of links to other Harvard Law School and University Web sites housed in four modules. New staff would have one page where they could go to learn not only about the Harvard University “culture” but also about the Harvard University Library system, Harvard Law School and the Harvard Law School Library. The Library’s Orientation Committee, consisting of six working members from different library public and technical services departments plus a staff member responsible for the Web page, the library’s personnel officer, and a staff member from the library administration department, was charged with refining the page, a task originally conceived of as linking to appropriate existing Web sites.

The committee quickly decided that a great orientation page would require far more than simply linking to existing Web sites. We realized that we needed to step back and consider some questions, including the following:

- What did we want to present to new staff?
- Did we want to include both a workplace and a cultural orientation?
- What does Harvard culture mean?
- Can we present culture or the feel of an organization via a Web page?
- Would we need to consider more human/hands-on orientation programs beyond the Web?
- Do we want to go beyond orientation and include some training?

In answering these questions, we expanded the initial premise, a series of links to existing pages, to a collection of pages containing more detailed information. We identified the need to move beyond basic library information and explain many of our library procedures and communication forums. While some of this information existed in various forms already, we also

realized that we would have to create much of the information that we wanted new staff to know about the library, law school, and university as institutions. Existing formats and Web links were not sufficient to provide the basic information about our workplace.

## The Developed Orientation Pages

Since we wanted to expand the Web page to address workplace orientation, we first divided the orientation Web page into two large sections, each with several subdivisions. Section 1 was to be a series of basic information sessions that the new employee should review first, preferably within the first few days or weeks of employment. Many of these sessions are important or key to a new staff member’s orientation but are not part of actually teaching about the institution or the culture. Section 2 would still be called “Working at the Law Library” but would be for use after the new employee completed the basic information sessions, usually within the first few weeks of employment.

The first section, Basic Information Sessions, currently includes ten topics covering facts about the library as a workplace such as:

- “Your Work Area” addresses the basics that a new staff person needs to know the minute he/she sits down at his/her new workspace—supplies, keys, phone and voice mail, computer logon.
- “Harvard Law School Organization” provides insight into faculty, students, administrative staff, and legal education.
- “Computer Support and Technology” educates new staff about when it is appropriate to consult the Library’s automation staff, a major concern in our day-to-day work lives.

Other pages in the first section describe the collections, list policies for staff, give

# A Desktop Learning Opportunity

information about the public and staff modes of the online catalog, and introduce the school's IT department. Many of these topics previously were included in various supervisors' checklists of orientation items to discuss with new staff. We've pulled them together for the first time, providing a "home" for the information that new staff members can return to after the initial orientation.

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Section 2 is an expanded version of our Director's initial home page concept of "Working at the Law Library." These pages expand upon the information in section 1 as well as cover new areas in order to explain more fully who we are and what we are about. We retained the four broad categories (HLS Library, the law school, the university library system, and the university) but found that much of the basic information needed to be created rather than merely identified in existing home pages. Besides the basic staff guide, a "Who to Ask" page identifies the right person to ask for various types of information. The new "Path of a Book" page written by staff follows a book's course through the Library from selection to shelving. The page helps new staff see not only all the processes involved, but also illustrates how each person's particular job fits into the larger picture and which other staff members are performing the various other functions.

Creating pages to help explain library functions and information was the easier task for us. Despite the large number of pages created by various law school departments, we needed a few that would help explain what life at the law school is like to those who often interact with students or faculty in limited ways. A student employee came to the rescue with an essay for the orientation page entitled "My Life as a 2L." This is the type of personal information about life at Harvard that can't be conveyed

adequately in a traditional one-day orientation program. To supplement these we have developed or are creating pages listing frequently used abbreviations at the law school and a humorous (we hope) look at and explanation of common "Harvardisms" that old-timers bandy about to explain existing culture at Harvard University. These pages also gave us the opportunity to involve a variety of staff in the Web page creation. Realizing that library managers are not always the right trainers for all orientation information, we solicited favorite sayings from the staff that they believe help explain life at the university.

We should add a note about our use of the word "culture." We thought of our page as educating our new employees about the "culture" at HLS. This quickly posed problems. First, what is that culture? The first thing one learns about the university is the extreme amount of decentralization. We realized there were organizational "cultures" at the library—key ways of thinking about the organization and its methods of operating—that differed from the school, that in turn differed from the university. On the other hand, there were definitely some common themes. Another interesting note was that our own committee reflected the different cultures of diverse departments within the library. Our different perspectives of the library emerged and showed how much our group was a microcosm of the culture of the library and the law school. Finally, the difficulty of working together as a group of any kind to organize a Web page cannot be emphasized too strongly.

## Application

So far the use of the orientation page has been in the Research Services division of the library with positive feedback. As new staff arrives, we incorporate the orientation page into their orientation and training. A new reference staff person found the page to be useful reinforcement after she had a personal introduction to people and places in the library. She commented that you cannot learn everything in a day, and it was good that she could always refer back to this. In Access Services, a new staff person found the basic information session provided the most practical information, particularly

the "Work Area" page. As for the initial reasons for creating the page, time will tell whether the staff feels more attuned to the organization(s).

An unexpected result of our work was the development of a staff training program about the use of HOLLIS, our online library catalog for circulation. While developing the information pages about the staff mode for HOLLIS, we identified the need for and then created a complete training program for Access Services staff. The extensive outline for the training complete with the PowerPoint slides is now used by our current staff as well as new staff through the orientation page.

## Status Report

Our initial innocent idea of identifying links to existing Web sites at the university expanded into a major orientation and training initiative. During the course of the project, we accomplished several things:

- We have developed an orientation Web page that helps explain to new staff a variety of information about the Library as well as the Law School and the University. We expanded our initial concept of providing links to Internet information by including job training information about the workplace and creating the information to explain life and work at the institution at various levels.
- We have developed the page using staff resources from diverse departments representing various library cultures and viewpoints.
- We have incorporated use of the orientation Web page into the standard orientation and training for new staff.
- We have been able to examine and identify our own training and development needs, resulting so far in a HOLLIS training program for one staff group that utilizes the knowledge and skills of experts from different departments, enhancing library-wide communication.

*(continued on page 25)*

## Advice to Others

For those of you contemplating a Web-based orientation program, we offer the following advice:

- Link to as much as you can with appropriate introductions, but acknowledge to yourself in the beginning that you will have to create a great deal.
- Realize that online orientation can provide a centralized location for many types of information that

explain an organization, but it does not replace human interaction.

- Don't be afraid to mix the humorous with the serious.
- Don't be surprised to find yourself in the peculiar position of having to ask what it is you really want to convey about your institution—and whether you have more than one institution that people need to learn about.

- Understand that orientation and training are interrelated. Any orientation page will have to address issues of training.
  - Accept that the orientation page will take time and that you'll learn a great deal about your own organization while creating information beneficial to all staff.

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