

The Digital Age and the Changing Profession

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How has the digital age, and in particular the phenomenal growth of the World Wide Web impacted on the jobs of information professionals, and what new skills sets have we needed to acquire as a consequence? These were two of the questions asked by the Information Management School of London Metropolitan University at their most recent Employers' Forum.

The Employers' Forums at London Metropolitan are a regular series of consultations aimed at bringing together information professionals and academics, allowing us to explore together the changing professional environment, and respond to the changing demands made of students emerging into the information profession. The most recent Forum was held at London Metropolitan on April 24th 2004, within sight of the new Graduate Centre, designed by Daniel Libeskind. Those in attendance came from across the breadth of professional practice, from the public library and academic sectors, and from commercial and governmental information and library services.

The challenges of the digital information age were discussed by the delegates, and some of the changing demands on the information profession mapped out. The contributions made to the forum gave a very clear picture of a changing information environment and changing professional practice. Some of the very many issues discussed are outlined below.

Within the public library sector, the implementation of the People's Network has had a significant impact on the role of information professionals. The People's Network forms a central part of the Government's e-government strategy, and the role of Public Libraries in opening up access to electronic government services is central to tackling exclusion issues in the development of e-government services. Because of the important role played by Public Libraries in this process, the digital information environment has become central to the role of information professionals in public libraries.

This has partly manifested itself in a growing responsibility for information skills training within the profession, particularly in relation to digital information resources and the World Wide Web. Information professionals are expected not only to manage digital resources, but also to train others in their use. This is a pattern that cuts across sectors: in the public library sector the People's Network has formalised an information training role, but within the academic, commercial and governmental libraries an increasing reliance on digital information has created a vacuum in training provision that librarians are increasingly filling. The increasing pace at which the digital environment is changing suggests a growing training role for librarians into the future.

Information literacy was raised by several delegates in relation to this. While the digital environment has not in itself created the gap between prevailing information literacy and those skills required to fully participate in society, services and democracy, this gap has been exposed by the move towards e-government. The e-government agenda has made explicit issues about the accessibility of government services that were perhaps previously hidden. This has not uniquely impacted on information professionals, however, there was felt to be a need for information professionals to understand information literacy, to engage in training for information literacy, and to participate in the wider social and political debate initiated by the move towards the provision of electronic information services.

The digital information environment has brought a new concentration on project work, with digital information services being developed often as discrete projects, in many cases in collaboration with other organisations. This was felt to be particularly true in the public library and academic library sectors where finances may be allocated on the basis of projects with identifiable outcomes. This trend has necessitated information professionals acquiring project management skills. More often than not, information professionals were the lead parties in these projects, and a new focus on cross-departmental or cross-organisation co-operation and co-ordination was emphasised.

Examples given included digitisation projects, particularly in relation to local history collections. This growing trend towards digitisation has also necessitated that information professionals gain new skills in digital preservation and Web archiving, as well as bringing traditional classification and organisations skills to the digital environment. Within the commercial and governmental library and information sector, this expansion of project work was also in evidence, if perhaps not as pronounced.

Highlighted as a part of this was the perception of a need for information professionals to act as intermediaries between users and IT practitioners. This was not felt to be exclusively about technical expertise in IT practice – the old model of the Systems Librarian bringing a high degree of technical expertise and knowledge of computer systems and networks in order to fill a void between library services and the IT systems that they rely on was felt to be outdated. Those present seemed happy to rely on the technical expertise of centralised IT departments for their development and systems maintenance needs. However, they stressed an important role in mediating between IT departments and end user needs, and effective communication was identified as central to this. It was felt that information professionals and librarians needed to be able to understand the jargon of IT departments, and communicate in the language of IT practitioners, in order to adequately represent the needs of users. Information professionals and librarians felt themselves to stand halfway between the developers of IT based resources and services, and the end user.

The organisation of digital information, particularly in large-scale systems, was also felt to be a key skill that information professionals brought to the development of electronic information services. In this there was recognition of the value of traditional librarianship skills such as classification and cataloguing, and their application to the digital environment. There was a feeling that many electronic information projects suffered through not recognising or utilising the expertise of information professionals in information architecture and meeting user needs.

The phenomenal expansion of the Web, and the increasing use of web platforms to deliver information services across sectors have highlighted a skills gap in Web design, something delegates felt was increasingly important in information work. The Web and Intranets have become important elements of information work, and the majority of delegates delivered some information services via these platforms. The ability to create Web based resources was though to be an increasingly useful skill for librarians.

Digital and electronic information services operate in an increasingly regulatory environment, alluded to by delegates. In particular, the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts have had an impact on practitioners' everyday work. Of acute significance, however, is the requirement to comply with the Copyright Directive and Licensing agencies. The emergence of e-publishing has brought about a huge demand for knowledge and application of these policies.

In conclusion the discussions saw a recognition that the professional role that librarians are expected to undertake has diversified, and that a new range of skills are becoming increasingly important: the management of projects; the development of digital resources; co-ordinating the interests of varied parties, and bringing the traditional skills and expertise of librarianship to shape new resources in which many individuals and groups have a stake. This diversification has brought new challenges to the role of the information professional, and new opportunities. What clearly emerged was the acute need for professional programmes that bring together all these elements so that future graduates joining the profession are equipped to practice competently.

The Information Management School at London Metropolitan are very grateful for the discussions and contributions made by the delegates, and would like to thank them for their participation.

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