

Defining professional competence: skills and prospects for the information profession

Sheila Corrall

SCENE-SETTING

We are working in a changing environment, where customisation and immediate desk-top delivery is the expectation of a society seduced by the hype of the Internet; low-budget and cost-conscious operations are demanded by paymasters; and confusion of roles continues as subscription agents become information providers, libraries and IT departments reposition and regroup, and information professionals don't know whether they are about to take over the world or be made redundant.

My vision of the management of libraries and information centres in a network environment runs something like this. The key characteristics of service provision for the future include:

- distributed access to information services around the organisation, but with stronger central management of information resources to optimise return on investment and value for money;
- self-service for almost all facilities, backed by more comprehensive training and support for users, tailored ('customised') to particular needs, and based on new charging and payment systems;
- application of library staff expertise in new areas, reflecting a higher priority given to information management and the need to integrate external/published and internal/informal data.

In my view, there are three key areas for library managers where success is essential, improvement is necessary, and concerted effort will bring the greatest benefit:

- human resource development;
- customer focus and liaison mechanisms;
- financial management and budgetary control.

I shall concentrate here on the human resource and management development issues, covering the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed and commenting on the recent Civil Service White Paper, but taking as my main theme the question of professional competence.

I am not using the word 'competence' here in the specific sense of the term's use in National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), but it is perhaps worth noting in passing that I am among those who feel that a highly specified competence approach to professional education and training is unsound and unsuitable for the current working environment. I like the definition offered by Tom Shaughnessy in his presentation as part of the Association of College and Research Libraries programme at the American Library Association Annual Meeting in New York in July 1996,

"Professional competence is always action-oriented and is demonstrated by what professionals do, not simply by what they know".

Shaughnessy made several points relevant to my theme about organisational change, professional identity and personal responsibility. You can look at the text of his overhead slides on the ALA web pages (1).

TOMORROW'S LIBRARIANS

What will 'qualified' librarians contribute to tomorrow's organisation? I use the word 'qualified' advisedly as the debate which began with concern about changing roles for intermediaries threatened by the empowerment of the end-user has now moved to question the value and relevance of professional education. A combination of factors makes this a pertinent issue for library managers at the moment. The downsizing and layering of organisations associated with budget pressures has encouraged delegation of so-called 'professional' tasks to para-professional or support staff. Proposed new routes to the Associateship of the Library Association linked with the advent of higher-level NVQs suggest that information 'professionals' of the future won't necessarily go to library school or its equivalent.

The blurring of boundaries and convergence of libraries and computer centres or information systems departments has also prompted talk of a new professional 'hybrid'. A substantial research project (2) to investigate this has been conducted as part of the Electronic Libraries Programme launched by the Follett review (3). The related Fielden report on human resource management in academic libraries (4) recommended abolishing the term 'professional' as traditionally used and removing barriers to promotion for unqualified ('non-professional') staff by adopting an integrated grading system; there is a general trend in the public sector away from national pay scales.

A key question for library managers to ask themselves – preferably before it is posed by others in their organisations – is whether long-held assumptions about jobs requiring library/information science qualifications are valid today. In many places, library assistants are taking on work previously the preserve of qualified librarians, with examples ranging from technical processing activities such as cataloguing and interlibrary loans to frontline services, including enquiries and CD-ROM help desks (5,6). IT developments have been instrumental here, but changes in management practices – notably teamwork – have also influenced the situation. Librarians are finding that their work involves a wider set of professional/technical competencies as well as a higher level of interpersonal/organisational abilities.

Research in the United States on the "information job family" (7) points to so many common elements in the jobs of library and computing staff that it is not surprising that senior managers are challenging assumptions. Activities common to both specialisms include:

- analysing user services and system needs;
- collecting and organising information in various forms and formats;
- planning, selecting and installing hardware and software;
- creating, maintaining, searching and managing databases;
- designing, operating and using local and wide-area networks;
- developing training tools and systems documentation;
- instructing colleagues and customers in the use of the above;
- providing technical assistance and consultancy.

The researchers also found both groups had similar goals, which might be expressed differently but boiled down to helping users to access, manipulate or use information – in all its definitions – through optimum use of hardware, software and communication systems. Physical setting and service philosophies are also coming together, but there are still significant cultural differences, reflected in salaries and status; education and qualifications; professional hierarchies and technological authority.

OFFICIAL VIEWS

What are the views of our professional associations? The Institute of Information Scientists has spent time on the reappraisal of its criteria for admission to membership and accreditation of courses, but the working party's efforts to simplify and 'future-proof' the criteria have moved them away from technical aspects of information work towards more general management and organisational competencies (albeit with the word 'information' attached) which are common to many other workers. Information generation, transfer and use still feature quite prominently, but with the possible exception of 'information evaluation' the suggested activities are couched in such general terms that the distinction between an information specialist and a computing or IT specialist is unclear. This may be a deliberate attempt to reposition the information profession, and perhaps attract members from different spheres of operation, but failure to differentiate properly between the conduit and the content is tantamount to giving up any claim to a distinctive contribution in the management of information.

Similarly, in 1995, the Library Association issued a pamphlet intended to outline the "special skills that professional librarians possess and how they apply them", and specifically aimed it at employers (9). This is a readable document but over lengthy for its purpose. I think it achieves more than the IIS has managed to do in defining professional information work, but it falls into the same trap of mixing up our specialist roles and responsibilities with those capable of being carried out by professionals in other fields or managers in general. Examples of the latter include various activities listed under headings such as strategic planning, financial planning, personnel, marketing, etc. However, suitably edited – with substantial cutting and pasting – and some expansion in places, this document has the potential to help a library manager argue the case for recruiting a qualified library/information professional on the basis of the distinctive contribution required.

The LA's initial definition of a professional librarian is a bit long-winded (with a rather old-fashioned ring to it) but the core competence is quite nicely encapsulated in the middle part – "collecting, retrieving and organising knowledge and ideas in a variety of forms, from books and manuscripts to computerised databases". Separate sections on information management, collection development and management, and organising knowledge offer other useful bullet points to support and expand on this statement, for example:

- evaluate external databases and other sources of information;
- design and set up in-house databases;
- teach users library and information skills, including research techniques and the use of specialist sources of information. (Surprisingly this point appears under the heading Marketing!)

Where the document falls down badly is in apparently allowing a concern to express things in plain English to reduce descriptions to a simplistic level. For example, 'bringing together like or related materials according to the needs of clients' and 'devising systems for the loan

of materials' sound fairly trivial tasks. What is missing here (and elsewhere) is any reference to a body of theoretical knowledge underpinning this work. The LA's proposals for widening access to its register of Chartered Librarians are probably a factor in playing down this theoretical base, and the note on professional qualifications only refers to "an academic course accredited by the Library Association" – which need not even be interpreted as a course in library/information studies!

CORE COMPETENCE

So what is our professional competence – and does it matter? Surely the core competence common to all our activities is information management – information handling in the broadest sense, covering the organisation of data/information/knowledge, searching and retrieval (via manual or automated methods) and evaluation. Developments in computerised systems, interface design and networked access to data sets have reduced the effort required in both the 'housekeeping' tasks of cataloguing and classification and in bibliographic research, especially with the arrival of more user-friendly CD-ROM services. But experience shows that while many publicly-available electronic information services are easy to search in terms of getting some useful output, they can be quite difficult to navigate successfully if a comprehensive or complex search is wanted.

An understanding of the underlying principles of subject analysis, indexing and thesaurus construction is needed to ensure users are properly served by such systems, irrespective of whether the information professional is acting as intermediary/searcher or adviser/facilitator/teacher. This knowledge is also a prerequisite in evaluating electronic products for purchase or lease. Similarly, with 'cat and class' minimal theoretical knowledge is needed for day-to-day tasks – particularly where a high proportion of bibliographic records can be obtained from external databases – but to maintain database integrity and to ensure users have adequate search facilities that function properly, a grasp of the underlying structures and principles is necessary. This expertise may be retained permanently in-house or it might be bought in, but there is an identifiable 'professional' contribution required from a suitably 'qualified' person.

Whether this theoretical knowledge ought to be imparted through formal academic courses is another question – beyond the scope of this paper – and the failure of many departments of information and library studies to do so effectively at present supports the case for a review. The challenge for the future will be to adapt our traditional approaches to a new environment.

We must also acknowledge that while a core competency in information handling is necessary for an effective information service, it is not sufficient on its own. Information workers also need knowledge, skills and insights in many other areas to become truly competent professionals. The complete information professional must have competence in three broad areas, which I shall now explore. The three areas overlap in practice, but can be distinguished conceptually for the purposes of assessment and development.

IT MATTERS

At the heart of the current debate about skills for the future lies much muddled thinking about the extent to which library/information service staff need to become IT specialists. It is undoubtedly true that the boundaries between traditional library and computing specialists have shifted, but as argued elsewhere (10) there are still distinct sets of abilities which can

be related to expertise in 'content' and 'conduit' respectively. The labels 'information specialist' and 'IT specialist' may be useful here to signal the shift but flag up the different specialisms.

The situation is confused by the fact that there are indeed many common job elements among library and computing personnel, as shown by the research by Woodsworth and others cited earlier (7). However, the fact that two sub-groups of the "information job family" share functions and purposes does not mean that it is necessarily desirable – or feasible – to merge or somehow combined the professional specialisms concerned. People bring to the activities listed different mixes of knowledge, skills and insights, acquired and developed through various career experiences. While acknowledging that many who began their professional lives as 'content professionals' have in fact developed considerable expertise in the 'conduit', both aspects of information management in my view are still sufficiently complex to justify distinct specialisms. Far from enhancing our role and status, extending the breadth of our claimed expertise – as opposed to our interest and involvement – in this direction threatens to dilute our potential expert contribution, at a time when our traditional areas of competence and strength ought to be pushing us into the limelight.

We need to assert our core competencies in the organisation of (formally and informally) recorded knowledge, and prove the value of our professional abilities:

- to design and develop indexing/access systems;
- to evaluate and select information sources and media;
- to promote and impart generic information handling skills.

We also need to acknowledge that while these competencies are necessary for successful service delivery, they are not sufficient. Library staff must have personal qualities and abilities in other areas if they are to make a truly professional contribution to their organisations in the information society of the twenty-first century.

However, we are the people to address the difficult issues, which are happily emerging on the agendas of bodies not normally interested in library matters, using the new vocabulary current being applied to our traditional concerns;

- navigation (search and retrieval);
- metadata (cataloguing and indexing);
- information quality audits (stock editing and selection);
- information mentoring (readers advisory work).

Librarians who habitually favour the forward defensive have often seen IT as the culprit responsible for 'de-skilling' because it enabled library assistants/support staff to take on more responsibility in manipulating or amending bibliographic records. Others welcomed the chance to hand over the routine aspects of those tasks and turn their energies to the challenges of providing public access to the proliferation of new electronic information products and services.

The managerial test here is to identify the point at which it becomes more sensible and cost-effective to bring a computing/IT specialist into the library team. At Aston University Library & Information Services, a leader and innovator in electronic information services provision, two information specialist posts were in effect given up to enable the development of a strong LIS Systems team, which was headed up by a 'content' professional (the former bibliographic records/cataloguing manager). There were already several information

(‘content’) specialists on the staff who had built up substantial expertise in PC-based systems and networking as a result of the changing nature of their work (and personal interest) but subsequent experience proved that recruitment of two ‘conduit’ specialists not only saved staff time overall but actually added value in identifying technical solutions and applications developments that would not otherwise have been possible.

The information content professional must achieve the level of competence in the information conduit (technology) necessary and sufficient to fulfil his or her role. This will vary from post to post, but it ought not to be confused with the core competence in information (content) organisation.

ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

The third broad area of competence identified reflects the distinction drawn by several commentators between the professional/technical dimensions of information work and the managerial/interpersonal aspects. Speculative studies in the United States to inform curriculum development for professional education of research librarians (11) as well as concise commentary from a special library management perspective (12) point to the growing importance of ‘organisation’ competencies, under which heading are grouped more generic managerial abilities not specific to the LIS professional but essential for effective performance within an organisational context. I think ‘context’ is the appropriate heading here as I feel it better captures the notion that management competence is context-specific.

The successful professional needs to be able to apply the concepts and techniques of disciplines or specialisms such as accountancy, market research, personnel, etc. in accordance with the norms and practices of his or her particular working environment, which in turn requires an understanding of its structure and culture, mission, vision and values, and – more broadly – strategic alliances. At a more pragmatic level, understanding the business and how it works, including familiarity with its literature and terminology, is vital to the effective anticipation, analysis and satisfaction of information needs, and information professionals also need to become effective ‘organisational networkers’ (rather than operating in ‘stand-alone’ mode) with better connections and continuing working relationships with their customers and colleagues.

Particular examples under the business/management heading include strategy, marketing, finance, human resources, and more specifically project management, investment appraisal and cost-benefit analysis. Under the heading of interpersonal and ‘self-management’ we could list communication, facilitating, teamworking, training/instruction, negotiating, problem-solving and time management.

TRIPARTITE MODEL

We therefore have a three-part model of professional competence – ‘content’, ‘conduit’ and ‘context’ – with the ‘content’ element forming the ‘core’ area where in-depth understanding and high-level ability are assumed. All professionals will need knowledge, skills and insights in the two other areas, but the nature and extent of the requirement will vary from job to job. In particular, regarding IT, drawing on the interim findings of the SKIP project (Skills for new Information Professional) mentioned previously,

“all staff should be IT literate and keyboard familiar, and should not be ‘technophobic’. The type and level of IT skills required are dependent on the requirements of the job.” (2)

PERSONAL QUALITIES

Beyond this, there are the personal attributes and abilities which recent evidence suggests are ultimately the critical factors for professional success. Referring to the SKIP project again,

“Personal qualities and attitudes are more important for staff than skills; these [ie the skills] can easily be taught or learnt. Managers require flexible staff who will learn new skills in response to constant changes in service provision. They do not want staff who cling to old notions of what does, or does not, constitute their specific role, job or sphere of work.”

Responsiveness, networking, multi-tasking, interoperability and connectivity – words previously associated more with systems now also indicate the skills and styles of people working in the electronic era. Far from de-skilling and dehumanising, IT has put more focus on the specialist skills and human qualities of information professionals. Garrod continues,

“The personality, vision, drive and attitude of the head of service are critical...” (2)

Few can now hold to the view that change is not a continuing feature of our working life. The questions are ‘How far?’ and ‘How fast?’ Carla Stoffle and her colleagues at the University of Arizona-Tucson published in 1996 a hard-hitting article urging radical and rapid change (13). Three key themes of Stoffle’s thesis are:

- Simplicity – moving from a concern with tasks and valuing complexity to a focus on processes and systems, and keeping things simple;
- Connection development – outreach or even formal liaison assignments are not enough – forming relationships that are strong two-way connections, for mutual sharing and benefit;
- Breakthrough performance – reducing cycle times for introducing new services, rethinking everything libraries do, and taking risks to achieve dramatic improvements.

Although Stoffle and her colleagues are writing about academic libraries, many of their comments are equally applicable to library and information services in other sectors. Her point about simplicity is well made: it is often more difficult, but ultimately more productive, to pick out a handful of key strategies and related performance indicators than a long ‘wish list’. My personal set of critical success factors for leadership and managerial effectiveness also includes:

- The big picture – a long-term view, with a wide-angle lens;
- Questions and answers – challenging the status quo, asking questions and listening to the answers;
- A sense of humour – don’t take yourself too seriously! (There are too many pompous and pretentious people in our professional universe already.)

PROSPECTS IN GOVERNMENT

The Civic Service White Paper on Development and Training (14) offered a timely opportunity to consider such issues in a government library/information service context. The paper reflects many longstanding and some more recent concerns, and includes most of the current ‘buzzwords’ – for example, ‘flexibility’, ‘lifetime learning’, ‘mentoring’, ‘performance

management', 'service level agreements', 'target-setting' and the ubiquitous 'value-for-money', as well as references to IT and even the Internet. Its stress on a stronger managerial culture and more professional management training is interesting given the long history of fairly comprehensive course provision by the Civil Service College and the multiplicity of initiatives previously taken in this direction.

Taken at face value, the White Paper is generally consistent with and supportive of the policies and practices advocated by the Institute of Personnel and Development and the HR/management development gurus. The triangular responsibility for personal/career development shared between the individual, line manager and employer/top management echoes the model advanced in the Library Association's CPD framework. The emphasis on improved understanding of the operational and organisational environment, the elaboration of key elements in the management development curriculum (for example, accounting and budgets, project management and quality techniques, oral and visual presentation) and the explicit references to top managers' commitment to continuous learning are all encouraging and relevant messages for us.

But, as usual we must be disappointed – though probably not really surprised – that information professionals are not among the functional specialisms and expertise mentioned explicitly; and I suspect that the reference to "latest IT issues such as the Internet" is not underpinned by any real grasp of the fundamental significance of Web developments, the importance of metadata, or the implications for data protection and copyright. It may be obvious to us that information professionals should be prime candidates in any initiative to make more use of specialists in wider roles (as advocated in the paper) but I doubt whether others genuinely share this view.

The information profession in government would also benefit significantly if the proposed new push to increase external recruitment at middle management levels could include bringing in LIS professionals from other sectors. The tendency to transfer and promote from within and the apparent lack of new blood or transferred learning from outside may be one of the causes of the continuing failure – with one or two exceptions – for 'state librarians' to make much impact on the national and international professional scene. (How many Circle members would you rank among the leading thinkers and practitioners in our profession? How many are regularly invited to speak or write outside their particular sphere of operation? How often do you visit or mix with colleagues in other types of library?) I know (from personal experience) how much further advanced in networked information provision university libraries were at the start of this decade. This was largely because UK universities were exceptionally fortunate in having their network infrastructure funded through 'top-sliced' budgets. Government LIS professionals seem to have been rather slow to catch up. Surely service heads with vision and drive should have seen this coming and brought in expertise – if not be recruitment, through secondment, exchange or attachment?

CONCLUSIONS

The White Paper provides as its subtitle suggests a framework for development, but progress will depend as much on the commitment, energy and imagination of the profession itself as it will on top management. To survive and thrive in the future, the management of library and information services must change significantly. The world of business offers models, tools and techniques which can usefully be adopted and adapted by library managers, after training as appropriate. But, in my view, the focus on staff training must shift from specifying and testing job-related skills and competencies to developing

capabilities and managing talent. Managers will need to have the insight and mentoring capacity to spot and nurture talent, and build capability among existing staff. This requires a more flexible view of organisational structures, which must be both fit for their purpose and fluid to enable progress. Designing roles for individuals rather than describing jobs and specifying the skills required is the way forward in a culture of downsizing and delayering.

The library leader's contribution is absolutely crucial. The role of the change agent has shifted from that of the know-it-all expert, selling staff his recommended solutions, to one of a facilitator-with-vision, coaching her colleagues in problem-solving techniques. The world around us may seem to be in perpetual flux (if not total chaos) but it is our job to create an atmosphere of (relative) calm – a climate where people can perform effectively, where they are stimulated and excited, but stretched rather than stressed, and exhilarated not exhausted. Successful leaders will be those who inspire confidence, who are flexible and listen to the views of others, but ultimately decisive and prepared to take personal responsibility for change.

REFERENCES

- 1 <http://www.sc.edu/library/ala/index.html>.
- 2 GARROD, Penny. Skills for the new professional. *Library Technology*, 1 (5) November 1996, 99-100.
- 3 JOINT FUNDING COUNCILS' LIBRARIES REVIEW GROUP. *Report*. Bristol: The Councils, 1993 (Chairman: Professor Sir Brian Follett).
- 4 JOHN FIELDEN CONSULTANCY. *Supporting expansion: a report on human resource management in academic libraries, for the Joint Funding Councils' Libraries Review*. Bristol: The Councils, 1993.
- 5 CORRALL, Sheila. Do we really need cataloguers? *Catalogue & Index*, (117) Autumn 1995, 9.
- 6 CORRALL, Sheila. An evolving service: managing change. In: Dempsey, Lorcan, Law, Derek and Mowat, Ian, eds. *Networking and the future of libraries 2: managing the intellectual record*. London: Library Association Publishing (in association with the UK Office for Library and Information Networking), 1995, 45-61.
- 7 WOODSWORTH, Anne, MAYLONE, Theresa and SYWAK, Myron. The information job family; results of an exploratory study. *Library Trends*, 41 (2) 1992, 250-268.
- 8 Criteria for information science. *Inform*, (188) October 1996, 3.
- 9 *Professional librarians: a brief guide for employers*. London: The Library Association, 1995, 10p.
- 10 CORRALL, Sheila and LESTER, Ray. Professors and professionals: on changing boundaries. In: Cuthbert, Rob, ed. *Working in higher education*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 1996 [in press]
- 11 WOODSWORTH, Anne and LESTER, June. Educational imperatives of the future research library: a symposium. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 14 (4) 1991, 204-209.
- 12 OJALA, Marydee. Core competencies for special library managers of the future. *Special Libraries*, 84 (4) 1993, 230-234.

- 13 STOFFLE, Carla J, RENAUD, Robert and VELDOF, Jerilyn R. Choosing our futures. *College & Research Libraries*, 57 (3) May 1996, 213-225.
- 14 *Development and training for Civil Servants: a framework for action*. London: HMSO, 1996 (Cm 3321).

Further reading

GREALY, Deborah and others. Staff development and training in college and university libraries. *Library Administration & Management*, 10 (4) Fall 1996, 204-209 [Illustrates the breadth and depth of staff development and training required for the networked environment.]

OSIF, Bonnie A. and HARWOOD, Richard L. Manager's bookshelf: cross-training. *Library Administration & Management*, 10 (4) Fall 1996, 252-256. [Covers both management and library literature in relation to multiskilling, job enlargement and cross-functional management.]

Sheila Corral was appointed University Librarian at Reading in 1995. She was previously Director of Library and Information Services at Aston University in Birmingham, and before that worked for ten years at the British Library and for five years in the public library sector. Sheila has served on the committees of many national bodies, and is currently a member of the Committee on Electronic Information of the Joint Information Systems Committee of the Higher Education Funding Councils. She has lectured and published widely on professional and management topics; her particular areas of interest and expertise include service quality, strategic planning and the management of change. Sheila is a former Vice-Chairman of the Circle of State Librarians.