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How a Company Treasures Its People – the MTR Learning Resource Centre

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Abstract

Special libraries may include corporate libraries, law libraries, art libraries, medical libraries, news libraries, architecture firm libraries, financial centre libraries, etc. Some corporate libraries are also known as information centres, resources centres or learning resources centres, etc. Many of them are set up for the purpose of supporting the missions of their parent organizations, and their functions and services tend to target towards the specific needs of their users.

According to Keyes (1995), one major issue faced by many corporate libraries is their difficulty in putting a 'dollar value' on the intangible services, which the library provides to its parent company.

Although its 'values' cannot be easily measured, the MTR Corporation Limited is one of the very few commercial corporations in Hong Kong that has undoubtedly invested a great deal of resources and manpower to support the ongoing operations of its Library (Learning Resource Centre) for the past two decades.

According to the MTR Corporation Librarian, although knowledge acquired might not be useful immediately, or at any unspecified time in the future, the MTR truly believes that only through continuous professional development, one can acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and understanding to keep up with their Organization, as well as with the rapidly changing work environment. And through continuous learning, one is then able to maximize his or her potential at work, thereby contributing fully to the MTR Corporation.

The following interview with Phoebe Ng (吳美玲), Librarian and Charles Ho (何朗秋), Manager - Quality & Staff Wellness Training was conducted at the Learning Resource Centre at MTR Headquarters on 15th March 2013.

Patrick Lo (PL): Could you begin this interview by first introducing yourselves, your roles and responsibilities at the Learning Resource Centre (LRC) at the MTR Corporation?

Phoebe Ng (PN): My name is Phoebe Ng. I am currently serving as the Librarian at the LRC at MTR (*MTR Corporation Limited*).¹ With reference to my education background, I obtained my bachelor's degree in library and information science from National Taiwan University,² after which I returned to Hong Kong and started my career as a librarian. While working, I furthered my studies in a related field at Charles Sturt University. It was a post-graduate-level course carried out through HKU-SPACE³ in Hong Kong—and via which I obtained my master's degree in library and information science.

Ever since my graduation with a bachelor's degree in Taiwan, I have worked in the field of library and information science. Before joining MTR, I previously worked as a library manager for several small- to medium-scale corporate and special libraries in Hong Kong, including a publishing house library, an architecture firm library, as well as an investment firm library. Now I have been working as the Librarian for MTR for more than 20 years.

Charles Ho (CH): My name is Charles Ho, and I belong to the Management Training and Development Department at MTR. I have been working together with Phoebe as partners at MTR since 4 years ago. I specialize in staff development and corporate training at MTR, i.e., including staff wellness and work improvement initiatives and management of various management training programmes and quality management for the whole MTR Corporation.

In addition to my core duties which I mentioned just now, I am also Phoebe's work supervisor. In other words, I am also overseeing the overall development of the LRC at MTR; while Phoebe is responsible for managing the Centre's daily operations. With reference to the LRC, many MTR staff would come to use our Centre's resources here for self-development and self-learning purposes. As a result, a large portion of the LRC collection tends to focus on themes related to staff development and training, corporate business management, and business leadership.

With reference to my own training and educational background, I studied engineering at University of Hong Kong. I also have an MBA degree from HKUST.⁴ Ever since I graduated with my MBA degree, I have been working in the field of corporate marketing and human resources, including employee training and staff development for several large-scale corporate organizations in Hong Kong. After joining MTR in 2010, I feel very

¹ MTR – Homepage. Available at: http://www.mtr.com.hk/eng/homepage/cust_index.html

² National Taiwan University (國立臺灣大學) – Homepage available at: <http://www.ntu.edu.tw/engv4/>

³ HKU-SPACE (University of Hong Kong, School of Professional and Continuing Education) - Homepage available at: <http://hkuspace.hku.hk/>

⁴ The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.ust.hk/eng/index.htm>

lucky that I was able to continue to make good use of my experiences and expertise as a staff development trainer. Since the LRC was set up with the main purpose of supporting training and development, as well as self-learning needs amongst the employees at MTR, it is natural that the LRC would function as part of the Human Resources (HR).

PL: Could you tell me what kind of role the LRC / Library plays under a large corporation like MTR?

CH: There are 2 major reasons why we chose to call this the Learning Resources Centre (LRC), instead of a library:

One reason is that MTR wishes our colleagues to have easy access to the most up-to-date information, which our staff would depend on, refer to for carrying out their daily operations, or providing other information materials that would benefit our staff's work in the long run – regardless of whether it is an immediate requirement directly related to the job in hand; or it is something that our MTR colleagues wish to learn in their own time for self-development purposes.

The second reason would be the LRC would serve as a central place for our colleagues to find information materials or other resources that could assist them to enhance their professional competence and job skills. For example, via checking the [work-log entries](#) compiled by the LRC, our MTR colleagues might be able to find engineering- or other job-related solutions (developed by other colleagues) that could be applied for tackling their own problems in hand.

In short, the LRC plays crucial and multiple roles in providing valuable resources and other information services for the MTR staff at all levels, to enhance their professional competence and working morale, beginning from facilitating individual staff in carrying out their immediate job tasks at an operational level. Another main goal of the LRC would be to serve as a convenient one-stop venue for storing all sorts of information and other resources that could be used as valuable references for strategic planning or practical solutions for problem-solving.

PN: From a different angle, one may say that the MTR Corporation places strong emphasis on continuous learning and self-development amongst the staff members at all levels, thereby maximizing the full potential and competence of every employee working at MTR. In my opinion, only large corporations that place strong emphasis on self-development and self-motivated learning amongst their employees would invest so much manpower and resources on running and maintaining a resources centre or library of such a scale, and the MTR Corporation is a very good example indeed. Because maintaining a professionally-run resource centre/library of such a large scale requires a large amount of resources on an ongoing basis, and only very few profit-making organizations in both Hong Kong or overseas could afford, or are willing, to do that.

PL: Would you agree that self-reliant development, learning via self-exploring, developing of one's positive working attitudes and morale – all such qualities and

values which the MTR Corporation places heavy emphasis upon are rather 'Western' concepts? For the other local Chinese companies, many of them emphasize more on employees' discipline, their willingness to follow the chain of command, as well as their ability to work with others as a group in harmony....Whether the employees are happy with their personal or work lives is something that they need to sort out on their own outside the office environment....Is my understanding correct?

CH: From my personal point of view, the idea of maintaining an employee's working morale or continuous learning is relatively new even for most large international corporations in Hong Kong. Perhaps, this "continuous learning" concept is something that we tend to hear more often in other Western societies. It is true that comparatively speaking, more companies in the West tend to invest a lot more resources, care and thought into developing individual employees' competences and EQ—with the aim of ensuring that their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being are all being taken care of, so that we could fully maximize their potentials and achievements at work, as well as help them develop a sense of belonging and loyalty to the organization.

In most Asian societies, perhaps we tended in the past not to talk so much about "continuous learning"; however, we Asians also need to maintain the same "continuous learning" principle as much as the people in other Western countries. One of the major functions of the LRC is to fulfill the mental and spiritual needs of the MTR employees. And fulfilling the mental and spiritual needs could be defined as maintaining one's enthusiasm towards his/her career; developing positive attitudes, job skills and professional knowledge on an ongoing basis so that they would not be made redundant at work in the long run, even when new technologies emerge, or their existing job skills or job positions become obsolete.

PN: In order to achieve the above, first of all, we have a very well-developed, well-defined collection development policy in place when it comes to the acquisitions of new materials for the LRC. In other words, all the books or other materials acquired for and by the LRC have to be directly related to business or industrial management, e.g., management of business enterprises, business ethics, industrial psychology, self-development for managers, etc. For this reason, you will not find any popular fiction, romance novels, or leisure magazines on the LRC's bookshelves.

CH: In addition to the range of topics mentioned by Phoebe, the LRC also provides a large collection of materials for supporting development amongst our MTR staff in a wide range of different areas, for example,

- Engineering
- Business / corporate law
- Corporate marketing / branding
- Industrial- and organizational-psychology-related topics, e.g., EQ (emotional intelligence) and stress management
- Technical reference books and databases, etc.
- Writing and speaking or public speaking skills in the technology professions

- Language learning
- Business writing

Since the LRC is 100% devoted to supporting the training needs, development and well-being of MTR employees at all levels, all the services, functions and materials provided by at LRC are ultimately geared towards the VMV (Vision Mission Values) of the MTR Corporation. LRC is part of Management Training and Development Department (MT&DD) under HR, and MT&DD colleagues might recommend particular book titles or other related literature for supporting certain staff training events, such as training workshops on customer service and public relations. One way to support the MT&DD is for the LRC to arrange a series of book displays or exhibits to support or further promote the training workshops being carried out by the MT&DD. By doing so, even after such training sessions are over, our colleagues could still easily locate a lot of relevant literature at the LRC if he or she wishes to conduct further reading on topics related to the workshops – in order to continue reinforcing what they have learned at the workshops and seminars provided by MT&DD.

PL: Has there always been a library or resources centre of some kind since the first day the MTR Corporation was established in Hong Kong?

PN: According to my understanding, the former LRC used to be just a small and informal physical library for housing various in-house technical reference books and other training and operational manuals.... At the same time, the former Library was used for collecting various research results and other technical reports written by the MTR in-house researchers. Over time, due to the rapid expansion of the MTR, as well as the various changes in the job skill demands and information needs caused by the different emerging technologies, the former Library has gradually evolved into the versatile and multi-functional Learning Resources Centre which you all see today. Since MTR has continued to put a great deal of emphasis on human resource development, it is only natural that the LRC would become part of MT&DD with the aim of maximizing each other's full potentials, for the benefits of the whole MTR in the long run.

PL: You mentioned earlier that the former MTR Library also collected a large number of research materials and other technical reports written by the MTR in-house researchers and engineers. Could you give a few examples describing the nature, format, and content of such technical documents and research reports?

PN: For example, they could be guidelines or reports on technical railway or tunnel engineering, hydraulic engineering, electric utilities, and techniques or applications in electric power systems, airport constructions, etc. In addition, from the former MTR Library collection, one might also find papers documenting various large-scale city planning or urban design projects issued by the Hong Kong Transport Department or by the Town Planning Office of the local Hong Kong Government. Furthermore, our former Library also maintained a large number of safety guidelines on railway emergency management and reports on railroad disaster investigations, etc. You may say that the

old MTR Library maintained a large amount of technical papers documenting a number of large-scale city planning projects carried out by the former British colonial government in Hong Kong during the 1980s and the early 1990s.

PL: Could you give a few examples of successful collaborations between the MT&DD and the LRC?

CH: LRC, being part of MT&DD, hosts a wide range of talks, seminars and workshops on a regular basis for promoting the spiritual, mental as well as physical well-being for MTR colleagues. At MTR, we have 2 major venues for hosting our training workshops and seminars. One venue is located on the 8th floor of the MTR Headquarters Building in Kowloon Bay, which can accommodate an audience of 160 to 170 people. In addition to that, we have another lecture theatre located at our Fotan Railway House, and this lecture theatre can also hold an audience of 120 to 130 people. And the lectures or workshops held by us at both lecture theatres are almost always full.

Furthermore, we also have the “people-counter devices” installed for measuring the number of people entering or using the LRC. Visitor/user counts serve as valid evidence indicating whether the LRC’s services and functions are in fact matching our users’ needs. On average, we have about 100 to 200 people visiting the LRC each day. Since MTR is a large corporation, we have many different branch offices located in different parts of Hong Kong. And for colleagues who are stationed at branch offices far away from the LRC, we will deliver the requested book items to them based on individual online requests, so that they do not commute all the way to the LRC for book-borrowing in person. All they need to do is to activate the book-deliver-request button under the LRC’s OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue). For the book-delivery service alone, the LRC averages 3,000 to 4,000 transactions per month.

PL: Does the LRC also arrange new book displays or other theme-orientated book exhibitions for promoting the use of the LRC collection?

PN: Yes, the LRC launches theme-oriented book displays and exhibits on a quarterly basis. At the same time, we arrange a special corner inside the LRC for showcasing our newly-arrived books. For example, the theme for our book exhibition this month is “Healthy Living – How to Maintain a Good Balance between Work and Rest.....” Based on the feedback we have received so far, users’ responses have been quite positive.

PL: To Phoebe—as a librarian, since you did not receive any formal training in engineering, and given that technologies are growing increasingly sophisticated at such a rapid speed, do you find your job at MTR becomes increasingly challenging? If yes, how would you go about overcoming these challenges?

PN: That is correct. At the LRC, every day I am surrounded by countless number of books and other literature related to engineering and industrial constructions, with high-tech terminologies ranging from undersea tunnel constructions to railway safety

principles and guidance. In addition, I have to handle highly technical reference enquiries or information requests issued by our in-house engineers, with terminologies that could be so specialized and advanced that could not be easily understood by people outside the 'business'. In order to do my job well, I have to constantly update my own knowledge, i.e., to familiarize myself with different and new technical terminologies in the field of engineering and industrial constructions. And I have always run into situations when our users would ask me for books or other information featuring highly technical engineering or industrial construction topics that I have never heard of. The only way to do my job well is to learn as I work, as well as to try to keep my eyes open, and to keep track of their research trends and other information needs. In addition, I have to be aware of any newly-published reference tools or databases, so that I could consult them in matters relating to our engineers' projects. And I truly think that my previous working experience at an architectural firm library has helped me a great deal in this regard, because it has allowed me to master the basic professional terminologies that are commonly used in the field of industrial constructions.

Luckily, given the convenience brought by the modern-day Internet connectivity, many users can now easily locate their desired information via our networked databases or E-resources on their own, without much interference on our side. Not until they have problems locating their desired materials by themselves do they then approach us in person or send us emails and ask for further assistance.

PL: Could you tell me the total collection size at this LRC at MTR?

PN: We have about 30,000 items in our whole collection, including both printed and audio-visual materials. For the printed book collection alone, we have about 10,000 items in total.

CH: Another major challenge that we are currently facing is how to encourage more MTR colleagues to use the LRC resources more frequently. I have to admit that a large percentage of our colleagues are already active users of the LRC, including using both the physical collection, as well as downloading our resources remotely via online access.

Nevertheless, MTR has over 15,000 employees and is an extremely large corporation indeed. In addition to our existing frequent users, we also need to think about how we could attract the other non- or not-so-frequent users to use the LRC resources. And I think this is the area that is definitely worth exploring. Finally, people in Hong Kong lead extremely busy life-styles and work long hours. They are so busy that many of them simply do not have the time and the luxury to sit down quietly and read a proper book. Even if they have the time, they would rather surf the Internet or engage in other online social media, or even playing videogames—doing things that are totally non-information-related, or non-textual, in order to help them cope with their job stress.

I think these are all common challenges faced by many other public, school, and special libraries, and not just by the LRC at MTR alone. In order to tackle such challenges, the

LRC has developed and launched a series of electronic interactive platforms catering to the MTR colleagues at different age groups and levels for self-learning purposes. In other words, the LRC does not only acquire books and other resources developed by the commercial publishers; the LRC also collaborates with outside vendors to design and develop our own in-house learning resources (in a variety of formats), in order to fulfill the unique information and learning needs amongst the MTR colleagues.

For example, MTR also places strong emphasis on the training and learning of Putonghua. Because MTR also has 3 other major branch offices located in different parts of Mainland China, like Shenzhen, Beijing, and Hangzhou. As a result, there is a large number of business transactions and other professional exchanges happening between our colleagues in Hong Kong and Mainland China. For this reason, the need to master the Putonghua language has become increasingly important amongst our MTR colleagues. Amongst our large pool of E-resources available at LRC, we have also developed an in-house interactive language-learning software named “GoChinese.” With “GoChinese”, one simply needs to input the written script (e.g., script for a public presentation) in Chinese characters, and this software will then automatically provide the user with the correct and most standard pronunciation of Putonghua. In addition, this software also allows the users to download the spoken text onto their own mobile phones or USBs, so that they could take the recordings home or back to their office to learn and practice at their own time and pace.

PL: With reference to the LRC user group, could you describe the general profile of the LRC users? Are they mostly middle managers from MTR or senior executive officers? What about employees at clerical or supporting-staff level – are they also frequent users of the LRC? Who makes up the majority of the LRC clients?

PN: Based on my observation and understanding, the majority of the LRC users tend to be mid- or junior-level managers. We also have a number of senior executive officers who are frequent users of the LRC resources. But for the senior executive personnel, they tend to depend on their assistants or secretaries to pick up the books for them, instead of coming to the LRC in person. There is no differentiation between levels of services provided at LRC. Regardless of whether they are junior clerical staff or senior executive officers, as long as they belong to the MTR family, we treat them all equally, accord them with the same respect, and provide them with exactly the same level and same range of services.

PL: Which are the most popular or sought-after or most circulated materials at LRC?

PN: I would say the most circulated items are usually books related to self-development, such as how to enhance working efficiency and working effectiveness, how to lead a happier life-style, or interactive language learning tools for both parent and child. In fact, interactive learning for both parent and child is also considered an important part of self-development or self-growth, because whether someone is able to maintain a happy and stable family life would directly affect one’s attitudes and performance at work.

Yes, it is true that LRC specializes in collecting engineering- and industrial-construction-related materials; however, such topics are only relevant to our colleagues belonging to the engineering or construction departments. On the other hand, how to maintain a happy and balanced family life, and how to maintain a healthy relation between parent and child – these items are never outdated and are of much relevance to almost everyone, regardless you are from the MTR law department, or from the human resources department, or from the marketing department.

PL: What do you find most rewarding about your job as the Librarian for the LRC at MTR?

PN: For me, the most rewarding experience has to be our users telling me that I am doing a good job, e.g., “the books you have selected for us are great, and really suit our needs and interests, etc.” Knowing that what I do could actually make a difference for the LRC and for our users – that does give me a real sense of satisfaction and encouragement.

PL: Do you know if there are other large-scale profit-making corporations in Hong Kong that are also equipped with a library / learning centre, in a scale that is similar to the LRC at MTR?

CH: There are other for-profit organizations in Hong Kong that are also equipped with their own in-house libraries. However, I would like to highlight the following: Firstly, in comparison to the other corporate libraries in Hong Kong, in terms of just sheer scale and the number of resources and services available, it is very unlikely that these corporate libraries could surpass or even compete with our LRC. Secondly, with reference to their library collections, many of these corporate libraries would merely function as a leisure corner, i.e., providing mostly literature like leisure magazines, fictions for leisure reading purposes, instead of targeting enhancing individual employees’ potential or working performance. *In other words, their library is no different from a regular community centre book-corner built for recreational purposes.*

As you can see, our LRC is very different from most corporate libraries in Hong Kong, in terms of scale, amount of resources available, as well the degree of professionalism in the services that we are providing.

PL: Could you tell me if there has always been a library or learning centre of some sort since the first day the MTR Corporation was established in Hong Kong?

PN: I think the MTR Library began in the early 1990s. Because when I first joined the MTR Corporation in 1993, there was already some sort of ‘prototype library’ at MTR. The MTR Library was set up with the aim of responding to the changing needs caused by the major and drastic transformations of the whole MTR. During the mid-1990s, MTR was transforming itself rapidly and was no longer a company focusing only on subway design and construction work, but was rather moving towards being a multi-faceted

regional corporation. For this reason, MTR wanted to invest a lot more resources into developing its own employees' job skills and professional competence and knowledge in all respects, including converting its own in-house Library into a versatile and multi-purpose LRC for supporting the research and information needs amongst its own employees, as well as other areas of self-development.

PL: Would you agree that nowadays libraries are also expected to function like department stores, i.e., in order to attract people to come to the library, it is equally important to create an attractive window display or environment to 'lure' the users to come to make use of the resources available.

CH: That is correct. Nowadays, running a library is no different from managing any other profit-making business, i.e., we need to explore every possible way to 'lure' our users / customers to come to use the library, regardless of whether they are coming in person or accessing the resources remotely via online. Especially in today's digital environment, we are constantly competing with a variety of entertainment options, as well as other information freely available via the Internet and online social media, e.g., Apps, Facebook, and free E-books. All I have to say is that nowadays, we librarians have to try harder than ever before to meet our users' needs, or even to surpass their expectations, if we are to stay relevant to our users and to the Organization so that we librarians would not become obsolete one day.

Since MTR is a large and internationally well-known corporation, we have guests from all walks of life and even from overseas countries visiting our MTR Headquarters regularly. In fact, over time our LRC has become one of the 'must-see-sites' for our visitors' guided tour at the Corporation. And most of our guests are extremely surprised and overwhelmed by the sheer scale, facilities and resources of our LRC. Over the years, our LRC has gradually become the selling point or an important part of branding (品牌) for the MTR Corporation. As you can see, the LRC does not only carry the functions of a library / learning centre, it is also an effective part of branding strategies – projecting a positive image for the Organization as a whole.

To conclude this interview, I would like to give a quotation from the MTR Human Resources Director, Mr. Morris Cheung, *"People are the most valuable asset in MTR. MTR has established the Learning Resource Centre (LRC) to provide self-learning materials and resources for both personal and professional development. Being in service for more than 20 years, LRC has received appreciation from our colleagues and contributed a lot to foster a continuous learning culture in the corporation."*