

NEW ROLES AND SKILLS FOR LIBRARIANS

By

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Abstract

Wider changes that have had an impact on librarians' roles are considered, including the growth of the information society, shifting patterns of work and developments in information technology. The implications for librarians are discussed. Areas where skills will be needed are identified and include information management, financial management, communication and interpersonal skills.

Introduction

Many recent papers in professional journals and many conferences have been devoted to discussing new roles for librarians. It is useful to start with some quotes and thoughts on this issue.

"In the larger world, outside the covers of professional journals, things are moving too quickly for the luxury of principal role discussions." ⁽¹⁾

"There are so many new tasks for us, and everything is changing so fast, it sometimes feels as if we information specialists are being shot out of the cannon by the information explosion." ⁽²⁾

Common stands can be found through much of the literature. In particular:

- We are in an era of rapid change
- By the time we have developed the new skills needed, they may have become irrelevant
- There is a blurring of the boundaries between professions, with information now an important component of most jobs
- We should take opportunities when they arise
- Continuing professional development is essential if we are going to equip ourselves with the skills needed

It may be a challenging period, but it is also an exciting one. It is a better time than during 1980s when it was thought that:

- Information technology may eventually make libraries and librarians redundant, and
- Many traditional skills such as indexing and cataloguing would be done automatically by computers.

Clearly there are opportunities to be taken.

Wider changes in society have had a significant impact on the role of librarians. Some of the major developments have been:

- The change from an industrial to an information society, with the resulting increase in importance of information. As a result many more jobs are grounded in information.
- Key feature of the information society have been identified by Nick Moore ⁽³⁾ as:
 - Information intensive organisations, which use information and associated technologies to increase efficiency and stimulate innovation.
 - A significant information sector.
 - Social use of information creating a high level of use, and
 - A learning society, where great importance is attached to life long learning. The need for high levels of information handling skills created the need for high levels of training and education.
- Shifting patterns and position of work in society. In an industrial economy large amounts of time were needed to produce goods and services. This is no longer the case, but the change has resulted in higher unemployment levels instead of creating shorter hours for all. Those still employed often feel the need to work longer hours and develop new skills to maintain their positions.
- The idea of the 'job for life' has disappeared. Training and updating skills is essential to remain employable.
- Rapid developments in information technology have had an impact on virtually every service we deliver, making it difficult to keep pace with technological change.

A comparison of the contents pages from two different editions of the Handbook for Special Librarianship help to demonstrate how our role has developed and changed. The fourth edition ⁽⁴⁾ in 1975 included chapters on most of the traditional areas of service, such as selection and classification, and also included chapters on some exciting new developments, such as the use of microforms in libraries.

By the time the seventh edition ⁽⁵⁾ was published in 1997, there has been considerable change and most of the traditional areas of service are not even mentioned. However, this does not mean that old roles are no longer relevant, although technology has altered the way they are delivered.

The seventh edition focuses on management of all types and on delivering user centred services tailored to meet an organisation's information needs. In particular we can note:

- A shift towards information technology
- The growth in importance of information management
- Information skills being used in a wider context, such as records management and data protection
- The importance of general management and marketing skills

Future Roles and Skills

The following skills, needed now and in the near future, are not listed in order of priority. All are likely to be important.

Information Technology

We need to think less about how IT can help to automate library routines and more about what we can do to make it more useful for our organisation and our users. IT departments have often taken the lead in many information development projects, such as Intranets. We need to demonstrate the valuable contributions we can make in these areas.

To develop the skills required we need:

- An awareness of the range of technologies available

- A knowledge of IS applications of IT
- IT support and training
- Knowledge and experience of electronic information delivery, such as e-sources and e-journals

Information Management

Information management presents opportunities for us to use our skills in a broader context. Areas include:

- Intranet information management
- Internet site management
- Knowledge inventories
- Data audits

Management

We need to understand the context in which we work. In particular, we need to consider:

- What is the impact on users of the services provided?
- How is the service perceived in the organisation?

An awareness of the organisation's strategic aims and objectives is needed.

Areas where skills need to be developed include:

- Managing change
- Political and negotiation skills
- The ability to communicate effectively
- The ability to deliver results

Team management and motivation skills are also important. There is a need to:

- Develop skills throughout the team
- Create a team identity
- Build a balanced team
- Deliver services and results

Financial Management

Financial management skills have become even more important as a result of budgetary restraint. This makes effective resource management even more essential. Key areas include:

- Business planning
- Business case development
- Resource accounting
- Financial implications of service developments

Communication and Interpersonal Skills

Libraries need to maintain a good awareness of how people view their services. Services should always be in tune with the business needs of the organisation and used to their full potential. Key areas include:

- Persuasion skills
- Consultancy skills
- The ability to work with user groups
- Writing skills

- Briefing skills
- Presentation skills

Customer Focus

A customer focus is essential to ensure that services remain appropriate to the needs of the organisation. In particular:

- Ensure that services are relevant and meet information needs
- Continually challenge services to ensure that they are continuing to add value
- Analyse service versus benefits
- Market services

Organisation of Information

This is a broad set of skills. We need to be thinking of new and different areas where we can use our traditional skills in new contexts. Areas of opportunity include the following:

- Knowledge management – making sure that knowledge is shared and accessible
- Packaging information in the way the customer wants – adding value
- Integrity of information supply – helping customers determine the value of 'free' information
- Avoiding information overload for our customers

We need to maintain our professional knowledge to be in a position to make a contribution in new areas. There is a need to prove that we can perform this function better than others.

Conclusion

There is an exciting and challenging time ahead, but it will not be easy. The continued pressure on resources will often conflict with the need for services to develop continually and respond to remain relevant. Tough decisions are likely to be necessary about maintaining existing services against developing new ones. Continuing professional development will be an essential tool for keeping skills up to date. Librarians have the necessary skills, but we will need to convince others and take opportunities as they arise.

References

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