

Preparing New Era Librarians and Information Professionals: Trends and Issues

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Abstract

“One must never lose time in vainly regretting the past nor in complaining about the changes which cause us discomfort, for change is the very essence of life”.

The advancement of ICT (Information, Communication and Technology) has brought a lot of changes not only on the library and information services but also on the roles and expectations of the librarians and information professionals. As a librarian you are expected to do more and more with fewer and fewer people. There is a real danger that librarians and information professionals will be left behind if it still insists on the old role of the traditional librarians. So it is important that there is a new change in paradigm. As the saying goes, change or perish. This paper will attempt to understand what a successful, relevant and dynamic librarians and information professionals must be in this Information Age. It will also focus on the issues, trends and challenges in preparing new era librarians and information professionals.

Introduction

There will always be changes in the environment, and these changes will affect librarians and information professionals: their role, job opportunities, self-image, motivation and even survival. Librarians therefore need to find a solution to timely repositioning and role claiming. There will never be an easy solution or a quick recipe, and this will certainly not be a short-term project. Without denying the value of curriculum and instructional design, the purpose of this article is to elicit ideas on using creativity and our "sixth sense" as an added dimension in preparing librarians and information professionals to assess new roles in time.

We live in an information society where the development of information technology and telecommunication networks is accompanied by a corresponding increase in knowledge, with a rapidly growing flow of information. This new information environment requires new skills in seeking, processing and using information. The base for individual ability to understand and use information is a qualitative, ongoing learning process. Learning and education are important topics in the information society and the educational situation is changing for several reasons, which develop from the social, cultural, political and economic changes in the society. The role of librarians and information professionals in this new environment has been strongly influenced by these changes.

Current Trends

Before discussing on the new roles of librarians and information professionals in the new era, let's first look at the current trends discussed in most recent literature of library and information management. These current trends somehow or rather will have a bearing in shaping librarians and information professionals in the new era. They are summarized as follows:

- A vision towards information and knowledge rich society
- Library functions in information and knowledge-based society
- Knowledge-based economy – information and knowledge as drivers to boost the economy
- Information management recognized as an important discipline
- Information recognized as commodity (information brokerage, information entrepreneurship, fee-based information)
- Information recognized as power/strength/weapon
- Information strongly link to decision-making, strategic management, competitive advantage, innovation, R&D

- Knowledge management – leveraging organization
- Globalization of information
- Integrated and widespread ICT applications
- Mushrooming of information systems – need for Information System Management (ISM)
- Growth of electronic / internet resources
- Role of digital/electronic/virtual library
- Librarians is designated as cyber librarians
- Librarians expanded & changes in digital environment
- New breeds of information professionals: CIO, CKO, Information consultants and analysts
- Competency- based assessment/training
- Leadership skills
- Access role replace custodial role
- Customer-focused/customer-centered, user oriented approach in provision of services
- Strategic alliances, partnership and collaborations
- Librarians need new management knowledge and skills
- Specialized knowledge & skills in library and information management
- Double degree (major-minor concept)
- Trend to develop digital contents to facilitate access
- Revamping of curriculum – redesign curriculum to accommodate changes and new trends

Traditional Roles and Skills

The information that users require may be accessed differently but the skills the librarians and information professionals need to manage this information can be adapted from established practices. There is no denying that this is a new global library environment and it is one in which librarians and information professionals are still finding their way. However, the foundations of the profession and the skills and roles associated with it will help to ensure librarians survival. The core skills traditionally associated with librarians/ information professionals which include information handling skills, training and facilitating skills, evaluation skills and concern for the customer are all still relevant. These skills cover cataloguing, classification, indexing, enquiry work and user education all functions which if managed by librarians will help to make the Internet an easier place to navigate. Librarians in all sectors have built up roles and library services based on collections and users needs and according to Creth (1996) the "values that are the foundation of the library profession should remain the same into the next century...values of service, quality, universal access, and co-operation". It is the way in which these values are translated into operations and activities that will undergo substantial change.

Lancaster (1997) correctly states that in order to justify its existence in the electronic world, "the library must continue to perform one of the most important functions it now performs in the print-on-paper world: to organize the universe of resources in such a way that those most likely to be of value to the user community are made most accessible to this community, physically and intellectually. The vast amount of information available in a networked environment suggests that there is more than ever before a role for trained intermediaries with search skills, abilities to analyze and evaluate resources and match needs with sources. The traditional library skills mentioned above should be reassessed and their value to information services in the electronic environment applied. For example, the skills of cataloguing and classification can be used to improve the end users experience of networked information retrieval. The creation of meaningful metadata files based on cataloguing principles can help users find needles in the Internet haystack. The creation of catalogues including electronic resources can ensure access, authenticity, reliability and validity of networked resources.

The increasing amount of information available to users and the ways in which it can be accessed has in theory made it easier for users to get the information they require. However, in practice there is now a danger that they can be overwhelmed by the amount of information they receive making it difficult to locate the exact information they seek as well as overseeing issues of accuracy and authenticity. The role of librarians and information professionals as both user-educator and intermediary is prevalent in this environment. The foundations of librarianship, which include skills such as cataloguing and user education, are, as explained above, as relevant in an electronic age as they are in a print based one and will continue to provide a solid base of skills.

New Roles and Skills

In addition to the professional skills mentioned, the librarians and information professionals of the future must be equipped with a wide range of personal and transferable skills in order to manage the changing environment in which he or she works. The importance of transferable skills over information technology skills should be highlighted here. Management and interpersonal skills will make librarians more effective managers of networked resources and services. As Hastings (1996) says "it is more important that digital librarians possess particular personal qualities (which are innate) rather than specific technical expertise (which can be learned). This is not to say that the way to avoid the electronic age is for library professionals to stick their heads in the sand. The information professional must change and adapt to the new electronic information environment, he or she must learn about new technologies and be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of them. Librarians should not feel threatened by computers and technical developments but should move forward with the new technology and take a pivotal role within organizations.

Information professionals within libraries are playing an increasing role in dealing with information in electronic formats by creating Web pages to promote their services to external customers and choosing automated library management systems. Skills in information organization are more necessary in this age of information explosion. Librarians and information professionals have a key role to play in this era. For example, librarians are well equipped to take intranet projects through the various stages of design and maintenance as they understand their users and their organizations information needs and have the range of skills to manage knowledge effectively.

The role of the librarians in this context is to help users find the information they require then provide them with the tools to assess and use the resources for their individual needs. Creth (1996) suggests that librarians achieve this by "actively seeking out users in a variety of settings" and by making "full use of information and multimedia technology" by offering instruction in a variety of formats (including Web based instruction and online tutorials). New era librarians and information professionals should be able to manage the Digital Information System as this encompass the overall competencies (knowledge, know-how, skills and attitudes) necessary to create, store, analyze, organize, retrieve and disseminate digital information (text, images, sounds) in digital libraries or any type of information.

The Value of the New Era Librarians

The new era librarian is a technology application leader who works with other members of the information management team to design and evaluate systems for information access that meet user needs. Where required, the new era librarian provides instruction and support so that end users can make optimal use of the information resources available to them. The new era librarian is capable of working in the hybrid world of print and electronic media and providing the best mix of information resources in the most appropriate formats for the environment.

The new era librarian plays a key role in developing information policy for the organization ensuring that access to all information resources -- from internal records to external databases -- is provided in the most strategically-effective and cost-effective manner. The new era librarian also plays another important role in ensuring that contractual, legal and ethical obligations regarding information use are met. The electronic information age provides new opportunities for organizations to produce as well as use information products. New era librarians, given their familiarity with the information marketplace, can be key contributors to the development, marketing and use of information products.

New era librarians are knowledge-based practitioners who use research as a foundation for their own professional practice and who support the conduct of research through their professional associations. Research has shown that the provision of appropriate information can lead to: better- informed decision-making; the ability to proceed to the next step in a project or task; improved relations with a client; and the exploitation of new business opportunities. The right information at the right time can also benefit the organization by saving the time of highly paid employees, avoiding poor business decisions, and even direct loss of funds. In the information age, new era librarians are essential -- by responding with a sense of urgency to critical information needs they provide the information edge for the knowledge-based organization. In order to fulfill this key information role, new era librarians require two main types of competencies: Professional competencies relate to the special librarian's knowledge in the areas of information resources, information access, technology, management and research and the ability to use these areas of knowledge as a basis for providing library and information services.

Personal competencies represent a set of skills, attitudes and values that enable librarians to work efficiently; be good communicators; focus on continuing learning throughout their careers; demonstrate the value-added nature of their contributions; and survive in the new world of work.

The following sections highlight the major professional and personal competencies of new era librarians:

Professional Competencies

- has expert knowledge of the content of information resources, including the ability to critically evaluate and filter them
- has specialized subject knowledge appropriate to the business of the organization or client
- develops and manages convenient, accessible and cost-effective information services that are aligned with the strategic directions of the organization
- provides excellent instruction and support for library and information service users
- assesses information needs and designs and markets value-added information services and products to meet identified needs
- uses appropriate information technology to acquire, organize and disseminate information
- uses appropriate business and management approaches to communicate the importance of information services to senior management
- develops specialized information products for use inside or outside the organization or by individual clients
- evaluates the outcomes of information use and conducts research related to the solution of information management problems
- continually improves information services in response to the changing needs
- is an effective member of the senior management team and a consultant to the organization on information issues

Personal Competencies

- committed to service excellence
- seeks out challenges and sees new opportunities both inside and outside the library
- sees the big picture
- creates an environment of mutual respect and trust
- has effective communications skills
- works well with others in a team
- provides leadership
- plans, prioritizes and focuses on what is critical
- committed to lifelong learning and personal career planning
- have personal business skills and creates new opportunities
- recognizes the value of professional networking and solidarity
- is flexible and positive in a time of continuing change

From the preceding section it would seem that there is an abundance of potential roles for the librarian. To take up these roles will require careful and timely preparation. Preparedness is a key issue in repositioning ourselves for new roles. Preparedness includes content knowledge and related skills but, more importantly, it includes survival skills. The following are a few suggestions that could also shape the teaching approach, assessment methods, etc. Survival skills could include the ability to:

- carry out environmental scanning and rapid decision-making
- critically analyze the professional domain and where it is heading
- employ time management to keep librarians from putting off preparing for new roles
- manage change
- work collaboratively (it is impossible to monitor new developments alone)
- study independently
- think creatively
- assess one's strengths, weaknesses and progress in continuing learning

When considering the roles that have been discussed and their requirements, it seems that, apart from survival skills, new era librarians should focus more on affective skills and characteristics such as:

- enthusiasm for life-long learning and new roles
- will-power (because nothing will come easily)
- assertiveness
- creative thinking
- self-confidence
- innovativeness

Role of Library Schools

The question that arises is how does the library school or faculty prepare the librarians to meet job market that is demanding, constantly changing, challenging with very diversified needs. The faculty or Library School does not have much choice but to take account of the changes and development while developing the program of studies and the curriculum. Curriculum should be geared towards preparing students to become new era librarians and information professionals. Students in the field of library science have to Major in Library and Information Management and at the same time taking a Minor in Information Systems Management. This will strengthen their knowledge in ICT besides having a solid background in library science.

Conclusion

It is ironical that all these technologies are under way, but not yet fully coordinated and targeted at the task of creating a new era librarian or digital librarian. The new era librarian will become the guardian of digital information and will be the vehicle to preserve democratic access to information. The digital librarian's role will be increasingly towards offering consultancy to the users in their efforts in providing digital reference services, electronic information services, navigating, searching and retrieval of digitized information through Web documents that span the Universal Digital Library or the Global Digital Library. The new era librarian will be an embodiment of a digital information professional or digital knowledge worker, who will ensure that the digital libraries are used effectively and with ease. Digital librarians with newly acquired skills can play a meaningful and leading role in the networked information society of the millennium. New era librarians add values and can make libraries truly useful and user friendly.

The knowledge that "new era librarians" bring to this knowledge environment would make sense of a multiplicity of digital collections and resources, provide access to a network of key contacts, identify cost-effective strategies for information retrieval, and assist users in the publication and creation of new knowledge. Several personal characteristics plus the new skills and competencies are essential for the new era librarians to create and manage library collections and services. Demonstrated skills and sophisticated expertise competencies are needed for new era librarians to manage the Digital Information System (DIS) in the important areas of imaging technologies, optical character recognition, markup languages, cataloguing, multimedia indexing, database technology, user interface design, programming, and Web technologies. Nevertheless, printed materials will remain important and places to hold them will be necessary. It is hoped we can stay focus in this fast changing environment which demands that librarians and information professionals must be someone with multi-skills, multi-tasking abilities, and competent in areas of work such as management, communication, language, public relations and others.

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