Charting a Career Path in the Information Professions

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Academic librarians play an important role in promoting information management and information literacy. This paper develops a career path model for academic librarians, delineating primary roles, psychological issues, required competencies, and strategies to attain those competencies at each stage. Human resource planning implications for information organizations are also discussed.

Information is now viewed as a strategic resource, both by corporations and individuals. Participants in the global economy seek the most current and relevant information to make the most timely and effective decisions. Increased access has paralleled increased demand for information. However, consumers must now learn to cope with two major obstacles—information overload and information complexity. The key problem is organizing and sifting through information for what is usable and relevant. Uncontrolled and unorganized information is no longer a resource.[1] Knowledge organizations such as academic libraries can lead in promoting information management.

Nina Matheson notes that five major developments will heavily affect library operations: (1) the trend toward deinstitutionalized information; (2) increased individualized access to information through communication networks; (3) the trend toward information work and greater dependence upon computers in the workplace; (4) the development of optical-disk technology allowing increased digital storage and retrieval of text as well as images in inexpensive, compact formats; and (5) the expectation that all professionals will need to be computer literate.[2]

Other authors see the increased commercial activity of electronic publishers as an impediment to information management and that these information products may no longer meet the needs of scholars.[3] They conclude that scholars, publishers, and librarians must cooperate to ensure that the information exchange process continues with a minimum of barriers. Others view electronic publishing as potentially significant to scholarly research where regular paper publishing is sometimes unprofitable.[4] The library will continue to link its user community with the information resources. However, global economic dynamics and the information industry marketplace add the new dimensions of information management and information literacy instruction to the library's role.

This article examines the changing role of academic libraries and major career development issues and provides a specific career stages model for academic librarians. The model is then adapted to create a career plan for the information professions. Primary roles, psychological issues,

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and required competencies and strategies to acquire them are detailed for each career stage. Critical issues are identified, and an approach is developed for systematic career planning.

EVOLVING ROLES

The academic library profession is faced with deemphasizing the concept of libraries as warehouses of books and expanding the role of librarians as information application experts.[5] Frederick Lancaster outlines the following future responsibilities of librarians:

1. Information consultants, directing individuals to the most appropriate sources
2. Training individuals to use electronic information sources
3. Searching sources unfamiliar to users
4. Analyzing, evaluating, and interpreting information for users
5. Assisting in the design of user interest profiles for current awareness purposes
6. Organizing personal electronic information files
7. Keeping researchers current on new information sources and services.[6]

Lancaster's list omits the important role of information manager, a critical function in the information society. Another critical role is instructing individuals in *information literacy,* defined as the ability to access and evaluate effectively information for a given need. Its characteristics have been specified by Martin Tessmer as follows:

1. An integrated set of skills (research strategy, evaluation) and knowledge of information tools and resources
2. Attitudes of persistence, attention to detail, and caution in accepting printed word and single sources
3. Time and labor intensive
4. Need-driven (problem-solving activity)
5. Distinct but relevant to literacy and computer literacy.[7]

Clearly, academic librarians can lead in planning information networks to ensure equal access for scholars and the academic community. Librarians will see a move from traditional hard-copy collections to electronic access to information not held by their institutions. Managing the new information resources will be a serious challenge for these professionals. Information literacy will be crucial to consumers for understanding the complexity and variety of electronic formats. Academic librarians are the logical instructors of information literacy issues.

With these new roles, the academic librarian's career outlook will broaden to present new opportunities. It will be an exciting period of transition, and academic librarians, in particular, must be aware of the key issues crucial to their career development and formulate strategies to negotiate successful career paths.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Career development can be categorized into four broad areas: (1) professional issues, (2) organizational issues, (3) technological concerns, and (4) required competencies.

Professional Issues

Much speculation and concern about the future of academic librarianship has been reflected in the professional literature. The survival of librarianship as a profession has been raised, but many professionals take the position of positive opportunism. Patricia Battin, for example, former vice-president and university librarian at Columbia University, has advocated that academic librarians forge alliances with campus computer centers.[8]

Professional achievement concerns many academic librarians. Faculty status has been the subject of intense debate on college and university campuses. Almost 79 percent of academic librarians now have some sort of faculty status.[9] This achievement has resulted in more equitable salaries, comparable rights and privileges, and increased pressures to conduct research and participate in professional societies in accordance with the faculty model. However, faculty status has also increased opportunities for involvement in library and university governance.[10]

Public appreciation for the craft of librarianship is another concern. Roger Greer posits that the public is also responsible

for endangering the profession. He cites two reasons: (1) the conditions of society have altered the public value of librarians, and (2) librarians have not changed their role in society to keep pace with social and technological changes.[11] Library users cannot distinguish the difference between librarians and other staff members and, thus, cannot appreciate the expertise of librarians. As a result, the benefits of professional status are not granted by the public.

Organizational Issues

The organizational structure of academic libraries adheres closely to the traditional bureaucratic pyramidal model with few advanced positions available to reward deserving professionals. Those not interested in management positions but wishing to advance within the organization have limited career opportunities.

Characteristic of most academic libraries is the bifurcated structure of a public services department and a technical services department. Individuals, upon entering the organization, typically fall into one of these two functional areas and are "tracked" as specialists in either department. For the most part, little movement occurs between the two. As one advances in tenure, it becomes increasingly difficult to make a career change.

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Typically, academic libraries lack guidelines for employee career development. Career paths for individual positions are characteristically undefined, and "professional development" is a concept often discussed but rarely implemented in a systematic fashion.

Studies on libraries indicate that males dominate top management positions in what is considered by many to be a primarily "female" profession.[12] Others have studied the characteristic differences between male and female library administrators that may promote this dual career structure.[13]

Technological Concerns

The most obvious impact of new technologies upon academic libraries is the loss of jobs. Entire jobs will not disappear when automation is introduced; rather, the nature of jobs will change. The more routine work will be handled by computers, freeing librarians to take on more professional responsibilities.[14]

For some, new technology translates to a loss of control over their lives, their jobs, and their libraries. The future is bleak for the librarian who wants nothing to do with computers. But the period of adjusting to automation among librarians and staff is increasingly shorter, as they realize the potential efficiencies achieved by new technologies.

In many instances academic librarians have not kept pace with sociotechnical changes. New staffing patterns are introduced along with new library technologies. Many tasks once handled by librarians are turned over to paraprofessionals. The role of the academic librarian is being reinterpreted to provide more effective service to library users.[15] Davis indicates that the scope of an employee's role may increase as the number of duties decrease.[16] Thus, the roles of academic librarians may become more complex and demanding as jobs become simpler.

Required Competencies for Librarians

Academic librarians must undergo retraining to attain new skills, knowledge, and abilities appropriate to evolving roles. The issue of professional competencies for librarians has been much discussed in the literature. The California Library Selection Project in 1975 was one of the first cooperative efforts to formally study the subject of minimum qualifications and competencies for librarians.[17] Another major study centered around Minnesota public librarians and grouped identified competencies in five categories: (1) identifying individual and community information needs; (2)

selecting, packaging, and providing information; (3) evaluating services; (4) managing services; and (5) having general skills and attitudes necessary for effective public service.[18] In 1986, Powell and Creth surveyed a random sample of ARL librarians on the importance of fifty-six knowledge bases. Their findings indicated that traditional library knowledge is still highly valued and that management and automation skills are also important among the librarians sampled.[19]

The New Directions in Library and Information Science project, undertaken by King Research in 1985, had a twofold purpose: (1) determine the present and future competencies needed by information professionals, and (2) examine the educational requirements necessary to achieve those competencies. Although the project was widely attacked by the library profession, the authors made these significant conclusions:

1. Many of the competencies required in libraries are transferable to the newly emerging nonlibrary information professional positions.
2. In-depth subject knowledge is increasingly important, particularly in technical disciplines, as information professionals interact directly with users and perform more analytical tasks.
3. Educators, trainers, professional societies, employers, and the information professionals themselves all play essential roles in acquiring the necessary competencies.[20]

These key issues are critical to the career development of information professionals. On a very specific level, however, academic librarians need to utilize some sort of career model to assist them in advancing within their particular institutions and in their profession. A number of career models are cited in the literature that differ in their basic assumptions. Most notably, Delbert Miller and William Form, and Edgar Schein, have developed models based on work and career stages.[21] A detailed discussion of these models is beyond the scope of this article; however, one specific model has been developed that may be useful as a framework for library and information professionals in career guidance. The career stage model and its implications for academic librarians will be discussed next.

CAREER STAGES AND ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS

The career stage model concept was developed by Gene Dalton, Paul Thompson, and Raymond Price.[22] They researched the reasons for differences in high and low performers among professional employees. In this study of engineers, they were able to identify four distinct career stages that professional employees may move through. Each stage is characterized by different tasks that must be performed well, by types of organizational relationships, and by necessary psychological adjustments. The authors concluded that high performers were those who moved successfully through the four stages, while individuals remaining in the early stages were more likely to be low performers.

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Academic librarians will find this a useful career stage model for planning and managing their own organizational careers. The following discussion focuses on how such a model effectively works for both the library professional and the academic library. Skills and competencies required at each stage are described and strategies to obtain these competencies are suggested. Finally, the value of the model to human resource planning in the academic library will be discussed.

Stage I: Apprentice

Entry level positions may have a variety of responsibilities; two library-related examples are cataloging of library materials and reference service, basic tasks of technical and public service departments, respectively. Collection development is another basic responsibility that may be

considered either a technical or public service function. Depending on the library, supervisory responsibility for paraprofessionals, clericals, or students may or may not be included. The size of the library may determine this.

The tasks of entry level reference librarians have been the subject of many articles on professional burnout.[23] Miller discusses overworked reference staffs and the seemingly never-ending responsibilities taken on by reference librarians.[24] Two of the most labor-intensive functions are library instruction activities and computer-assisted reference services. Librarians often handle the clerical components of these functions due to staff shortages.

The beginning librarian is highly dependent upon supervisors for training and advice, making mentoring relationships significant. The mentor acts as a role model, providing support and counsel to one who is unskilled and unknowledgeable in a new organizational culture. The quality and relative power of the mentor in the academic library can have a serious impact upon the success of the librarian. Mentors can also be poor role models, so the entry level librarian must select an appropriate mentor.

Kathy Kram, in her study *Mentoring at Work,* indicates that mentor relationships may not be readily available to all those who want them.[25]

Thus, peer relationships must be developed in the organization. Research has been conducted concerning peer relationships at different career stages.[26] Two common themes have been identified in the apprentice stage: (1) establishing professional identity, and (2) developing self-confidence and competence while learning the organizational ropes. The differences between mentoring and peer relationships are significant. The conventional mentoring relationship is often characterized by large differences in age and in hierarchical levels, while in peer relationships usually one of these factors is the same. Finally, the mentor relationship involves a helping dynamic that is a one-way exchange, while peers interact in two-way exchanges.

Stage II: Colleague

This phase of the academic librarian's career is characterized by a greater degree of independence and the establishment of the individual as a competent specialist. Developing a specialization and demonstrating extreme competence in that area are essential to the career of the librarian. Self-esteem is increased, as well as the visibility of the librarian in the organization. There are two approaches to acquiring specialization. One can choose a content area or develop specialized skills that can be applied to a variety of problems. Examples of the former would include subject specialists, reference librarians, and catalogers. An example of the latter is systems librarians. The choice of an appropriate specialization must be made in light of professional trends and local budgetary constraints. This key decision forms the base for a productive and successful career.[27]

The subordinate role is continued at this stage; however, the librarian comes to rely less on the supervisor or mentor for direction. The nature of these relationships will undergo changes that are difficult for both the supervisor and the librarian. Specific changes in attitudes and behaviors on the part of both parties will be necessary for a successful transition. The various phases of the mentoring relationship have been described in some detail by Kram.[28]

While peer relationships take on greater importance at this stage, some organizational factors inhibit them. These include the nature of the reward structure, promotional policies, and the encouragement of competitive rivalries. As one advances in the library organization, fewer managerial positions become available. Thus, individuals are more conscious of competing with peers for these few positions, and the organizational and political environment may promote or discourage the formation of peer relationships.[29]

A major transition in Stage II is the move from dependence to independence. To accomplish this, librarians must develop their own professional standards. These standards may be influenced by peers, colleagues outside of the organization, and professional library associations. This

transition could prove to be difficult if librarians receive heavy indoctrination upon entering the organization.

Significant progress in Stage II is critical to the career development of individuals in organizations.[30] In academic libraries, many librarians stay in this stage, acting as specialists for the remainder of their careers. These individuals continue to make substantial contributions to academic libraries; however, opportunities for advancement are limited. Nevertheless, some academic libraries have reported the successful use of a "two-track" personnel system that allows librarians to advance in salary and in rank through either a professional administrative or nonadministrative track.[31]

Stage III: Mentor

Librarians who have moved into Stage III have increased responsibility for influencing, directing, and developing others, especially entry level librarians. Characteristically, these individuals will have broadened their interests and capabilities beyond their basic jobs. They also interact with individuals outside the subunit or organization so as to benefit others inside the academic library.

Dalton, Thompson, and Price delineate the three roles that professionals in this stage may fulfill.[32] First, there is the role of the informal mentor. Librarians involved in a variety of librarywide projects and needing additional technical assistance to perform specific tasks and/or to further develop initial ideas or proposals become informal mentors to those who provide the additional assistance. Second, the idea consultant acts as a resource for small groups within the academic library. This individual has broad involvement and influence over the work of others. Third, the manager is typically not more than one or two levels away from the work itself. This individual would likely have formal responsibility as head of a department or unit. Of course, a supervisor could act as a mentor to an entry level librarian. Individuals at Stage III may recognize that these roles are by no means exclusive; indeed, they may assume all or any of these roles at a given time.

The major transition from Stage II to Stage III involves the individual's outlook concerning work relationships and organizational objectives. The librarian has shifted personal perspective from being strictly inner-directed to being more outer- or other-directed. Responsibility is now assumed for the work of others. A variety of interpersonal skills is now required to set objectives, coordinate tasks, and supervise staff. Multiple reporting structures also become more prevalent; the librarian must now satisfy a number of "bosses." Confusion of roles and objectives also may occur, particularly in those academic libraries employing matrix organizational structures. The Stage III librarian experiences a shift in the relationship with those above in the organizational hierarchy. Responsibilities are now clearly both upward and downward in the library, so that the librarian must learn to cope with divided loyalties.

The supervisory role may not be suitable for some individuals. One who excels in technical competence might be lacking in either the interest and/or the necessary interpersonal and social skills to manage others effectively. Another potential problem is librarians who have been promoted on the basis of their technical competence unable to pull away from that technical work. Some may feel the need to maintain both the technical competence and their supervisorial responsibilities. Finally, mentor relationships have the potential to sour and create resentments.

Pamela Chesebrough and Gordon Davis outline some prerequisites for the successful negotiation of Stage III: (1) management experience through projects, (2) experience in different functional area applications, (3) diverse technical experience, and (4) a variety of interpersonal skills.[33] Librarians may remain at this level for the rest of their careers. The organizational rewards are many, taking the form of peer recognition, organization status, social involvement, and the satisfaction of helping others further their careers.

Stage IV: Sponsor

The key characteristic of Stage IV librarians is their influence in determining the

future direction of the organization. Typically, one may think of the chief administrator as the sole person with this influence. Such titles as "dean of libraries" or "university librarian" come to mind. However, this major influence is in fact more widely distributed among key individuals in the library. More often than not, sponsors may be found in the library's top management team. Middle managers at Stage III may also make the transition to Stage IV. These individuals distinguish themselves as major forces in planning and shaping the future of the library.

The Stage IV librarian interacts with key elements of the environment, such as the university administration, faculty, student organizations, the state legislature, library networks, regional cooperatives, professional library associations, publishers, and commercial services. The concept upon which this interaction is based is known as stakeholder management.[34] New ideas and services are developed, or new users groups are served. The sponsor also directs the resources of the library toward specific goals. All these activities are strategically important to the long-range success of the library. Stage IV librarians play at least one of three roles. First, the manager formulates policy and initiates and gives approval to broad programs. This individual is neither involved in guiding Stage I librarians nor supervising those in Stage II, since the individual is too far removed from the details of daily work. Second, the intrapreneur brings resources (funding, staffing, and innovation) together to further new ideas to influence the direction of the organization.[35] Third, the idea innovator contributes to significant breakthroughs noteworthy in the information professions. Reputations are established outside the library through scholarly publication or professional achievements, such as in national library association activities.

The sponsor also has major influence in the future direction of the academic library by selecting and developing key individuals to become Stage IV librarians. Guidance, feedback, and opportunities are provided rather than direct instruction. The sponsor also maintains important relationships outside the organization through contact with the various stakeholder groups of the library. These contacts are critical to discovering significant trends in the environment and bringing them back to the organization. They also give the academic library the necessary exposure to attract funds and outside resources.

"Library administrators must be comfortable with the fact that they will no longer be close to daily operations."

The major psychological adjustment in moving to Stage IV is the removal of the librarian from day-to-day operations. Library administrators must be comfortable with the fact that they will no longer be close to daily operations. Rather, their influence is exercised through less overt means such as personnel selection, resource allocation, or changes in organizational design. Another important adjustment is shifting perspective from short-range to long-range, strategic-planning time frames. Finally, Stage IV librarians must become accustomed to exercising power in appropriate situations.

A CAREER STAGE MODEL FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS

A career stage model applicable to academic library professionals consists of four stages, each with the following elements: (1) primary roles, (2) major psychological issues, (3) required competencies, and (4) strategies to obtain competencies. The model is presented in figure 1. Note that the level of tasks broadens as one moves up through the career stages. The number of individuals affected by one's decisions increases at each succeeding career stage. Correspondingly, the competencies required at each succeeding stage are less technical, but more administrative and broader in scope. Stage III and IV librarians will increasingly look outside of their institutions to accomplish organizational objectives. Network-

Stages / Elements	Stage I (Apprentice)	Stage II (Colleague)	Stage III (Mentor)	Stage IV (Sponsor)
Primary Role	Learning Assisting Following directions	Independent contributor	Training Directing Influencing	Shaping the direction of the library organization
Major Psychological Issues	Dependence	Independence	Assuming responsibility for others	Exercising power
Required competencies (skills, knowledges, abilities)	Critical evaluation, problem-solving, instruction, reference, information retrieval, cataloging	Specialized subject knowledge, reference skills, technical expertise	Coaching, consulting, managerial abilities, interpersonal and social skills, ability to train	Long-range planning, budgeting, intrapreneurial skills, fundraising, lobbying, marketing, ability to network
Strategies to obtain competencies	Graduate library education, work under supervisor, on-the-job training, develop mentor and peer relationships	Mentor relationship, expand peer network, professional association activities, advanced graduate degrees	Increase professional association involvement, seminars, workshops, diverse technical experience, management experience through projects	Establish scholarly publishing record, reputation as speaker, innovator, run for office of professional associations, work under sponsor

FIGURE 1

A Career Stage Model for Academic Librarians

ing plays an important role at these career stages. Finally, the model illustrates the critical point that not just one, but many leaders exist in an academic library organization. If a professional views an organization from this perspective, rather than the traditional pyramidal model, many more career advancement opportunities are apparent.

CONCLUSION

The model proposed here provides academic librarians with a set of specified career expectations and a process for managing activities for transition to future career stages. It also promotes a greater awareness and understanding of academic library organizations. Managers can better determine reasons for stagnation at certain positions by applying this model. The numbers of individuals in each stage can be tracked by showing the progress between stages. Career development issues can then be brought directly to top management for evaluation and action. Implications linking career development with human resource planning are evident. Growth in new programs, opportunities for creating new positions, and turnover analyses can be considered hand-in-hand with career development.

Rapidly changing developments in the

information society environment will necessitate improved long-range and strategic planning. A major issue in academic library management is how to strategically approach the challenges of new information technologies, new professional roles, new organizational structures, and changing societal needs for information. Organizational obsolescence is a real danger if nothing is done to change and/or improve the mix of library staff members' skills.

This article has discussed in some depth the need for a career planning approach for information professionals. The library or information organization can also benefit by identifying its needs and matching them with employee needs through a human resources management system. Long-term professional development is crucial to both the organization and the information professional. A formal process should be established to enable individual employees to review their career interests and objectives with management. Desired competencies can be identified for specific positions that may soon be vacant. Career paths can be discussed with the employee to promote career planning techniques. Management, in turn, would be better able to establish effective organizational plans and training and development programs based on its knowledge of employers' career objectives. One such program has been described by Roslyn Courtney.[36]

The career stage model is adaptable and relevant to those in the information and knowledge professions. It provides a career planning approach based upon the various stages an individual may pass through and allows the individual and organization to plan together for a more effective future.

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