

WHAT DOES IT TAKE THEM JUST TO GET THE JOB?
AN ANALYSIS OF EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS OF TODAY'S LIS GRADUATES: IMPLICATIONS FOR LIS
CURRICULA

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INTRODUCTION

The information world is changing every day and so are the skills and competencies that an information professional needs. The school curricula, however, cannot be changed so fast. Therefore, a good curriculum has not only to be able to cover today's needs but also to be adaptive enough to accommodate tomorrow's needs. In order to have a better understanding of the information skills and competencies, the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Carolina conducted a survey in 2010. Although there was limited response to the survey (17 in total), the results revealed that knowledge of SQL, telecommunications and networking, and network security are the most important areas of expertise. However, soft skills (such as teamwork, time management, and project management) are as important as the knowledge on technical issues. This qualitative study is built upon the previous survey and aims to understand which skills are more important and why from the information professionals' perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

At the time of continuous economic downturn, securing gainful employment remains one of the primary concerns for graduates of Library and Information Science (LIS) programs across the nation. A number of studies have been published in recent years focusing on defining and developing the skills an information professional needs in order to be competitive on the job market and find his/her first job. Although there is a general agreement among scholars about what theoretical knowledge of the

field an aspiring LIS graduate should possess, there is not so much unanimity as to what practical skills newly-minted information professionals are required or expected to have in order to function successfully in the chosen area of the profession.

As Brine and Feather (2002) point out, identifying those skills is critical for making appropriate adjustments to LIS curricula that would ensure that the coursework and the associated practical training equip students with the necessary skills to supplement the knowledge they typically acquire through academic study. Communication, technical proficiencies, and problem-solving aptitude have been singled out as generic skills all LIS graduates are supposed to have acquired by the conclusion of their respective programs (Brine & Feather, 2002). Developing the criteria for the desired skill sets for young information professionals along four key areas of professional practice has been suggested as an efficient strategy in this regard. Brine and Feather (2002) describe these areas as units of knowledge, such as: information resources, information service and organization management, information systems, as well as policy and the broader social dimensions of information work.

Technology is one area where the demand for skilled professionals has been particularly evident for a number of years. Papp (1998) claims that "students and faculty alike are aware of the insatiable demand for skilled workers with a strong background in technology" (p. 39). The notion of library technology competencies has indeed been explored by many authors, among them Lowell, 1997, Deyrup & Delozier, 2001, and Lussky, 2008. Rapid technological advancements bring about certain changes in the employment landscape, which dictates that students not only possess the desired skills but

also be able to efficiently use information technology tools and proficiencies.

By ‘tools’ Deyrup and Delozier (2001) understand email, word processing, and statistical programs, while ‘proficiencies’ denote in the same study Web page design, system maintenance, and computer programming. Besides improving efficiency of many of the librarian’s daily job duties, for instance, organizing and providing access to digital collections (Lusky, 2008), the knowledge of modern technologies provides another hard-to-ignore benefit to MLIS graduates – improved pay rate because “advanced information technology skills... translate into better paying positions” (Deyrup & Delozier, 2001, p. 22).

In addition to the above-mentioned technical competencies, LIS job market hopefuls are expected to possess a high level of the so-called soft skills, including communication skills and organizational competencies (Gonzalez, 2010), core behavioral skills such as a passion for learning, risk-taking ability, public service orientation, and independence in decision-making (Lusky, 2008). ‘Behavioral skills’ is the most loosely defined category that may refer to a broad spectrum of concepts, such as flexibility, taking the initiative, and enthusiasm. What may also help young aspiring information professionals are such qualities as close listening, technical writing, and proficiency in one other language. Extending the list even further, Gonzalez (2010) asserts that in today’s highly globalized and competitive marketplace “new generations of librarians must be comfortable [with] diverse cultures” (Gonzalez, 2010, p. 277) from the standpoint of providing bibliographic instruction and other forms of assistance to multicultural audiences.

Diversity of clientele cannot leave the structural composition of the library workforce unaffected. Since diversity is commonly agreed to be a positive sign for the communities which libraries serve, current employers have come to realize the importance of diversifying the body of job candidates and eventual hires by widening the range of their preferences in terms of the applicants’ gender, ethnicity, and age. By broadening their selection criteria to include minority candidacies, employers

bring aboard personnel who “have a better understanding of cultural values, languages, and information needs of minority communities” (Morgan, Farrar, & Owens, 2009, p.197).

Along with the concerns of developing more sophisticated knowledge of modern technologies, proper behavioral capacities, and responding to the increasing diversification of the client base, all of which constitute individual competencies, novices in the library and information science universe also face the challenge of fostering in themselves a set of institutional competencies consisting of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that form the culture of an organization itself (Gonzalez, 2010).

Also, several sources (Martz & Cata, 2008, Haycock & Sheldon, 2008) underscore the impact of planning and project management skills on the employability of new information professionals. In a very broad sense of the word, management in the information world takes on many different shapes and forms. Sharpening one’s managerial skills is therefore vital for succeeding in turbulent and fast-changing environments in which information professionals of the future will have to operate.

In the current challenging job market, employers go to great lengths to attract the crème of the crop of soon-to-be professionals who bring a diversity of educational, cultural, and personal backgrounds to the library and information science field. Because of this, Ard et al. offer an optimistic take on the recruitment problem in the profession (Ard et al., 2006). Their optimism is rooted in the fact that, by and large, employer expectations, albeit high, are driven by the job applicant expectations – from salary to technical ability to the acceptance and a nuanced understanding of the diverse modes of human communication.

The past two decades have witnessed a gradual rise in the LIS career studies. All in all, it is possible to speak about the emergence across a variety of sources of a symbiotic approach to the formation of a comprehensive skill set suggested for would-be information professionals. This multi-skill approach considers paying an equal share of attention to the development of a number of core competencies (technological, behavioral, organizational,

management, institutional) to enhance the employability of LIS program graduates in the tight economic conditions of our time. A teaching paradigm based on such key tenets should enable IS program faculty to develop curricula that balance the acquisition of high-demand skills with an education conducive to lifelong learning (Case, Price, & Rogers, 1997).

METHODOLOGY

Ten semi-structured phone interviews were conducted to answer the question of information science related skills needed in the job market. The persons interviewed for this project were identified from primarily two sources. Two of the senior faculty at the SLIS identified several people serving on the Special Libraries Association (SLA) to interview. In addition, there were the participants of the SLIS employer survey who provided contact information and said that they would be willing to share more information with the SLIS. In total, there were 15 names and 10 of them agreed to have a phone interview with the researchers.

The participants were seasoned professionals with minimum 8 years of expertise in the information field (maximum 37 years) with different expertise from traditional library positions to information technology (IT) positions to information science positions. The size of the companies they worked for changed from 50 to 20,000. The domains were diversified too. Media, law, research, IT are to name a few. Although most of the companies have offices worldwide, all of the participants are working in South Carolina.

The questions they were asked revolved around several areas of employee skills including soft skills (communication, teamwork, etc); general technical skills (telecommunications and networking; website development, databases, etc.); basic business skills (finance, law, etc); and information specific skills (information search and analysis, knowledge management, etc).

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Multiple researchers analyzed the data and identified the themes that are important in the field according to the information professionals.

RESULTS

Data were collected based on the following six questions asked from 10 individuals with Library and Information Science degrees:

1. Educational and professional background of the interviewees
2. What kind of soft skills do you look for in your Information Systems employees? Why?
3. What kind of General Technical Skills do you look for in your Information Systems employees?
4. What kind of Information Resources & Services Management skills do you look for in your Information Systems employees?
5. What level of expertise regarding Applying Information Tools & Technologies are you looking for in your Information Systems employees?
6. What level of expertise regarding General Business Knowledge are you looking for in your Information Systems employees?

In essence, the interview results confirm the findings from the literature review. The participants identified a number of skills that potential employees either lacked or needed significant improvement in. First, soft skills were deemed extremely important by all respondents, regardless of their specialty within librarianship or information resources management. One interesting observation can be made based on the results of the interviews: the unanimously recognized significance of soft skills for all MLS graduates that at times can even take precedence over the primary skill set required by the job. The interviewees put a particular emphasis on hiring well-rounded, qualified individuals who demonstrated solid oral and written communication skills as well as the ability to think critically to develop new ideas and tackle challenges in various job-related scenarios.

Second, the interviewees described as “critical” those general technical skills that allowed prospective hires to operate basic technologies or website development and maintenance, database design and customization to individual user needs, along with management of library electronic resources. Naturally, the interview

participants differed in their responses concerning expected proficiencies with specific technologies because of differing levels of needs for those in their respective work environments. Larger libraries or businesses usually tend to have a designated Information Technology department that deals with major network security issues, and “the more hardcore programming things,” as one of the respondents put it. Solo librarians, on the other hand, have to be responsible for everything, from maintaining web pages to providing technical support for electronic resources, collections, and databases to managing “the whole life cycle of information, from acquisition all the way to deaccessioning.”

Third, possession of basic business skills, such as an understanding of budgeting, negotiating skills, vendor relations, knowledge of an organization’s workflow, risk management skills, or principles of strategic planning were viewed as absolutely indispensable attributes of a successful job seeker in the field of information management. In the words of another interviewee, “librarians, [particularly] special librarians should see themselves as business people” whose primary job is to facilitate access to information. To be efficient in this capacity, the respondents noted, one must possess sharp management skills and creativity but, above all, act as a “collaborator in problem solving” and an attentive listener to the user. A point of interest in this category of analysis relates to a comment made in the course of one of the interviews to the effect that the general business knowledge is somewhat secondary to the success of a special librarian-user interaction, or at least not as important as creativity in going from one clue to another clue to achieve the final goal. It is understandable, therefore, why employers are trying to attract cadres who are forward-thinking in terms of creativity – a quality that can hardly be taught but can very well developed and polished in library and information science schools.

Finally, regarding information specific skills, the interview participants mentioned information analysis and searching capabilities as vital skills sought by many employers. Knowledge management skills are commonly recognized as a big plus as well, especially when they are accompanied by expertise in copyright and intellectual property issues or a keen

awareness of the overarching information management problems.

In the long run, however, what mattered most, in the eyes of the respondents, was professionalism, amicability, and an agreeable personality that allows the recruit to interact productively with everyone in the organization, from management to lineworkers.

The ten interviews created a clear image of the future information professional as an ethical person with a great deal of leadership, creative thinking, and public speaking skills, comfortable to work both independently and as part of a team. A good summation of the high expectations 21st century employers typically have for MLS graduates would be the following skill set cited by one of the interviewees: on top of the purely professional skills, present-day information professionals are expected to possess a high level of accountability, adaptability, business acumen, communication, customer focus, decision making, developing talent, drive for results, global mindset, influence, innovation, and strategic agility.

CONCLUSION

The School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Carolina conducted this study to collect feedback from 10 Program alumni holding various positions in information-intensive industries. The study intended to determine what skills the alumni, as potential employers, would like to see in current and future job applicants as well as how the SLIS IS curriculum might be changed to better address the real-life need for those skills. The study concluded that in today’s client-centered age soft, or interpersonal, and foundational (critical thinking, problem-solving, analytical, leadership) skills generally overvalue more specific job-related ‘non-people’ skills.

We hope this study provides a strong impetus to assess the current SLIS BSIS curriculum from the standpoint of better preparing students for the rigors of the volatile job market so that they become fully equipped to meet the dynamic needs of a wide range of employers. A model IS curriculum, the study indicated, should be built around the principles of lifelong learning and open communication, supplying

the students with a solid theoretical framework, conceptual foundations, and practical expertise with which they can realize their full potential and efficiently secure gainful employment.

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