Career and Professional Opportunities and Challenges for Librarians and Other Information Professionals Specializing in Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning

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Abstract This article reviews the new career and occupational opportunities for librarians and other information professionals as a result of dramatic and pervasive developments in IT technologies in the last several decades. In particular, a case is made for a new information counsellor position which would be analogous to financial counsellors but operating in the information arena. Traditional library and information positions are being very widely expanded by new challenges which every social and economic sector, both public and private, is experiencing as they confront the twenty first century's rise in Google search engines, mobile devices like smart phones, and the spread of broadband and the Internet.

Keywords Careers • Occupations • Counsellors

You will be hearing a great deal about information literacy and lifelong learning at this workshop today and tomorrow. I have the honour to serve as UNESCO's facilitator for a series of 11 workshops being held throughout this year in all of the regions of the world. Six are now completed, and I would like to share with you today some of the career and professional opportunities, as well as challenges, that have been highlighted and discussed by both the expert presenters and participants at those first six workshops.

First the career and professional opportunities.

I hope when you come away from these three workshop days here at Wuhan University you will be convinced that you have selected a bright and promising future for yourselves in a field that has emerged as a critical twenty first Century skill requirement. The opportunities, both tangible and intangible, both quantifiable and non-quantifiable, are numerous, growing by leaps and bounds every day, and are already, and will continue to be realized by all sectors and by all professions. For

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example, with a more highly information literate workforce, private sector companies can expect that their workers will work smarter at whatever they do, and therefore produce at a higher rate—whatever the products and services involved—than ever before. But I want to concentrate on librarians and information professionals because most of you are in that career area already, and I therefore want to try to address your needs and expectations, and try to deal with some of your fears and misgivings—real or imagined.

To begin with, you are going to be in great demand for your knowledge and skills because you can expect that your superiors, colleagues, peers and subordinates, not to mention your family and friends, will have been reading about information literacy and asking many questions—what is it, why is it important to me, how can I learn about it, and how can I practice it so as to improve my life, do my job better, and help my family resolve their problems? They will begin to look to you for the answers to those questions—perhaps from the moment you arrive back home and go back to your jobs on the first day. They will need training, which is why this workshop is designed to help “train the trainers.” So the first opportunity I’m addressing is that you are in a new and still-emerging profession, the members of which will be expected to have acquired, both in formal schooling, in special workshop opportunities such as this one, as well as in practice, on-the-job, information literacy knowledge and skills. Whether you respond to this demand for your expertise and talents is, of course, entirely up to you. Some of you may be timid, and believe that you have not learned enough to call yourselves information literacy experts. That is understandable. Sometimes titles are not all that important. But, hopefully, many, if not most of you, will, slowly but surely, rise to this demand for your talents, whatever your current job title, and, however modestly, and however carefully you begin to respond to that demand, you will, eventually, be looked up to in your organization as one of the, if not THE information literacy expert! Many professionals are in stable or even declining fields and careers. But yours is a field that is ascendant—rising fast—and the demand will not lessen for years to come. I personally happen to believe it is rising exponentially!

Secondly, as the benefits of a more information literate faculty, student body, office worker, laboratory worker, factory worker, and managerial level becomes more visible, quantifiable, transferable and sustainable, inevitably your job opportunities will proliferate and salary levels and other kinds of benefits can be expected to increase commensurately. Do not sell yourself cheaply! Perhaps you may need to transfer, moving to another unit, or even an entirely different organization, to take advantage of new opportunities that are arising. Do not be bashful or hesitant to consider such offers and opportunities. In short, the price tag you command should increase proportionately to correspond with the level of expertise you acquire as you learn more and more about information theory concepts and practices. Like all fields, you start as a beginner, then advance to an intermediate level, and then, sooner or later, go on to an advanced level. Be sure to keep your resume and C.V. up to date to reflect your information literacy expertise and learning. For example, include workshops of this kind in your C.V. so that when a more lucrative and challenging job offer becomes available, you will have a job portfolio that reflects accurately your training as well as on-the-job experience.

Thirdly, consultancy opportunities. Whether you are currently working for a library in some other kind of information job at a university, a government agency, a private company, an NGO, or somewhere in the Civil Society, and whether in a regular line or staff position, with a regular career progression ladder, inevitably new consultancy opportunities will appear for you. Perhaps you are already largely satisfied with the career ladder in front of you. That is, the salary levels at each step on the ladder, the intellectual satisfaction, the working environment, your peers, and so on. But I can predict that, as your information literacy expertise increases, and becomes more widely known in your community, sooner or later you will be called upon to provide advice and assistance to organizations beyond your own. Consistent with your current legal and ethical job demands and employment rules, you may well be able to benefit from such offers, and, in many cases, monetarily benefit. Perhaps if such requests come from close friends and colleagues you may decide to provide your expert advice and assistance gratis—free of charge—recovering just expenses. But do keep in mind that experts normally charge a fee for their knowledge and expertise—they do not often give it away free!

Finally, even if you choose to remain in your present job, without risking any significant requests to change your job descriptions and position duties, you still will have considerable professional opportunities to share your information literacy expertise with your colleagues, both inside and outside of your present organizations. What I mean here is that as it gradually becomes known that not only are you a librarian, or an information professional of some kind (whatever your exact job title may be), inevitably your colleagues, and even strangers, will begin to approach you and ask for your advice and assistance. In short you will become recognized as a person who possesses knowledge and skills that are extremely timely, and very valuable. You must decide, then, how to handle that kind of opportunity. Obviously there is also some risk that unless you obtain at least implicit permission from your superiors to spend at least some time offering information literacy advice to those seeking it from you, your superiors may come to believe you are extending yourselves beyond your assigned duties and responsibilities. So you must be careful to address this risk. But, having said that, I believe that the benefits and values of deliberately expanding your skill portfolio to beyond your “classic” academic training, to embrace the new skill sets possessed by an information literacy expert, outweigh the costs and burdens. But each of you will have to make that decision for yourself.

Now let’s go on to the challenges of becoming an information literacy expert.

First, the challenge of adopting lifelong learning attitudes and behaviors. I list this as a challenge because information literacy, although an exciting new career and professional opportunity, carries with it, implicitly, the demand that you keep up with new advancements in the field. After all, relatively speaking, information literacy has only been with us as a discipline in its own right for less than two decades. That is a very small amount of time compared with the traditional disciplines of, for example, teachers, doctors and nurses, accountants, lawyers, and so on. This means that you need to refresh your knowledge and skill portfolio regularly, not just periodically or intermittently. Every day, virtually, there are new and updated ideas, approaches, strategies, and so on, that are being advanced by both information literacy theorists

and practitioners. You need to keep abreast of what these are, and decide whether any of them have relevance to you and your organization and your information literacy practice. If they do, then you need investigate them carefully, and decide how you will adapt and adopt them into your organization and your programs and projects.

Next, the risk arising from a failure to understand and grasp related concept inter-relationships with information literacy. What I mean here is that at this early stage of information literacy theory experimentation, and promising 'best practices' development, inevitably there are already, and will continue to be many differences of opinion among the experts. That is perfectly normal and to be expected. For example, there is still a difference of opinion on exactly what information literacy is, and how it should be defined. And there are many different terms and words being used to describe what is essentially the same concept—such as information competency, information fluency, digital literacy, and so on. And then there is the challenge of inter-relating information literacy to various closely related fields and disciplines. For example, media literacy and information literacy, ideally, should go "hand in hand," which means they should be pursued in a complementary fashion, not independently. But there are distinct differences between media literacy and information literacy, and you must be able to explain those distinctions clearly, and how they can work in harness together, and in simple enough terms to be understood by people outside of the librarianship and information fields. And then there is distance education. While distance education is very important in the context of information literacy, it is a separate field, and, once again, you must be able to articulate the inter-relationships between the two areas. In sum, you must have a certain tolerance for dealing in a world that is proliferating many new disciplines and technologies and tools, and how they relate to each other is an integral part of the information literacy challenge.

Next the burdens and costs of establishing and maintaining a higher level of peer social networking. Information literacy is not like a physical or biological science where you and perhaps one or two colleagues and assistants can work in isolation in a laboratory for years and years, and perhaps neither see nor talk to professionals outside of your immediate team, even if they are employed in the same laboratory and on very closely related challenges. Instead, you must establish and network with information literacy colleagues who share your special interests, needs and desires, so that you can rely on them to provide you with advice and assistance, or perhaps just informal consultation and the testing of new ideas. This need puts a premium on what is now called 'social networking,' which is a mode of collegial interaction that employs Webcasting, online learning, and similar approaches to maintaining close ties with kindred colleagues.

In this short time I have tried to stimulate your thinking about very personal decisions you will have to make, given the new knowledge and skills you are acquiring. I cannot stress enough that every one of you will have to make his or her own personal decision—there are no standards or ironclad guidelines that I can give to you. But I believe that the career and professional opportunities now being presented to you are indeed very substantial, and I urge you to think carefully now about whether or not, how, and when to make your next career and professional moves so as to enhance your personal futures.

Postscript

Since the author wrote the above words, science and technology have revolutionized information handling so we need to “fast forward” to the twenty first century and review some of the many career risks, challenges, and opportunities confronting librarians now.

First, incredibly fast search engines have revolutionized the ability of ordinary people to search for information which they need themselves, whether at a desktop home, a laptop in the workplace, using a smart phone or tablet while traveling between locations, and so on.

But, like a student first entering library school, ordinary people very soon discover that, while searching for some kinds of information such as the weather, sports news, stock market reports, and the daily news headlines, is, indeed, relatively easy and fast, more complex searches require learning more detailed methods, techniques, concepts, best practices and “tricks.”

Suppose, for example, you are looking for a job, or trying to solve a personal or family health problem, or applying for admission to a college? How do you even begin to search for that kind of information, efficiently and effectively, without wasting an inordinate amount of time and effort? Or falling prey to fraudulent misinformation or disinformation or “infotainment?”

There are, of course tutorials online that allow you to self-teach yourself some of these concepts, methods and tricks but almost all of them require some basic knowledge of the very fundamental building blocks of librarianship knowledge.

What is a “tag?” What is an index and how does it differ from a table of contents? What is a citation? What is a bibliography? What is a directory? And so on.

Soon the novice searcher, no matter how proficient with computer hardware and software, or with cell phone texting and apps, or with social media networking, discovers that just because the information universe is becoming digitized does not mean that they automatically can learn to become skilled in being able to find just the right information needed at the right time and in the right place.

Librarians discover very early in library school that learning how to go about finding and retrieving information—from whom, from where, when, and how, is the essence of their craft and they must learn those things thoroughly and proficiently if they are to succeed in their careers.

The discovery by ordinary people that search and retrieval does not come “naturally” like breathing, eating or sleeping, may come sooner than later, but inevitably it does come to everybody, and when it does, people have a choice: continue ploughing ahead, blindly trying to self-teach themselves the basic elements of librarianship, or, in desperation, go to a library and ask for the help of a librarian.

Which leads us to the present context?

Much timely, detailed and relevant material has already and is currently being written about the transformation of the traditional bricks and mortar library into the ultra modern digital library. So, instead of discussing here how the “analog librarian” job is being retooled to the “digital librarian” job, we prefer to concentrate on only one very important brand new career opportunity—the Information Counsellor.

Previously the specific domain or “turf” which I want to talk about now was usually called the job of the “reference librarian.” Or the job of the librarian involved in “user instruction.” Or sometimes we have seen the terms “Solo Librarian” or “Paraprofessional librarian.”

We have had Financial Counsellors, Health. Counsellors, Employment Counsellors and many other kinds of counsellors for a very long time.

Now, with the twenty first century and the dawning of the Global Information Society, we are finally, and very clearly, seeing an emerging, critical need for an Information Counsellor (IC).

Credit for the IC idea, historically, must be shared among many LIS professionals. But one whom I remember, especially, is Professor Marta Dosa who for many years taught at Syracuse University in New York State in the USA.

Professor Dosa presciently forecasted the need for this new occupational category in the 1950s.

She foresaw a wide array of specialties under that umbrella category. Here are a few illustrations.

First, an IC at the top end of the occupation who would do theoretical research to advance the IC concept and to train ICs to learn best practices.

Second, an IC who would specialize in a certain field, sector or area like Health, Employment, Small Business, Education, Citizenship, etc. Thus we would have, for example, a Health Information Counsellor.

Third, she said we should have ICs who team with “sister” Counsellors like those in the finance area, so that the team, operating together, would be stronger than each performing independently.

Fourth, ICs should specialize by audiences served. Thus we should have Immigration Information Counsellors.

And so on. Here are some other key aspects of the IC job and role.

For one, ICs would perform in both the public and private sectors.

For another, ICs would operate at all levels of organizations and institutions—at the very top, at the middle levels and at the lower levels.

ICs should also not exclusively limit their advice to their clients on traditional librarianship matters. Their domain must extend to media, telecommunications, communication, problem solving, analytical thinking, brainstorming, and other areas.

And ICs must be skilled in Information Literacy, Media Literacy, Computer Literacy, Digital Literacy, and the other so-called twenty first century literacies.

Finally we foresee a range of IC firm sizes emerging that offer primarily IC products and services, from, at the one end, independent proprietorships, to small firms, medium ones, large and then very large at the other end.

In summary we hope that a significant number of library and information school graduates enter this exciting new field! Some may be solo entrepreneurs. Some may team with colleagues to form small businesses. And some will join large companies.

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