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Changing Roles of Library Professionals

Janice Simmons-Welburn
Marquette University, janice.welburn@marquette.edu

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Janice Simmons-Welburn was affiliated with the University of Iowa at the time of publication.

Changing Roles of Library Professionals

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Janice Simmons-Welburn
Director, Human Resources and Processing Services
University of Iowa

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ASSOCIATION OF RESEARCH LIBRARIES

OFFICE OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT SERVICES

Executive Summary

Introduction

Over the past ten years, many changes have affected the roles of librarians and other professionals in research libraries. The changes have been caused, in part, by technological advances, reorganizations, more focus on libraries as learning organizations, the use of teams and team-based approaches to tasks, and a recognition of diversity's importance to organizational development. Librarians have had to align priorities with redefined institutional goals.

The survey for this SPEC Kit was an effort to examine these professional changes through an analysis of position descriptions issued by ARL member institutions. What follows are the results of the survey conducted in January 1999 by the ARL Leadership Committee whose membership included: Nancy Baker, Washington State University; Joan Giesecke, University of Nebraska–Lincoln; Carolyn Snyder, Southern Illinois University; DeEtta Jones, ARL Senior Program Officer for Diversity; and Kathryn Deiss, ARL/OLMS Program Manager.

Summary

ARL received responses from 55 of the 122 member libraries (45%). The largest numbers of respondents were from the South and North Central regions. Approximately 65% of the respondents were public institutions. Since January 1, 1996, the 55 responding institutions had posted 686 librarian positions (a mean of 12.5 per institution) and 206 administrative positions (or a mean of 3.8 per institution). No significant differences in the number of postings were observed by region, except for a striking difference between U.S. and Canadian institutions. The number of positions reported by Canadian libraries was quite small (44 in all), which is possibly due to the small number of postings for positions in Canada relative to the U.S. during the time of the survey, but more likely indicative of a reduction in Canadian staff.[1] Variance in the number of library and administrative positions per institution was largest among U.S. institutions in the West, while the smallest variation can be found in the North Central Region. Again, the difference by institutional type (public or private) was not substantial.

One hundred and seventy-two (25%) existing librarians positions and 90 (44%) existing administrative positions were radically redesigned. There were no extreme differences in the average number of redesigned positions by region, although the average number of redesigned administrative positions in the West was low (.4 per institution), while the Northeast reported an average of 4.1 administrative positions redesigned per institution. ARL libraries in the South reported the largest number of redesigned librarians' positions (67 or 39% of the total number of redesigned positions). No significant difference in the average number of redesigned positions by institutional type was observed, although state institutions reported a large number of changes in the designs of librarians' positions (128 or 74%) and administrative positions (51 or 57%).

Among the positions libraries desired, if funding was made available, 74 out of the 155 positions (50%) involved technology in one capacity or another. Six positions (4%) involved information literacy, outreach, or distance learning. Twenty-two (14.8%) of the desired positions involved either administrative support, development, or public relations and marketing, while six positions specifically mentioned duties relating to copyright and contracts and licenses. Examples of titles drawn from the list for desired positions include: computer programmer, systems analyst, application support specialist, budget officer, staff development officer, digital archivist, web development and management, data librarian, and negotiation and coordination of digital licenses. Most of the desired bibliographer and cataloger positions were for either highly specialized areas (East Asian, music, Irish, maps) or digital-related resources[2].

A substantial number of the new job descriptions submitted by respondents are for web- or technology-related positions. While most are intralibrary system positions, two are for a university web master. Many of the remaining position descriptions submitted—while they do not principally focus on technology-based responsibilities—demand varying degrees of knowledge or familiarity with technologies. Thus, the job descriptions make it clear that in the current employment marketplace for library professionals there is an expectation of higher levels of technological competencies, especially among M.L.S. recipients.

Characteristics

An analysis of the position descriptions forwarded by respondents does not indicate that there are significant geographic differences in position requirements and characteristics. Nor are there significant differences between public and private institutions, except that the public institutions often include language pointing toward a more diverse student clientele. Descriptions from public institutions, for example, profess an interest in attracting professionals with experience, educational background, or other evidence of professional preparation that would prepare them to work with distance learning or distance education programs or engage in outreach efforts to reach an array of clientele.

What are the new positions and new characteristics? As mentioned before, the new skills requested in position descriptions revolve around technology and include knowledge of educational and instructional technologies (or teaching technologies), especially for public institutions. It is common to find postings for reference positions seeking individuals with knowledge of electronic resources and products, for example: electronic resources and reference librarian or reference librarian and web specialist. Other new positions reported include information technology specialist and digital projects librarian. It is also commonplace to find requirements that include knowledge of markup languages (HTML, SGML, XML) and operating systems (Unix, Windows, and Macintosh). A knowledge of the latter implies an ability to work across platforms, which indicates again the new expectations for library employees.

A significant number of the descriptions collected indicate that the positions have been redefined to fit within new or reengineered organizational configurations. In some cases, new positions have emerged from organizational redesign and development. For example, one library advertised for a coordinator for a "Service Plus" configuration. Another referred to a reconfiguration of services into four educational teams, thereby requiring teaching-training expertise in technologies supporting the new organizational structure. Another advertised several positions reporting to a director of computing and telecommunication.

Many positions ask for the possession of team skills—the ability to work in "team-based" or "team-oriented," "client-centered" environments. Typical among the language for these skills is a statement on "teamwork, communication, and shared responsibility."

Among the new administrative professional positions, several respondents sought development officers. In some, but not all, cases the M.L.S. is required.

Among the educational requirements reported by responding institutions, the M.L.S. remains the terminal degree requirement. Many descriptions list various desirable degrees, such as computer science, educational or instructional technology, business administration, or advanced degrees in other disciplines, but few require them. Instead, advertised positions focus on demonstrated expertise or experience in the working area required by the position, such as a knowledge of hardware or software, web-based activities (including HTML or other markup languages), staff training and development, classroom teaching experience, or administration.

Conclusion

In summary, the changing roles of librarians and other professionals in ARL libraries are the consequence of new technologies and organizational development. On the one hand, ARL institutions presently desire many different types of new positions that are designed to work with technology, networked environments, information systems, and digital libraries. In addition, many other positions have been redesigned to integrate technological competencies as a part of the overall requirements and desired characteristics of their positions. On the other hand, although the number of librarian positions posted outnumbered non-librarian administrative professional positions by three to one, a significantly higher number of administrative professional positions (44.1%) were the

result of radical redesign. These figures support what Stanley Wilder concluded in his article previously quoted. Libraries have a need for new kinds of expertise; this shift "represents a movement away from traditional library skills and library education generally. One is left with the overpowering sense that while the individuals who are about to leave this population may be replaced, their skills and professional training may not."[3]

(Footnotes)

[1]Stanley Wilder has observed, "Canadian ARL university libraries lost almost 12% of their professional staffs between 1994 and 1998, most between 1996 and 1997." Trends in staff reductions among Canadian ARL libraries are likely to have affected the number of positions reported in the present study. See Stanley Wilder, "The Changing Profile of Research Library Professional Staff," *ARL: A Bimonthly Report on Research Library Issues and Actions from ARL, CNI, and SPARC* no. 208/209 (Feb./Apr. 2000): 4.

[2]Again Wilder ("The Changing Profile," 4) found that staff reductions had a significant impact on the ARL population in the 1990s. According to Wilder's study, "In 1998, there were 302 fewer catalogers in ARL university libraries than in 1990, despite the addition of three libraries to the data set. This constitutes a drop of 25% in just eight years."

[3]Ibid., 5.