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New wine and old bottles: new professional skills in the library world

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Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out and the bottles perish: but they put wine into new bottles, and both are preserved. (Matthew 9:17)

The nature of library work is changing as a result of more fundamental social, organisational and technological changes. Librarians need new professional skills to respond to these changes. We need to develop the new skills among the existing workforce. Even more important, we need to recruit new professionals with personalities and aptitudes that will enable them to make the most of the opportunities that are open to them. We need to make sure that the supply of librarians matches the demand for them.

The changing demand

The last ten years has seen a policy-driven shift to information-based societies throughout Europe and most noticeably in the Nordic countries. This has stimulated the information and communication sectors of the economy and it has begun to have a profound effect on the ways in which people think about, value and use information. Our perceptions of information and the role it plays in society are changing steadily but dramatically. As a consequence, people's views and expectations of libraries are beginning to change.

Many of the societal changes have been triggered by technological change over the last thirty years. In particular, the shift to digital information has changed the ways in which we can access, communicate and manipulate information. Librarians now have to deal with new information products and new systems for managing them.

Within organisations of all kinds, information is beginning to be regarded as a resource that needs to be managed and exploited. This

should enhance the importance of libraries and librarians, pushing them closer to the core of the organisation. But few library professionals have been able to take advantage of the opportunities that have been presented in this way. Instead, their functions are being carried out by new groups of workers, such as researchers, information analysts and knowledge managers.

These, and many other changes, are altering the context within which librarians work, creating demands for new skills and abilities.

The supply side

To respond effectively to these changes in demand, librarians need to be able to adapt their core skills, to develop new skills and to change the ways in which they work. Library professionals need to be flexible enough to respond quickly and effectively. But this flexibility is rare.

We are all getting older. This applies to the library workforce, not just to us as individuals. In most countries there was a dramatic growth in the library workforce during the late 1960s and 1970s. The library education system expanded rapidly, producing large numbers of qualified graduates who filled the growing number of jobs in public, academic and, to a lesser extent, in industrial libraries.

By the mid 1970s most libraries were staffed by predominantly young librarians. In 1976, 58 per cent of qualified librarians working in Britain were under 35 years of age ¹. The recessions and public expenditure constraints of the 1980s and 1990s meant that few new jobs were created. Job mobility declined. Those who had jobs hung onto them. And, faced with reduced promotion prospects, many young professionals left to find work elsewhere. As a consequence, the age structure has changed dramatically. The average age of the professional staff in most libraries has increased. We no longer collect the statistics but my best guess is that the majority of working librarians are aged over 40. It is proving to be difficult to motivate and re-skill a number of our ageing colleagues. As we say in Britain, you cannot teach an old dog new tricks

This stagnation in the job market also had a profound effect on recruitment. In many countries it is difficult to recruit talented students to first qualification courses in librarianship (although it is

¹ Moore, Nick (1986) *The library and information workforce: a study of supply and demand* (British Library Research and Development Report 5900) Parker Moore Ltd

not so difficult to attract them to courses in information studies). We have a paradox in Britain – the newspapers and other media are full of articles and programmes about the information society, yet the numbers wanting to train as librarians and information workers appears to be declining. We need to find better ways of attracting the brightest and the best because even our young dogs are finding it difficult to learn new tricks.

Flexibility is also constrained by the length of courses in librarianship and the time it takes to modify them. In Britain, first degree courses take three years and sometimes it can take almost two years to get approval for a new course or for a significant modification to an existing one. This inevitably reduces the library schools' ability to respond to changing demands.

Fortunately, most new recruits in Britain now come into the profession after studying librarianship for a year, following a first degree in another subject. This makes it easier for the courses to respond to changing demands, but the short duration of the courses, and the level at which they are undertaken, means that the graduate's knowledge is relatively superficial and theoretical. They may understand the theory but they do not necessarily have the skills that are needed to apply it.

Even if there are opportunities to modify and develop courses to accommodate new skill requirements, there is no guarantee that the teaching staff will be capable of developing the appropriate tuition.

It is possible that we need to think radically about education and training for librarianship. There is currently an implicit assumption that the education one receives at the beginning of a career is sufficient to equip a person for a working life of forty years or so. There may be a need for some up-dating along the way but the package of skills that one picks up at the start should, it is believed, be sufficient to see one through to the end.

The time has, perhaps, come to replace this assumption with a recognition that most skills have a half-life – their utility decreases over time. If this were generally accepted, we could replace vocational qualifications with a licence to practice that would be valid for ten years or so, after which it would have to be renewed through a further period of education and training. New graduates could be offered to employers with a 'best before ...' date.

This may sound unrealistic but a similar arrangement is being developed for doctors and clinicians in Britain.

The problem of changing skill requirements can be overcome, in part at least, through the provision of a programme of continuing education and professional development. New recruits could develop practical skills, building on the theoretical foundation provided by their educational course. And experienced staff, who are in the middle of their careers, could benefit from periodic re-skilling. Sadly, however, I do not know of a single country that provides enough continuing education and training to satisfy the need, although this may change as more internet-based training becomes available.

The new skills we require

For some years I have been arguing that it is possible to identify four sets of skills that are required by information professionals. One set is associated with the creation of information, another with its collection, a third set is concerned with the communication of information to users and clients and the fourth set is associated with research, analysis and consolidation of information on behalf of a client ².

Clearly, the skill-set that is most closely associated with librarians is the one that is concerned with the collection of information and the subsequent maintenance and exploitation of the collection. But the other three sets of activities can also be found in most libraries. Librarians are called upon to create all kinds of information from websites and internet portals through to literature guides and user education programmes. They clearly need to be able to communicate effectively with library users and increasingly they are being called upon to undertake investigations and research on behalf of the users.

The increased availability and use of digital information is generating a requirement for new skills: skills in acquiring and retaining the right to use the information; skills in organising it and in making it available to users; and skills in its long-term storage and conservation.

² In a relatively recent exercise for Unesco, we set out in some detail the actual skills and levels of competence required by people working in each of these four categories. See: Nick Moore and others (1998) *A curriculum for an information society: educating and training information professionals in the Asia-Pacific Region*. Unesco Principal Office for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok.

Interestingly, a number of commentators ³ have identified a need for skills in classification and cataloguing – two subjects that had almost disappeared from the British librarianship curriculum. The demand for these skills is being revived by the need to impose an order on the chaotic flows of digital information that are pouring forth.

Others ⁴ have argued that tomorrow's librarian will need to act as an information intermediary, meeting the complex needs of increasingly sophisticated users who expect everything to be delivered to the computer on their desk, or in their briefcase.

The challenge

The challenge facing us is complex. We must find ways of recruiting to librarianship people with talent and imagination who can interact successfully with service users. We must equip them with an understanding of fundamental principles that they can apply in currently unforeseen circumstances but we must also give them the skills that they will need to make an impact in the short-term.

To achieve this, we need high quality education and training institutions that are staffed by creative educators who are well aware of the changing demands that are faced by librarians and who have the skills to translate that awareness into challenging and stimulating educational courses.

And finally, we must devise much more effective ways of re-training and up-dating practising librarians throughout their careers.

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³ See, for example, Arnold, S and others (1999) the future role of the information professional. *Electronic Library* 17(6) 373-375; Biddiscombe, R (1997) The changing role of the reference librarian *In* Biddiscombe, R (editor) *The end-user revolution: CD ROM, internet and the changing role of the information professional*. Library Association Publishing 79-95 and, from a different perspective, Davenport, T (1999) Putting the I in IT *Financial Times: Mastering Information Management Supplement* 1 February 1999 2-4

⁴ See, for example, Higgins, M (1999) Meta-information and time: factors in human decision making. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*. 50 (2) 132-139 and Raven, D (2000) The information chameleon. *Library Association record* 102 (10) 566-567