

Professional Skills and Competencies for Academic Librarian in an Electronic Environment

Ms. Susan Mathew K.

Assistant Librarian

University Library, CUSAT, Kochi, Kerala

A B S T R A C T

Development of new technologies in the field of library and information science especially in academic libraries has resulted in the need for library staff to be flexible in adopting new skills and levels of awareness. In addition to core technology skills, importance is to be given to other skills in communication, management, etc. This paper attempts to describe in brief the competencies and skills required for an academic library professional in the digital era.

Keywords: Competencies, ICT skills, Academic librarian.

Introduction

The dynamic environment of the library and information sector stresses the need for academic library professionals to remain flexible and adaptable to change. To meet this need, they have to ensure that their knowledge, competencies and skills meet the needs of the community which they serve. Similarly, employers have a responsibility to provide opportunities for library and information professionals to keep their skills, knowledge and competencies up-to-date. In light of the technological advancements that are taking place, there is an urgent need for LIS educators to conduct evaluation and performance measurement studies on the effectiveness of their curricula in responding to the needs and demands of the real world of

information work. The library and information science curriculum must incorporate more technology components to meet the intellectual and practical needs of information professionals.

The biggest challenges facing the library profession today is preparing employees to use technology effectively. But it is not enough for a library professional in an academic library to be a master of technology alone. In the present electronic era, what every library professional choose to ignore is the management aspect of a library. In addition to the technical and professional skills they have to possess various other skills like business and management, teaching, leadership, soft skills, etc.

A number of competency studies have been conducted in the field of library and information studies during the last few years in the wake of developments in information technology. Most of these studies were generally concerned with the common competencies needed by LIS professionals. One of the major studies on competencies was undertaken by the Special Libraries Association (SLA) entitled *Competencies for Special Librarians of the 21st Century*, revised edition, June 2003. The SLA identified two main types of competency. These are two core competencies very essential for every library or information professional.

1. Professional competencies related to the special librarians' 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. Professional competencies further include four major competencies, each supported with specific skills:
 - (a) Managing Information Organizations.
 - (b) Managing Information Resources.
 - (c) Managing Information Services.
 - (d) Applying Information Tools and Technologies.
2. Personal competencies, comprise 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 field of work.

Web Junction supported in part by OCLC has made a compilation of competency statements that deal with a broad range of library practice and service. This includes Library Management, Technology (Core Skills and Systems and IT Skills) and Personal/Interpersonal competencies.

Successful running of an organization require certain leadership skills and careful management techniques. It is important that academic librarians acquire the skills that will enable them to operate effectively in large and increasingly competitive organizations.

Important library management competencies are:

- (a) Effective financial management using sound business and financial judgement.
- (b) Use appropriate business and management approaches to communicate the library's value to university administrators.
- (c) Promote the library as a center of lifelong learning for the community.
- (d) Maintain good public relations through communication and promotion of library's services and needs to all stakeholders.
- (e) Maintain a user friendly and safe physical environment to encourage library use by the academic community.
- (f) Maintain an awareness of current law and policy that may impact library services, administration and up-to-date policies/procedures for staff communication.
- (g) Understand the basic principles of marketing and how they apply to library services.
- (h) The librarian has to assist the professional and personal development of people working within the information organization by creating development plans for staff to gain necessary competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities, behavior, attitudes).
- (i) Management of human resources effectively to increase productivity which is highly important to achieve the library's mission and goals.

Personal and Interpersonal Competencies

The library professionals have to develop good communication skills to help build good relations with co-workers and users. Librarian must anticipate and maintain awareness of users' needs and wants through user surveys, complaint logs and other means.

Developing interpersonal competencies helps to maintain effective relationship with other staff in the library and achieve common goals.

Library professionals must understand the importance of lifelong learning for all levels of library work and actively pursue personal and professional growth through continuing education.

In an academic library environment the librarian must be alert to the importance of library in the context of higher education (its purpose and goals) and the needs of students, faculty, and researchers and seek to provide services that will enhance these endeavors. Librarian must be familiar with the structure, organization, creation, management, dissemination, use, and preservation of information resources, new and existing, in all formats. The subject knowledge to support collection development within the library and research and teaching within the university will come under the competencies of technical services. Now the collection development of e-resources has assumed much prominence in the world of information. Academic institutions and librarians will continue to allocate more resources towards technology. Academic libraries will continue to have a crucial role in not only providing technology for users but also in creating new information systems for managing, disseminating, and preserving information regardless of format. At the same time, traditional library collections books, serials, sound recordings, maps, videos, films, photographs, archives, manuscripts, etc., will still need to be acquired, made accessible, and preserved. (Shaping The Future: ASERL's Competencies For Research Librarians).

Technology Competencies

As technology has saturated all levels of library's operations and services, the library professional in an academic institution

has to anticipate the changing expectations of users, and be flexible in adapting and adopting new skills and levels of awareness.

Listed below are some of the basic technology competencies important for an academic librarian:

- (a) Knowledge about relevant developments in information technology like e-mail and Internet, web search strategies.
- (b) Skills in basic computer hardware, troubleshooting and networking.
- (c) Knowledge about software applications, operating systems.c
- (d) Automation of library services and its management.
- (e) Familiar with web tools like blogs, social networking, RSS feeds, etc.

In addition to the core technology competencies, there are other technology systems that control the operations in a library about which the librarian must have sufficient information. As lot of library's resources may be in digital format, especially in large academic libraries, a number of new skills and knowledge are involved in creating, selecting, organizing, managing and providing access to these digital resources. The academic librarian's skills have to be developed for designing and developing web-based materials and documents for online use.c Self-archiving in open access repositories, metadata harvesting, electronic document management, etc. are presenting a whole new dimension of the information landscape. To summarize, understanding design and development of webpage, E-resource management, working knowledge of programming languages, network security, intellectual property rights, and copyright issues, etc. are some other competencies required for a library professional in the current digital age.

Even though librarians are facing challenges for new and emerging skills, the most important aspect of this change is to be able to adapt the existing skills, many of which are traditional librarianship skills and the ability to remain flexible in a working environment that is constantly changing. The rapidly changing environment of academic libraries needs attention of the authorities that manage LIS education in the

country. Information technology competencies demanded by most of the institutions require particular emphasis in our LIS curriculum.

References

1. Bakeri, A.B.A (2005), "IT Competencies in Academic Libraries: The Malaysian Experience R", *Library Review*, 54(4), pp. 267-77.
2. Gerolimos, Michalis and Konsta, Rania (2008), "Librarians' Skills and Qualifications in a Modern Informational Environment", *Library Management*, 29(8/9), pp. 691-99.
3. Vijayakumar, K.P. (2005), "Continuing Professional Development of LIS Teachers: A Strategy in Library and Information Studies in the Digital Age." Ed. by Devarajan, G. pp. 31-42, New Delhi: Ess Ess Publication.
4. Abels, E. (2003), "Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century", available at: www.sla.org/content/learn/comp2003/index.cfm (accessed 12 August 2009).
5. "Shaping the Future: ASERL's Competencies for Research Librarians," available at <http://www.aserl.org/statements/competencies/competencies.htm> (accessed 12 August 2009).