

Getting ready to work

GENEVIEVE CLARKE shows how The Reading Agency's Six Book Challenge can help libraries to reach new audiences in workplaces.

Getting people talking about what they've read or want to read can be a great way to break down barriers in the workplace. It can get them thinking about their interests, the things they have in common and their skills. Above all it can lift them out of their daily routine, open up new opportunities and lead to new ideas – all of which can contribute to a motivated and successful workforce.

For the last two years, public library staff have been working with a new breed of activists in the workplace – employees called union learning reps (ULRs) who, with the support of their trade union, have caught the learning bug. Together they've been using the Six Book Challenge to help workers in a range of locations to discover (or rediscover) the joy of reading. Run by The Reading Agency, the Challenge is targeted at less confident readers, inviting them to read six books and record their reading in a diary in order to get a Six Book Challenge certificate.

This successful partnership is captured in a free publication, *Getting Reading to Work*, produced by The Reading Agency in association with unionlearn in Yorkshire and the Humber. It looks at how libraries have supported ULRs to run the Six Book Challenge in six very different workplaces: Corus steelworks with North Lincolnshire Libraries, a Royal Mail depot with Bradford, Fox's Biscuits with Kirklees, Fletchers Bakeries with Sheffield, prison officers at HMP Moorland with Doncaster and Tesco with York.

It is appropriate that this work should have been pioneered in Yorkshire and the Humber. The Six Book Challenge was created by Hull Library Service in 2006 and trialled by library services across the region the following year working with

partners in colleges, adult education and prisons. It was then launched as a national scheme in 2008 by The Reading Agency. Nearly 9000 people registered for the Challenge in 2009 – an increase of a quarter on 2008. And the scheme has achieved significant recognition by being made a finalist in this year's CILIP Libraries Change Lives Award.

About 250 people in workplaces across Yorkshire and the Humber took part in the Six Book Challenge in its first year and this doubled to 500 in 2009. This workplace activity has also spread to other regions with the support of unionlearn, the learning arm of the TUC, and of individual unions which have recognised its potential – in particular the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union, Communication Workers Union and Fire Brigades Union.

The main activity for each year's Challenge runs from January until the end of June. This allows participating organisations to take advantage of key points in the year such as the launch of new Quick Reads titles for emergent readers on World Book Day in March and Learning at Work Day during Adult Learners' Week in May for which many ULRs are able to get small grants to support activity. However organisations are welcome to run the Challenge at any time and workplaces are in an ideal position to do this.

Opportunities for libraries

A few public libraries already have links with local workplaces – they may provide deposit collections or arrange for their mobile library to cater for shift workers. A scheme such as the Six Book Challenge opens up a raft of new opportunities for libraries willing to take them up, not least the chance to reach out to an entirely new audience and their families.

There are up to 24,000 trained ULRs in workplaces across the country, many of whom are keen to find easy and appealing ways in which to entice their fellow workers on to training courses and into learning centres. The TUC has recognised the power of the Six Book Challenge to change



Case study: Fox's Biscuits and Kirklees Libraries

Fox's launched their Six Book Challenge for 2009 at a special Family Learning Day at Batley Library. The partnership with the library began with the previous year's Six Book Challenge, and the ULRs were looking for ways to bring in people who had previously not taken part.

"The hook we chose was a variation on the Challenge for which parents would read six books to their children," explains Library Support Co-ordinator Judith Robinson. "This felt like a great way of encouraging people to read with their kids and might also support some people's literacy difficulties."

Batley Library supplied the children's books and organised the Family Learning Day for a Saturday at the end of January. The ULRs promoted the event heavily to staff at Fox's and on the day set up a stall

with old photographs of the factory which proved a real talking-point.

At least 60 families from Fox's attended the day at the library. There was a storyteller for the younger children, and henna tattoos and necklace making for the teenagers. For many people it was their first visit to a library for a while, and many were pleased to see the more welcoming environment and the wide selection of books for children and adults on offer.

From that day the scheme has continued to expand with some parents doing the Six Book Challenge with their children and a larger group doing it for themselves. The Family Learning Day gave the Challenge a much higher profile at Fox's and with over 70 people signed up this year it has done really well.

"With this event and the Six Book Challenge itself we've proved that we can really reach out to working families," says Judith.



Pictured: Fox's stand in Kirklees Library; North Lincolnshire mobile library at Corus plant Pictures: Justin Sutcliffe

attitudes to reading and learning in the workplace and is supporting The Reading Agency to train ULRs in every region to deliver it effectively in 2010 and beyond.

This puts The Reading Agency in an ideal position to broker partnerships between libraries and local workplaces. But libraries themselves shouldn't have to look far to find organisations with whom they can work, not least their own council workforce. The key to success is identifying the role that libraries can commit to play, linking this to their own priorities set by performance management targets and Local Area Agreements. Where capacity allows, this can encompass a rich range of activity: library visits to staff premises such as canteens, rest rooms and learning centres; reciprocal visits to the local library for employees and their families; and creative reading events in either location that can link across to other national programmes such as the Summer Reading Challenge and reading group activity. At a minimum it needs to include the supply of an appealing range of books to support Six Book Challenge participants and an invitation to employees to join and use the library to pursue their new reading habit.

Most workplaces make extensive use of the Quick Reads titles for the Six Book Challenge – the growing range of short and inexpensive books published especially for adults who are just getting into reading. They may be able to get hold of these from unionlearn, but it's likely that they will need to be supplemented with multiple sets of particular titles from the library if they want to run any reading group activity. Ideally every library in the land should be promoting Quick Reads as a way of luring new readers to cross the threshold and local workplaces make an ideal partner in this exercise.



Case study: Sheffield Libraries and local workplaces

Sheffield Libraries have made a spectacular success of the Six Book Challenge, this year signing up 220 participants from local adult education, the WEA, Sheffield College as well as Fletchers Bakeries and the Department for Work and Pensions. They've supported Fletchers Bakeries for a couple of years with mobile visits to the site and Challenge completers have attended the annual celebration at Sheffield Central Library.

Community Development Librarian Andrew Stansall is already making plans for 2010 to involve more local workplaces whose employees fit the target audience for the Six Book Challenge such as Royal Mail and Pennine Foods. As well as supplying book collections to cater for a multilingual workforce, he will provide tours and events in the library to encourage employees to get to know the resources on offer. "The Six Book Challenge has brought us into contact with people who would never normally use a library. It gives me a real sense of pride to do this work."

But the Six Book Challenge is also an opportunity to introduce new readers to a wealth of other reading material. This might be emergent reader titles published by New Island (Open Door series), Accent Press, Barrington Stoke or Ransom Publishing. Or mainstream fiction and non-fiction selected for this audience and listed on The Reading Agency's searchable database at www.firstchoicebooks.org.uk Libraries can work with ULRs to open up these reading choices as well as promoting all their other services to people who may have little knowledge of the library offer.

As awareness of the Six Book Challenge spreads in workplaces across the country, libraries should be ready to make the most of this opportunity to open up the world of reading to a new and enthusiastic audience.

"It's been a very successful initiative. What's made it work has been the support of libraries and making it visible in the workplace." Tracy White, Union Learning Rep, USDAW, who has worked with York Libraries to run the Six Book Challenge with Tesco staff

"This is largely an untapped audience. A lot of people can't get to the library because of their work so we have to get to them." Yvonne Lea, Adults and Communities Team, North Lincolnshire Libraries, who worked with Corus Steelworks

"You just have to go for it. I was apprehensive at first, but the Challenge has been one of the best things I've ever done." Barry Burton, Bakery Supervisor at Fletchers Bakeries who were supported by Sheffield Libraries to run the Six Book Challenge

"Libraries have a huge role to play in supporting learning and helping people to discover the joy of reading. Working with trade unions is an exciting opportunity for us." Fiona Williams, Head of Libraries and Heritage, York City Council, and President of the Society of Chief Librarians

Information

Please see www.sixbookchallenge.org.uk for information about materials for The Reading Agency's Six Book Challenge 2010 or contact David Kendal at mail@davidkendal.co.uk if you'd like to be put in touch with a local workplace.

Free copies of Getting Reading to Work are available from www.unionlearn.org.uk/freebooks

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