

***PROFESSIONALISM AND THE EXPANDING HORIZONS OF THE INFORMATION PROFESSION: THE CHALLENGES FACING LIBRARIANS IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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Introduction

Given the extent to which technological developments have influenced information work, the greatest challenge that confronts information professionals, and for that matter librarians, in the 21st century is the threat posed by the fast moving changes that have been brought about by these emerging technologies.

Although in the past the library has been viewed as the gateway to information, today when one considers the fact that information is everybody's business, it appears as much a matter of practicality. The critical factor is not so much who has the key, or who has been trained to use it. Rather, it is who can use the key best. Certainly, there have been arguments about the relevance of librarians in the new information age. The reason being that in recent times there are many 'knowledge management' jobs available which are being filled not only by librarians alone, but by workers with a variety of backgrounds who go by the tag information professionals. These may be journalists, data processing managers, systems analysts, marketing

personnel, records managers, computer scientists, etc. who are all staking their claim.

This situation has led Davenport and Prusak (1998) to doubt the applicability of people with traditional information systems or computer science backgrounds to this new area of occupational needs. Currently, the term information professional is used to cover this spectrum of generalists or specialists since they all see information as their object. The fact is, every profession has its object. Just like for law where everything is a case, and for medicine everything is a disease, the object of the information professional is information. Each profession, therefore, achieves generality by reducing everything to a common denominator, or leveling everything to common terms. The question then is who is an information professional?

The Information Professional

According to Abels et al (2003) of the Special Committee on Competencies for Special Librarians, the information professional uses information in his/her job

to advance the mission of the organization, and s/he accomplishes this through the development, deployment, and management of information resources and services. The term information professional is used to cover a broad spectrum of professionals with different backgrounds ranging from journalism, librarianship, information science, computer science, technical editing, marketing, systems analysis, records management, etc.

Essentially, the role of any information professional is to act as an intermediary between the information product in whatever format and the person(s) requiring that information. Information professionals, therefore, play a unique role in gathering, organizing and coordinating access to the best available information sources for the benefit of the user who turns it into usable knowledge. In order for the information professional to be effective in this role s/he must interact in various ways with the people, systems or institutions, and in the opinion of Gash and Reardon (1988), the essential component of such interaction is communication.

These days, a great deal of the work of the information professional centres on using information technology to manage information so as to ensure that it is delivered on timely basis for decision making, research activities, etc. It is this changing attitude towards information that has caused the rapid evolution of the information professionals' role.

Profession and Professionalism

Certainly, a group does not become a profession by merely calling itself one

(Shaffer, 1968). In that respect, the question that we should seek to answer is what makes a profession? To many, some of the basic attributes of a profession are that it should have a body of knowledge that makes it possible for people to assess the accomplishments and standards of the formal content of the education system of the profession in question. Furthermore, there should be the presence of an underlying theory and code of ethics that guide the activities of the practitioners as well as a common association that takes care of the interest of its members.

Professionalism, on the other hand, is embodied in the norms, methods and behaviours that are taught, learnt and rewarded. It maintains itself through a repertoire of defences against discordance and threat. According to Chambers (1994), professionalism normally refers to the thinking, values, methods and behaviour dominant in a profession or discipline. It is concerned with action and has in-built stability from its link with knowledge generation or education and training.

One aspect of professionalism, which is indispensable, is the sense of belonging to a professional association. Although these are voluntary bodies formed by people in a particular profession like ours, they provide the corporate personality and the voice for their members. Furthermore, the association also guarantees the competence of its members through the establishment of proper standards for professional conduct.

Whither Librarianship Profession?

There is a growing sensitivity about the lack of recognition for many professional groups, not least of which are librarians (Clark

2002), and in a recent article on changing roles for library professionals, Rory Chase (1998), deliberately flung down a challenge to the profession that it is “in danger of being marginalized in the knowledge era” or, worse still, being “made irrelevant”. The question then is, are the rumours of the impending death of the librarianship profession being exaggerated? Surely, one would not have agreed more with Burns (1999), when he asserted that the key task for maintaining professional relevance is not abstract consideration of these generic roles and the appropriate terminology for them, but what the users want done for them.

In the inaugural issue of the **Library Journal** on 30th September 1876, Melvil Dewey had this to say, “the time has at last come when a librarian may without assumption, speak of his occupation as a profession.... From the first, libraries have commanded great respect, and much has been written of their priceless worth, but the opinion has been largely prevalent that a librarian was a keeper only and done his full duty if he preserves the book from loss, and to a reasonable extent from the worms”.

The library profession is found in its comprehension of the value of information and the power of organizing information for the purpose of enhancing serendipity and this has been the unique magic that librarians possess. Thus, the ability to select the best and most useful information to organize it into categories for easy access indicates that librarians possess a detailed understanding of what their clients need.

We are also all too familiar with some of the unsavoury remarks that the public make about this profession out of sheer ignorance. For example, to them, anyone who works in a library is a librarian. Some even go to the extent of asking whether librarians are now information professionals since Bawden and Fleck (1995) even go to the extent of imagining that an information professional is not only more “outward looking than the traditional idea of a librarian, but also possibly more specialized and ‘hi-tech’, and perhaps more dynamic in coordinating various sources of information and possibly networking with other professions, than the librarian”.

Meanwhile, with time the professional practices in librarianship have changed into something that sounds much more like management than cataloguing, selecting, answering reference questions, etc., Innter (1998), and each good professional now embodies the mix needed so that today’s technical service staff is not only knowledgeable and skilful in reference service, but that the reference staff also has in-depth bibliographic skills.

Unfortunately, one basic weakness about librarians is that quite often they tend to discuss among themselves ideas that can change the course of events, but these ideas are not aired in the correct arenas where they will be heard. Although librarians cause many good things to happen for their benefit, they have elected to be silent about their worth. If their value is to be recognized they will have to assert that their services contribute in no small measure towards ‘public good’.

The Expanding Horizons

For a long time the library has been taken as a metaphor for order and rationality as it represents, in institutional form, the ultimate realization of a place where each item within it has a fixed place and stands in an 'a priori' relationship with every other item, where access to the collection was only via the librarian (Radford, 1998). The librarian is, therefore, seen as someone who seeks to exercise rationality and control over the collection while the users are seen as chaotic interrupters. Fortunately, all these have changed since today's concept of 'user-centredness' has brought the user closer to the materials and the information system. Today, the emphasis is on the individual practitioner, and the concentration is on information provision in a variety of contexts.

Consequently, with the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs), and the Internet as the delivery platform, information has become readily available at the desktop. Following from these developments, libraries, which once had monopoly on information, are now considered to be a small piece of the information pie. The fact is, these days information professionals working in non-traditional settings such as market research business development, etc. use the Internet and other current technologies to represent information in a way that maximizes its usefulness as well as save time and money to attain the goals of the organizations. Again, users are becoming more knowledgeable in the use of the facilities that ICTs provide on their own, and their dependence on librarians is decreasing.

Therefore, whether we like it or not all these pose a serious threat to our very existence, and it will be very necessary for us to re-orient ourselves, and to re-design and re-define our activities, services and products.

Within the expanding horizon of the information age, librarians would be required to provide the information edge for the knowledge-based organizations by responding with a sense of urgency to the critical information needs of their clients and in order to accomplish that the librarian will require some basic competences among which are those that relate to the professional knowledge of the information resources, technology, management, and research as well as his ability to use them to provide the service; that represent a set of skills, attitudes, values, etc. that will enable him to work efficiently, be a good communicator, focus on continuing learning throughout his career, demonstrate value-added service, and be able to survive in the new work environment (SLA, 2003).

Professional Competences

In the information work environment professional competences form the basis for the continued survival and growth of the information professionals therefore, there are critical competences that librarians must develop in order to succeed in the knowledge age so as to enable them to become better agents for change. These competences should take into account the shifts that are taking place including the transition from paper to electronic media.

As librarians we cannot assume that the value of the library or information centre

will be self-evident to the organization or community that supports it. Consequently if we do not market our services they will not be fully utilized. We should, therefore, acquire the requisite marketing techniques to enable us to continuously improve upon the quality of the services that we provide. In this regard, we should not only be very knowledgeable of information resources, but also possess the capability to critically evaluate the materials to enable us to select what are relevant for our clients as well as to meet the organizational goals through the provision of current awareness and selective dissemination of information services.

It is very important that the librarian recognizes the relevance of information seeking and utilization as part of the creative process for either the individual using the service or the organization for which the service is being provided. Consequently, it is important for him to anticipate the trends and proactively realign the services to take advantage of them. This calls for total commitment towards excellent services. In this respect, the librarian should position himself to provide excellent instructions to support his clients.

On regular basis, the librarian should be able to conduct regular needs assessment and user surveys by using the appropriate research tools to ascertain whether the services are still relevant to the needs of the users. It is from these that he can design value-added products and services to meet the identified needs.

Finally, as librarians we should appreciate the enormity of the challenges that confront

the profession and prepare ourselves to seize the opportunity to address our shortcomings with the view to ensuring a viable tomorrow.

The Challenges

According to Peter Drucker (1988), any organization that can meet the needs of the public efficiently and effectively will be the hallmark of the 21st century. This certainly applies to all libraries in the organizations and institutions in which we work. The question that we should ask ourselves as librarians is whether the libraries and information centres that we manage can position themselves to confront the challenges of this century.

The new breed of librarian who will be effective in this century will be the one who will act objectively and meet deadlines as well as keep an open mind and seek new ideas in addition to welcoming suggestions from his colleagues. Furthermore, he should be the one who is widely read, and may want to experiment and shoulder some responsibilities. Finally, he should be someone who should inspire confidence and trust among his colleagues.

In the opinion of Marfleet and Kelly (1999), the librarian must realize that for him to avoid any misunderstanding and provide good service, he needs a better understanding of the cognitive, affective and social processes that underlie information needs, searching, interpreting, and problem-solving. Therefore, as an intermediary, he is supposed to analyze the customers' needs in a broad sense (i.e. the kinds of problem-solving they are engaged in, their goals, the social and organizational matrix of their activities, their knowledge

states, their preferences for information search strategies and formats, etc.). It is from the knowledge acquired from the customer that could be used to provide a customized gateway to widely distributed sources.

The rapidly evolving nature of ICT has threatened to surpass the ability of librarians to stay current with changes and developments. Increasingly, libraries are turning to ICTs with the aim of enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery by building links among disparate databases as if these will resolve all their problems. This has created the need for librarians to be trained and equipped with the basic skills to enable them to cope. In this respect, any opportunity to attend professional conferences and training seminars or workshops will not only boost their morale, but also ensure that they are reasonably current with developments in their profession.

A profession's strongest claim of jurisdiction over a problem is that its knowledge system is effective in the task domain. In view of the multi-disciplinary nature of the new information jobs, there is the need that the education of skilled information professionals must evolve to meet the many challenges that have resulted from the complex knowledge-based environments in which they live and work.

The educational ramifications of the changes are considerable. There is the need to place more emphasis on data and information structure, design of information systems, development of entrepreneurial and marketing skills, development of core

competencies that are general to the information profession and not specific to librarianship. All these should be done in recognition of the great employment mobility of the information professional.

Looking at the way things are going it is very important that we carry out substantial re-assessment of the educational requirements for careers in the librarianship profession to bring it in tandem with the technological developments. Consequently, the situation where academics stress theoretical study and the acquisition of subject knowledge, while employees expect skills both practical and professional should be reconciled. The difficulty, according to Gash and Reardon (1988), has been the failure to differentiate between education and training, and to recognize that academics wish to educate while employers require suitably trained personnel.

Conclusion

There is now a general acceptance that information is not only a valuable resource, but also one of the major factors that contribute to changes in the economy. The situation where information is viewed as a public good is gradually giving way to it being viewed as a commodity. As librarians we have a responsibility to both our employers and users to offer swift and value-for-money services, and guard against complacency that may lead to professional stagnation.

In order to continue to be relevant, librarians should be able to introduce periodic changes to various aspects of their operations and these should be well-

managed, otherwise some of these changes may end up being very costly in the final analysis. Whatever changes that librarians embark upon should be guided by the following indicators: the effectiveness output which takes into consideration client satisfaction, better utilization of information and whether the resources allocated match the agreed priorities; and the efficiency outputs which relates to the increased innovativeness on the part of the staff and the degree of reactivity on the part of the clients.

Finally, librarians should position ourselves to play a more proactive role in advocacy at the national level to get the government to enact laws that incorporate the development of libraries in the national development plans.

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