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Scene setting: the challenges of today's employment market

In this chapter we look at:

- challenges of employment changes in the UK, Europe, and internationally
 - growth areas for information and library work, such as the finance, legal and medical sectors
 - changes and challenges ahead for the library and information professional
 - the need to keep up with developments in education and training (continuing professional development) and the skills needed for information and library work, including management skills, web editing skills, language skills, negotiating skills, consulting skills and self-motivation.
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Introduction

The first edition of this book provided a much needed guide to the ways that library and information professionals could further their own professional self-development and career in the current job market and to highlight the possibilities to do so. This second edition builds from that

by looking at the opportunities that have arisen since then, and showing the range of library and information work now available. It provides guidance on managing every stage of a career, whether you are a young person considering a career in library and information science and wanting to know how to get a foot on the ladder after qualification, a librarian in mid-career, or even a candidate for more senior positions (perhaps with mentoring or careers advisory responsibilities) who wants to get a view of the current state of the profession as a whole. A book of this type cannot deal with all these topics in great detail, but there is an extensive list of information sources to allow the reader to follow up on any point.

In this first chapter we explain the importance of career planning and personal development for librarians and information specialists, and show how career patterns, expectations, and the necessary preparations and actions have changed greatly in a very few years. Later chapters look in more depth at some of the overall issues of career planning and the major events in a career.

We begin with an overview of the current state of the job market and consider the changing skills requirements for jobs with library and information science skills content. Understanding the implications of the ever-growing range of opportunities presents problems for employers and employees. People without traditional librarianship skills are taking on some of the work that was once the preserve of this profession, but librarians are finding their expertise in demand in several new areas of work as businesses and other employers get to grips with the organization and retrieval of the information content of computer and documentation systems.

In Chapter 2 we talk in more detail about the changes that are taking place in the profession and look at a number of employment sectors. These changes present a challenge to the traditional styles of career that many librarians have followed through their entire working lives. Chapter 2 will also show you how to begin planning your career by considering some of the elements that need to be taken into account and suggesting ways to adapt to future changes.

Chapter 3 looks at ways to get a first step on the career ladder, and some of the ways in which you can get practical help at all stages of your career. In the following chapters 4, 5 and 6 we look at the process by which many jobs are filled, taking in turn job advertisements and applications, interview techniques and the paths to further progress. In Chapter 7 we look at how to evaluate job offers and Chapters 8 and 9 cover some of the many other questions you need to consider when planning your career. Chapter 10 gives some career case studies for your information and inspiration, and is followed by appendices and a list of further reading, websites and organizations.

Employment patterns – no more ‘jobs for life’?

Many people have discovered that there is no longer any such thing as a completely secure job. You cannot now expect to stay in one job with one employer throughout a career. Many employers are themselves trying to cope with the realities of the current economic situation and you can no longer assume that they will chart a course for you through the organization. In reality, a truly ‘glittering’ career in information work needs careful planning, and nowadays this falls to you, even if your employer is among the good ones who include career development within their appraisal or personnel management processes. The ‘portfolio career’ described by Charles Handy (1984, 1995) is fast becoming the norm rather than the exception, especially for those now entering the profession.

On a wider scale, events on the other side of the world can now have a domino effect on jobs in any country. We are still working through the economic effects of the events of September 11, 2001, particularly their effect on multinational organizations, while dealing with the downturn that resulted from the collapse of the Far East economies in 1998. As an information professional you are in a good position to be able to watch the events in the world through various information sources – newspapers, journals, television, radio or internet discussion groups and

newsletters – allowing you to track the effect of these events on your own sector of employment or interest regularly. Your job could be changed out of recognition by events over which you have no control, but you can avoid being caught by surprise.

Jobs also disappear. Those information professionals who have worked in the library automation industry, for example, are particularly aware that some of the largest companies, brand leaders of five or ten years ago, have disappeared and their staff have moved on or away. In 2003 a similar process is taking place among subscription agents, with consequences that can be difficult for customers to cope with and disastrous for the staff of the vendors concerned.

Surveys show that the United Kingdom is increasingly developing a long hours culture; even where the issue has been tackled by law, for instance in France, there is a growing feeling that the balance has been tipped too far to enable an effective job to be done. As a result, senior staff are ever more preoccupied with their own jobs and consequently too busy to be able to act as a mentor or guide to less experienced people. Each employee is constantly under pressure to keep the work flowing and to complete it as quickly as possible, often without the benefit of the full picture. Sound advice and development coaching are frequently lacking. The result is a stressed or ‘burnt out’ individual, without commitment to the employer, and someone who may no longer enjoy the work that previously gave him or her satisfaction.

Today, the customers of our information services have higher expectations than has ever been the case. Even though we warn them against the notion, they believe that the world wide web offers a viable alternative to all our services. As a result they call for professional help far too close to their own deadlines, demand the use of a wider range of information sources and want the results to be delivered in a variety of formats; then they transfer their own pressures onto the information staff. Fortunately, new information and communication technologies (ICT) have also offered information professionals the opportunity to acquire and

manipulate information more easily than in the past. But again, they have given the customer the opportunity to channel instant demands that force information professionals to keep abreast of the latest developments in these technologies.

In fact, librarians finally have the opportunities they have been dreaming of for decades as their skills are recognized by the wider world. 'Demand explodes for librarians with high-tech research skills', read the headline to one story on this topic. It went on to state that 'librarians today are hired as "high-tech wizards to navigate the Internet, establish intranets, search databases and classify information"' (Rurak, 1998).

The need for computer-literate librarians with 'stellar research skills' continues to grow rapidly. Librarians need to grasp these opportunities (as we pointed out in *Becoming a Successful Intrapreneur* (Pantry and Griffiths, 1998)), but they also need to take these changes into account in considering and planning their future careers.

The effect of official policies

Changes in national and international policies are adding to the challenges that workplace technology has presented to information professionals. Many of the new proposals being put forward in the UK and across Europe will radically alter the way information professionals in these countries work in future. Some of the most important proposals are submitted in the following publications:

- *New Library: the People's Network*, published by the Library and Information Commission in 1997, and the follow-up report
- *Building the New Library*, November 1998
- *The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain*, which included the National Grid for Learning initiative
- The UK government's competitiveness white paper, which includes considerable detail on information and knowledge management issues in the main and supporting papers.

In Europe, issues are raised and opportunities are created for librarians by policies of the European Commission. These include:

- the lifelong learning initiative
- the DigiCult programme, based within the Information Society Directorate, dealing with digital heritage and cultural content
- the e-content programme, which runs until 2005 and includes discussion on the use of and access to public information.

A long-running libraries programme provided a number of opportunities during the 1990s but has now come to an end, at least in its own right. However, a number of EU programmes, particularly the CORDIS research programme, still provide librarians with opportunities in the European context.

These policies are just a few examples of strategies that aim to remove the divide between the information rich and the information poor, reducing social exclusion as well as ensuring the maximum benefit from new information and communication technologies. There are further examples to be found in many countries, all with information as their common baseline, presenting challenges that information professionals and their industry must be constantly ready to accept. If they fail to address these issues, other professions and other sectors will recognize the opportunities and take the lead, leaving the information industry lagging behind.

New focus in subject work

The changes in the employment market generally have led to a concentration in particular sectors nationally and internationally. In this section we look at three areas where there have been marked developments in the library and information field, matching the changes in the industries themselves.

The financial sector

The financial sector is a major producer of information as well as a consumer of it, and provides a number of the most important players in the current information industry. Information is distributed not only via the conventional online databases but also through a variety of other channels. Current financial information is a valuable commodity, but can lose that value in a matter of minutes. Information professionals could find themselves making use of trading systems carrying this valuable real-time data: online databases; the world wide web; or even television, where we have seen the growth of stations dedicated to financial news and comment. The ability to distinguish between good and bad information can make the difference between profit and loss or even lead to the insolvency of a company; the Emulex company suffered great financial damage because false information was relayed by newswire and then by television (Griffiths, 2001, 17).

The legal sector

The legal sector has long provided positions for specialist librarians, and continues to expand. To the growing amount of domestic legislation and the influence of European legislation can be added the need to check the implications of other countries' law-making, for example the effects of the US Patriot Act on the uses of and access to information.

The medical sector

Despite the number of mergers that have taken place in the pharmaceutical industry, there remains an important role for information professionals in the medical sector. Information for healthcare has in contrast grown considerably and continues to do so. In the UK considerable work has taken place in and around the National Health Service, including the development of the NHS Information Authority, the National Electronic Library

for Health, and (again, despite the reduction in the number of health authorities) library policies for the National Health Service. The evolution of the discipline of health informatics has added to the opportunities for involvement of library and information professionals.

In addition to these sectors, the growth of the information and communications technologies sector has brought the prospect of further new employment. But not only are there areas of subject specialization where developments have brought new opportunities for library and information professionals, there are also new types of professional work in these and other fields.

New areas of professional work

The intensification of competition now forces many people to move into areas of work in which they may not have had previous experience. Furthermore, new areas of work for library and information specialists are constantly developing, as we saw above and consider again in greater detail later in this book. For example, the focus of many organizations on knowledge management has grown considerably since the first edition of this book. The skills of information and library professionals have been identified as matching exactly what is required to organize, manage, produce and maintain information systems, so that organizations can exploit their own knowledge base more fully. To bring order to the current chaos, they use professional skills such as indexing, thesaurus management and other ‘traditional’ library techniques. Information technology experts now identify these as necessary skills that are missing from their own strategies for dealing with information overload. Mainstream business literature such as Davenport and Prusak’s *Working Knowledge* (1998) sings the praises of librarians at some length. Even if the terminology may be different – suddenly metadata is the fashion – these are simply the latest in a line of such concerns in the business sector about information, knowledge, and the growing volumes of both that are being produced.

Thus you cannot assume that the nature or scope of the profession now remains what it was when you entered it, and still less can you rely on the profession remaining the same throughout whatever length of career you intend to have in future. The pace of change is accelerating. Your choice is to manage your career and adapt to change (and the pace of change), or be sidelined. In an article to which we shall return later, one writer notes that you really cannot start a portfolio career in mid-career – it has to be planned and provided for as soon as possible after qualifying, not least because of the financial and pension planning concerns that arise. But if there is no alternative to changing job, starting your portfolio career is a better option than doing nothing at all.

Working in another country

If you are thinking of working in another country, advice is available from a number of official and other websites. These case studies draw on official websites and on information from the professional organizations in the countries concerned.

Case study 1: Library and information professionals in Canada

Librarians, archivists, conservators and curators

Website: Job Futures (Human Resources Development Canada)

(<http://jobfutures.ca/noc/511p3.shtml>)

Prospects for this group of occupations are rated fair until 2007. Librarians benefit from above average wages and below average unemployment rates, and have enjoyed growth in prospects because of the private sector's development of corporate archives and memory systems, and the growth of searching on the internet. Government cultural policies are leading to an expansion of library services, and the level of retirements (among the post-war generation) will create a flow of opportunities. This means that although recent graduates will face competition for jobs, the number of jobs

available will broadly match the demand. Candidates with appropriate skills, such as in IT, will have the greatest choice.

Case study 2: Library and information professionals in the United States of America

Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics
(www.bls.gov/oco/ocos068.htm)

This US government department identifies the use of library automation as an influence that reduces the demand for librarians, moving some formerly professional work to library technicians and giving end-users access to information at the desk top. However, librarians are undertaking more complex and demanding work and, as with Canada, forthcoming retirements will ensure constant job opportunities. Those prepared to work in rural areas have better prospects than those wanting to work in urban areas. Echoing our discussions in other parts of this chapter, the Bureau makes these observations on emerging prospects in new areas of librarianship:

Non-traditional library settings include information brokers, private corporations, and consulting firms. Many companies are turning to librarians because of their research and organizational skills, and knowledge of computer databases and library automation systems. Librarians can review vast amounts of information and analyze, evaluate, and organize it according to a company's specific needs. Librarians also are hired by organizations to set up information on the Internet. Librarians working in these settings may be classified as systems analysts, database specialists and trainers, webmasters or web developers, or LAN (local area network) coordinators.

Case study 3: Library and information professionals in France

University of Caen
(www.unicaen.fr/unicaen/service/form/centredeformat4/lesmetiers/metiers.htm)

ADBS (l'Association des Professionnels de l'Information et de la Documentation). *L'insertion des jeunes diplômés en information-documentation: promotions 1997-1998, 1998-1999, 1999-2000*, Paris, ADBS, 2002. France is one country where the employment market for librarians and information professionals (often referred to as documentalistes) is highly regulated and structured, with competitions for admission to posts in the public sector, and with some posts in a few government departments reserved for French nationals. However, EU citizens have the right to work in other member countries, and (provided that they meet other requirements, of which fluency in French is usually one) there are ample professional opportunities in France. A survey in 2002 by ADBS, one of France's library and information professional organizations, looked at the progress of three groups of recent graduates. These were some of the findings.

The respondents, who were not all members of a professional body but representative of the profession as a whole, were predominantly female and aged 25-29. In terms of education, 60% had the basic qualification, with two further groups of around 17% each having spent four or five years in higher education. 20% had more than one qualification in information science and 30% of the sample had studied history or the history of art compared with only 11% who had studied scientific subjects. Most of the sample were in work, with only 6% unemployed. Almost one-half of those in work were in the private sector (service industries, banking and insurance being the main sectors) with a further 41% in central or local government, or in public sector companies. Monthly salary levels for this group averaged €1418: interestingly the highest salaries in the survey were paid to those in banking and insurance, but also to the small number of respondents working in the UK. Factors that helped in getting work included qualifications, experience, knowledge of software and fluent English (mentioned by those with the highest level of qualification, where English forms part of the curriculum). When asked which skills they needed to acquire, respondents mentioned website creation skills and project management.

The need for continuing professional development

For any information and library service to function effectively it must have appropriately trained staff. To ensure and maintain this position means first of all that a supply of new information and library professionals with these skills is required. However, it also means that members of the existing workforce must upgrade their skills to meet these new and constant challenges and opportunities in the information industry.

It may surprise information professionals that (discounting students and unemployed or retired members) of the 16,000 personal members of CILIP employed in the UK in 2003 only 5500 work in public libraries. Another 5500 work in academic libraries and information services or schools, with the rest being deployed in a wide range of other organizations, such as financial, legal, consulting, engineering and computing organizations, hospitals, national libraries and government departments or agencies.

It has been said that one Sunday's edition of the *New York Times* today contains more information than a person was exposed to in a lifetime in the seventeenth century.¹ To deal with this, information professionals constantly need to upgrade the variety and depth of their subject skills as well as their professional competences. Without knowledge that is kept constantly abreast of that of the best informed of their customers, information professionals can do no more than run behind those customers and cannot provide a service that continues to play an irreplaceable part in supporting the organization's progress.

Management skills

In the past many information professionals felt that once they had gained their qualifications that was the last major effort they had to make. The wise ones realized that this was only the beginning and planned to ensure their continuing professional development. The development of a graduate profession and the growth of a range of new styles of education and

qualifications, such as the Master of Business Administration (MBA) or various courses offered by the Open University, have expanded the range of options available and many librarians have chosen to develop their qualifications and knowledge by pursuing one of them. Management skills are increasingly important as information professionals move through their career, so qualifications such as the MBA have become more popular in recent years. Alternatively, additional specialist skills complement the requirements of library and information work, leading some information professionals to acquire teaching or training skills.

Self-motivation

Whatever you decide about acquiring additional qualifications and skills, including the new skills we discuss below, you will need to develop self-motivation. You may be lucky enough to work for an employer who will sponsor you, or at least provide time off for study; but in many organizations you will in effect be on your own. The motivation that gets you through the course will be your own, or that of yourself and your fellow students. Don't underestimate the effort needed to succeed in study; but the rewards will be the sweet result of your own labour.

New skills for new roles

Web editing skills

As new roles have developed recently for library and information professionals, so these professionals have acquired further skills. Developing web pages is, despite what software vendors would have us believe, not the kind of skill that is acquired in a couple of afternoons as a result of buying a particular web editing package. Creating websites, particularly if these go beyond the most basic functions, is a specialist (and very marketable) skill. A number of librarians have developed the skill levels required, and a few of them have been very successful as a result. The

best known example is probably Louis Rosenfeld and Peter Morville. The second edition of their book *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web* (2002) contains a table setting out the differences between libraries and websites, thereby indicating the additional perspectives that librarians need to make a success of working on the web.

Language skills

Language skills are not a new requirement for library and information work, but they have become more important for a number of reasons. The world wide web was originally very much an Anglophone resource. Although estimates vary, the proportion of pages in English on the world wide web at the end of the 1990s was between 50% and 85% (Pimienta, 2000; Internet Society, 1997). However, a 2002 estimate suggested that the proportion of pages in English had by then dropped to 50% (Funredes, 2002). Although many authors write in English for the global market, now other languages – not only Western European languages but Chinese and Russian – have become more important and there is a new demand for the ability to read web pages that are not written in English. It makes sense for the searcher to be able to read other languages, and indeed to be able to use non-English language search engines.

Negotiating skills

In our book on service level agreements (Pantry and Griffiths, 2001) we describe the elements that should appear in these documents and the kind of negotiations that library and information professionals will need to conduct in order to reach these agreements. Negotiating skills are increasingly important in professional work. Not only are they required when agreeing levels and costs of service, but they are needed in carrying out a range of more senior responsibilities in the library and information service. Negotiating with clients starts with the classic reference interview, which

may involve delving below the query presented in order to discover the customer's true requirements. It may involve agreeing deadlines, quality or cost, and the prioritization of work in the library. Those with responsibility for a service or areas such as acquisitions or procurement may negotiate contracts or the supply of services to other organizations (either in the private sector or to some public sector purchasers such as prisons). In another context, those librarians who take a role in collective bargaining or other trades union activities will find these skills very important.

Consulting skills

Information broking and consulting skills are also growing in importance – and not simply for those who now trade on their own as consultants, of which more in Chapter 8. We have remarked before on the increasingly pervasive idea that all knowledge can be found on the internet if only you know where to look. Library and information professionals are only too well aware of the falsehood of this statement, but it needs a well-defined service such as internal consultancy or information broking to bring the point home to many information consumers. Where the librarian acts as a consultant to advise users about their information needs, there is a greater prospect of successful use being made of information resources in order to make business progress.

The demand for new skills does not appear to diminish. As pressure grows in many corporate environments, many business people are finally turning to their library and information professionals for greater support – the support they would have had all along had they made better use of the professional skills of their specialists. But better late than never: we can meet the demand, sometimes simply by using the skills learned during professional education, sometimes using new skills acquired through appropriate training. There is plenty of scope for further development of our profession and its skills.

Summary

In this chapter we have considered:

- changes that have taken place in the employment market for library and information professionals
 - the range of work that is now available to information professionals
 - the effect of national and international policy on the job market
 - new subject areas where employment has become available in recent years and the professional skills required to work in them
 - the possibility of working outside your home country
 - the importance of continuing professional development and keeping your skills up to date.
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NOTE

¹ This assertion is made by Richard Saul Wurman in *Information Anxiety* (1989) and reappears in several forms, involving either the Sunday or weekday edition of the *Times*, and variously a citizen of the Renaissance, the 17th century (Shakespeare is mentioned in some versions) or, strangely precisely considering that this variation turns out to be spurious, 1892. It reappears in *Information Anxiety 2*, by Wurman, Sume and Leifer (2000) in the form of a weekday edition of the *New York Times* and a 17th-century man. Quite how one assertion about information can have spawned so many versions in 15 years is unclear.