

## **LIBRARIANS DO FLY: STRATEGIES FOR STAYING ALOFT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** To examine past and future predictions about academic libraries and identify the skills that librarians will need to survive in an increasingly digital environment.

**Methodology/approach:**

A review of relevant literature, including ephemeral material such as job advertisements, indicates a broad consensus about the skills required. The life-cycle of an academic librarian is considered from initial training, through recruitment and performance management to staff development and training.

**Findings:** Various predictions about the future of academic libraries that were made during the 1990's have largely proved accurate. Therefore, this article presumes that predictions about the skills of academic librarians for the forthcoming decade may prove useful in their recruitment and management.

**Practical implications:**

Managers in Library and Information Services are encouraged to maintain an awareness of developing skills requirements within the sector in order to inform good practice in staff management.

**Originality/value of paper:**

Some visions for the future are drawn together with the aim of defining a set of professional skills.

**Keywords:** Academic, Librarians, Skills

**Paper type:** General review

## LIBRARIANS DO FLY: STRATEGIES FOR STAYING ALOFT

### INTRODUCTION

Predicting the future is no easy task. However, by examining the current academic library landscape we can test, to a degree, the accuracy of earlier predictions. If the vision of commentators writing some ten to fifteen years ago has actually materialised, it is a reasonable assumption that today's prophets may also prove to be fairly accurate in their forecasts. Understanding the direction in which our services are developing is the first step in identifying the skills and personal qualities that will be needed by the staff who provide those services.

The starting point is an influential review of academic libraries that was undertaken by Sir Brian Follett in the UK in 1993. The Follett Report confirmed the centrality of libraries in academic institutions and recommended investment in buildings and IT, accurately predicting that, despite the inevitable march towards the electronic or "virtual library", traditional media would continue to be combined with electronic media for the foreseeable future (Follett, 1993). At the same time, and under the chairmanship of Follett, the Fielden Consultancy was conducting a study into library staffing and the human resource implications of possible new models of service and structures. The resulting report (Fielden, 1993) identified several key areas of competence:

- Teaching and learning
- New technology and information systems
- Customer service
- Management skills

Some three years later, Heery and Morgan (1996) also speculated on the future skills of academic librarians, particularly in the context of rapid technological change. Their vision of essential skills, not significantly different to Fielden's, was grouped under four main headings:

- Teaching and training
- IT-related skills
- Credibility with academic staff
- Management skills

Another three years on, a Delphi study undertaken in 1999 by two Polish librarians set out to forecast "The future of the academic library and the academic librarian" as it would be in 2005 (Feret and Marcinek, 1999). Although superficially a little different from the earlier lists the detail reveals that customer service is still there (under communication/training skills) and IT skills had expanded to incorporate HTML and web page design.

#### *Communication/training skills*

Language proficiency (stressed mainly by non-English speakers); team-working skills; teaching and training skills; customer orientation; service needs awareness; user friendliness; public communication skills; good sense of humour.

#### *IT skills*

Basic level: PC, Windows and Internet knowledge

Advanced level: HTML, web pages design, systems design; library skills / proficiency in information management i.e. knowledge of sources of information and its organisation.

#### *Managerial*

Project management skills; IT management; time management; business approach; analytical skills; global approach/vision; leadership qualities; good legal/institutional acumen; knowledge of international standards.

### *Commitment*

Intellectual curiosity/imagination; commitment to the profession; flexibility/adaptability; multi-disciplined and multi-functional skills; entrepreneurial approach.

## REVIEW OF CURRENT SKILLS REQUIREMENTS

How do our current requirements match up against the skills that were identified in earlier studies? A trawl of advertisements for academic library posts (CILIP, 2007a) suggests that these writers had, more or less, got it right. University library job titles often sound traditional – Assistant Librarian; Faculty Team Leader; Subject Advisor – but the responsibilities of these jobs include delivering information literacy programmes; developing electronic collections and liaising with library stakeholders. Customer service skills are expected and an understanding of the higher education environment also turns out to be an important requirement.

This limited survey indicated that although IT skills are not always mentioned in recruitment advertisements they do show up in person specifications. Usually something like “excellent IT skills” will appear in the further details. Some advertisements are more specific and suggest a more dynamic IT environment such as, “You will be familiar with the challenges and potential of e-resources and technology-supported learning”. Perhaps, in general, a relatively low-key approach is indicative of the fact that IT is so embedded in the work of academic library staff that it does not need special promotion. However, contrast this approach with that taken by a national museum library seeking “an innovative thinker with strong ICT skills and a good understanding of the potential of ICT. An understanding of international standards such as AACR2...and EAD [Encoded Archival Description] is essential, and experience of web-design and HTML formatting would be an advantage” (CILIP, 2007a).

A recent UK based research project looked into the skills required by employers and the extent to which they were being delivered by Library and Information Management training. Although not specific to the Academic library sector, early indications suggest that the LIMES Project [Library and Information Management Employability Skills] (2006) had identified gaps where the skills that were highly valued by employers were not apparent in recent graduates. These included awareness of the sector, experience of online sources and theory of information retrieval. Skills that were identified as emerging trends, asked for by employers, included application of IT within an organisation, awareness of legislation and web development.

## FUTURE SKILLS OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS

A number of writers have considered the future of the academic library and, of course, the academic librarian. In 2004, under the auspices of SCONUL [Society of College, National and University Libraries], a small group of UK academic librarians gathered together to develop a vision of the academic library in 2010 (SCONUL, 2004). The major themes identified by the group were:

### *Personalisation of services*

Library users will benefit from services tailored to their individually profiled requirements.

### *Collaboration*

Collaborative approaches could include both physical and virtual facilities shared between institutions as well as collaboration between library and faculty staff.

### *Flexible use of space*

Physical space will become more flexible and support an ever wider range of social learning activities and IT facilities.

### *Management and skills*

LIS staff will increasingly need management skills in the areas of finance (including fund-raising); marketing; impact measurement and information literacy.

## THE ACADEMIC CYBRARIAN IN 2012

Bearing in mind this set of skills, let us see how Thomas Surprenant and Claudia Perry brought them to life in a prize-winning essay about the “Academic Cybrarian” (Surprenant and Perry, 2002). They envisaged a future in which Cybrarians (i.e. librarians who operate in cyberspace) would work in both “INFOspace” (the virtual world) and an “INFOplace” (or library as we might still call it). It is interesting that the concept of a physical place still exists but in 2012 the INFOplace is “organized around information clusters”. Even more excitingly, each cluster is contained within “a transparent shimmering wall of digits which identifies the cluster by faculty/Cybrarian members’ course title and code”. Naturally, this “curtain silencer software” also acts as soundproofing for the clusters, allowing the Cybrarian to engage with students, teaching them how to get the best of their virtual reality helmets. It is encouraging to read that, “The role of these former ‘librarians’ has risen in importance to equal that of the faculty as their responsibilities as a ‘helping and organizing’ profession have become absolutely central in the digital education environment”.

Theirs is an optimistic vision of the future for our profession but perhaps one that gives us something to which to aspire. The skills that would be needed by the Cybrarian certainly relate to the key themes identified by SCONUL (2004). Firstly, what could better represent the personalisation of services than helping students “to create, organise and manage their personal info-cyberspace, including their real-time digital info-profiles” or the fact that information clusters would be “formed, adjusted, utilized and eliminated based on the wants and needs of students” (Surprenant and Perry, 2002).

Secondly, a genuinely collaborative approach would be required for the Cybrarian to work with various teams, including playing an active role in an economics faculty meeting (Surprenant and Perry, 2002). Thirdly, it is unlikely that the imagination of the members of SCONUL who identified the “flexible use of space” as a key theme ran to curtain silencer software but academic librarians are already engaging with the need for designing a new kind of learning space. The University of Strathclyde in Scotland has been using teaching clusters since 2000 and, also in Scotland, the Saltire Centre in the Glasgow Caledonian University uses colour and audio to differentiate between areas for a range of learning activities (JISC, 2006). Librarians cannot afford to let architects and designers to take the lead on designing buildings or INFOspaces that ignore the changing information needs of learners, academics and information professionals.

Fourthly, management represents a continuing theme with the added challenge of managing virtual resources in a digital world. “Organising” has always been at the heart of what we do and it would seem that although we might do it differently, we will still be organising things in the year 2012.

It is obvious that the future of academic libraries is increasingly digital one. As Choi and Rasmussen suggested (1996), “The main purpose of digital libraries is consistent with that of traditional libraries in that the purpose of digital libraries is to organize, distribute and preserve information resources just as it is for traditional libraries”. The core skills remain the same but they have moved on, particularly in technical terms.

Of course, successful librarians will continue to be flexible, adaptable and multi-skilled in order to survive in an environment of constant and rapid change. In addition to these personal characteristics, they will have to offer a range of skills. Naturally, there will be a difference of emphasis, depending on type of job, but the following is a good indication of the skills that library managers should be seeking and developing in their staff.

#### *IT skills*

Database management; web development; management of multiple media; metadata skills; knowledge of standards such as Z39.50 and Dublin Core.

#### *Management skills*

Budgets; people; information; physical resources; virtual environments; IT equipment; customer focused services; impact assessment; risk assessment; knowledge of legislation; knowledge of Higher Education environment.

#### *Communication skills*

Presentation skills; marketing and promotion; liaison with academics and external agencies; securing sponsorship/funding; negotiating; collaborating.

#### *Learning and teaching*

Pedagogic skills; expertise in emerging technologies; information literacy; research skills; e-learning.

#### *Personal qualities*

Flexible/adaptable; multi-skilled.

Armed with this set of skill requirements, let us turn to the lifecycle of an academic librarian to establish what is being done, and what needs to be done, in terms of initial training; recruitment; performance management and continuing professional development.

### INITIAL TRAINING

The MSc in Information and Library Management at the University of the West of England offers an interesting case study in initial training. This is because it is primarily taught by practitioners who hold senior posts in library and information services in the region. The programme is, therefore, firmly rooted in the realities of the profession. At the same time, teaching is also provided by staff in the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Mathematical Sciences (in which the programme is based) and by visiting specialist tutors.

An examination of the curriculum (University of the West of England, 2006) illustrates the range of skills being taught as both compulsory and optional modules. The new student gains a good grounding from the five core modules that cover: Information and its users; Transferable management skills; Management of information and library services, Organising information and Research methods in information and library management. IT skills are taught at the first level in the Organising information module where students study a wide range of theory and practice from the organisation of information in a hybrid library to intranets and knowledge management. Assessment for the module includes the production of a set of web pages. Students can also move on to an Advanced Information Systems module to gain a deeper understanding of more advanced concepts such as Internet standards, metadata schemas and functionality in digital libraries.

Students emerging from this course would expect to have developed most of the skills identified above. However, even students taking the Academic Libraries option would have no opportunity to develop pedagogic skills while cataloguing and classification are only taught as part of an optional module. It may simply be that, in a crowded curriculum, it is felt that traditional "cat & class" represents a minority interest as the downloading of catalogue records becomes the norm. Equally, pedagogic skills are perhaps felt to be more suited to continuing professional development once the individual is in post.

## RECRUITMENT

The next stage in the life-cycle of the newly qualified academic librarian is employment. For managers, it is imperative to have a clear understanding of the current and future skills required for the post. Recruiters, therefore, have to keep themselves fully up to date with developments, especially in the field of technology. A person specification is a vital document in the hunt for the ideal employee. It must provide a clear description of the essential skills and attributes that are needed. Specifying "Excellent IT skills essential" is quite good but how much better is "You will have a proven track record in...at least three of the core areas of activity (digital library development; electronic resources; collection development" (CILIP 2007 b).

A good person specification should lead to a well-worded advertisement that attracts potential candidates with the right mix of skills and qualities. An example of an effective advertisement was posted by the Royal College of Physicians, looking for a Medical Education Information Specialist (CILIP 2007 b). "Your information and knowledge management skills will be required in helping to develop and maintain a taxonomy of medical education terms and applying these terms in electronic catalogues, virtual learning environment and online resource depositories". This gives potential candidates a real flavour of what the job is going to be about and should attract people with the relevant skills.

It is worth mentioning the value of the recruitment process as a means of marketing and promoting your institution in general and your service in particular. Our profession is not one of the most highly paid but the skills possessed by library staff are often those also in demand in other types of organisation. Therefore, it is in our own interest to design posts that help both to attract and retain high calibre staff. By having a very clear vision of what you are trying to achieve and the skills that your staff need to deliver that vision, you can communicate clearly to the outside world your values and expectations. Such clarity and objectivity are also vital in ensuring that interviews are conducted fairly and that you appoint people with the skills and qualities that you really need. If you are unclear about what you want it increases the extent to which luck plays a part and undermines the role of good judgement. Most Human Resources Departments will have effective recruitment systems in place for appointing new staff. It is up to us to use them to our best advantage.

## PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Not only does the performance of individuals need to be managed, so does the performance of teams, the service and, indeed the institution as a whole. In a performance management system the emphasis is on results. Therefore, to achieve results, managers need to ensure that their staff know what is expected of them (what their objectives are); that they have the necessary resources to achieve their objectives (correctly functioning equipment and adequate time among other things) and that they have the requisite skills. Performance is not simply about working hard. Let us imagine an Acquisitions Librarian, why not call him Colin, who arrives at work early every day and often leaves late. He spends a lot of time consulting with others and writing up detailed procedures. He makes sure that he personally checks the work done by staff in his department and is very supportive in going over their mistakes with them. He is well-liked by his staff. Unfortunately, his department has a very slow turnover and new items can sit on the shelf for months. He defends his position by saying that accuracy is more important than speed.

What should happen here is that his manager should agree with him some realistic targets that will speed up the processing of new stock. Colin needs to use his own managerial skills to delegate to his team the responsibility for turning out accurate work. He might benefit from training in how to manage his time better and should certainly be considering system developments to improve both his and his team's performance.

## STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Staff training may be perceived as a means of addressing weaknesses in performance but, more importantly, it is a tool to enable staff to update their skills continually – essential in an environment of ongoing change. Margaret Oldroyd has recommended four levels of staff development to ensure a “coherent and consistent approach” (2004). These include:

### *Individual employee level*

Staff play an active role in identifying their own training needs; maintaining personal development plans and logging their achievements.

### *Organisational level*

Managers employ a range of tools to manage the staff development function, including skills assessment tools; appraisal systems and benchmarking frameworks.

### *Regional level*

Organisations within a geographical area co-operate in the delivery of staff development, making sound financial sense.

### *Sectoral level*

A collaborative approach, for example linking government and professional bodies.

In order to improve his performance, our fictitious Acquisitions Librarian could benefit from training at all of these levels. For example, he might usefully set up and maintain a record of his own professional development to chart progress and help him to plan effectively. He should take advantage of his institution's appraisal scheme to learn from the feedback provided by his manager and agree targets that are challenging but realistic. At a regional level he could find that job shadowing or even a job exchange with someone in a similar post in another institution would result in fresh ideas and a new approach. Finally, he could tap into the wealth of formal training opportunities offered by professional training bodies to improve his managerial and technical skills. A cost-benefit analysis would surely demonstrate that the investment in training would be justified by the resulting service improvements.

With sound management practices in place, right through from initial recruitment to continuing training and development, academic library managers can maximise their opportunities for attracting and keeping high calibre staff who will grow and develop with the changing environment.

## CONCLUSION

I'd like to conclude by looking again to the future. Many commentators have tried to predict the future for academic librarians. Some, like Surprenant and Perry, have let their imaginations run riot and painted an exciting vision for the future. Others have conducted careful research and not only identified the skills that are likely to be needed but also the skill gaps that need to be filled right now. A measured view is taken by Sluss (2001). She wonders if “a world in which collections are digitized and smart interfaces to the collections [will] make the intermediary librarian extraneous to the process”. She makes the point that, “if we don't embrace change and embrace the future, the predictions of our collective demise may come true [but] we have an opportunity and an obligation to guide the future of libraries by guiding our own profession's evolution and transformation”. Or, to put it more poetically, let us think of the academic librarian as a Chinese phoenix which, “flies far ahead to the front, always scanning the landscape and distant space. It represents our capacity for vision, for collecting sensory information about our environment and the events unfolding within it. The phoenix, with its great beauty, creates intense excitement and deathless inspiration” (Kam-Chuen, 1996).

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