Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Public Librarians with the Highest Retention Rate are More Likely to Choose their Entire Career Path in Public Libraries

A Review of:
Noh, Y. (2010). A study analyzing the career path of librarians. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 36*(4), 329–346.

Reviewed by:
Nazi Torabi
Reference and Instructional Librarian
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
Email: ntorabi@uwo.ca

Abstract

Objectives – The main objectives of this study were the following:

- to analyze the career path and career movement of librarians in Korea
- to identify and compare factors influencing the career movement path of chief librarians in public libraries and other librarians
- to determine library positions' turnover rates, average career retention, career reinstatement, proximity between careers, and proximity between different libraries

Design – Survey questionnaire.

Setting – One survey conducted in college libraries, public libraries, special libraries, school libraries, and library-related service providers in Korea, and another in public libraries in Korea, targeting chief librarians only.

Subjects – Librarians were identified from the 2008 Korean Library Yearbook published by the Korean Library Association. Also, more survey recipients in the 'other category' were identified through Internet search, directory search, and library ads. A total of 816 librarians participated in the survey. The breakdowns of participants based on the type of library they were working at are the following:

First survey:
- 282 Public librarians
- 268 University librarians
- 24 Special librarians
- 25 School librarians
- 15 Other librarians

Second survey:
- 202 Chief librarians at public libraries

Methods – A total of 2179 questionnaires were distributed twice in May 2009 via mail to different libraries. Postage paid envelopes were provided. A phone call reminder was made to increase the response rate. 614 copies were returned. The total response rate for the survey was 28.18%. The highest response rate was from academic libraries with a total of 37.17% (Table 2 in the article). Six hundred and forty three copies of the questionnaire were sent out to chief librarians and the response rate was 31.42%. The SAS statistical package was used for conducting statistical analysis of the data. The content areas covered in the two questionnaires are listed below in Table 1.

In order to investigate the career movement path of librarians, participants were asked to identify their current job position plus the first three positions before the current position. Each position equals one phase in the librarians' career path analysis. The jobs were broadly categorized into public libraries, university libraries, special libraries, schools and school libraries, database and content builders, library automation system developers, MARC companies, agencies, Internet portals, library supply companies, and others.

Main Results – The data obtained from those items italicized in Table 1 were used to compare factors influencing the career movement path of chief librarians in public libraries and librarians. The survey results on differences in gender show that most chief librarians (58.9%) were men compare to women (41.1%), while the ratio of women to men librarians is 2:5. Therefore, it is more likely that male librarians decide to become chief librarians. Analyzing the age of

respondents indicates that it takes 20 years of library experience before one becomes a chief librarian. Survey results on differences in the final academic degree between librarians and chief librarians show that more librarians (96.7%) held higher graduate degree compare to chief librarians (87.6%) (results calculated form Table 7 - p. 333). Likewise, there are more librarians who studied library and information science (83.3%) compare to chief librarians (55.9%) (Table 8). Comparing the type of certificates held by two groups, it is evident that 26.7% of chief librarians do not have any library related certificates compare to 5.9% of librarians. The survey results suggest that both librarians and chief librarians make effort to increase their knowledge and skills. While librarians spend more time to improve operational aptitude and personal management, chief librarians identify themselves as hard working individuals.

The study conducted a simple analysis on factors influencing the career movement of librarians and chief librarians. Those factors differ greatly between librarians and chief librarians. While 25.5% of librarians rank compensation and working conditions as the most important factors, 19.2% of chief librarians report organizational culture as the main motivating factor. Based on the percentage of initial career selected in each job category, the most frequent career paths taken by librarians and chief librarians were identified. A total of 92.9% of public librarians reported that their whole career path was indeed in public libraries. In addition, the average length of service by career movement phase was identified to get shorter from the initial to fourth career for librarians while they intent to stay at their current position the longest (157.8 months). On the other hand, chief librarians have one main career in which they have stayed the longest (116 months). This main career is the position immediately prior to the current job position.

The main results of this article are summarized in table 21, based on numbers presented in the tables 12 to 20 in the article.

Table 1
Content Areas Covered in the Two Questionnaires

	For Librarians	**For Chief Librarians**
Personal background	*Gender*	*Gender*
	Age	*Age*
	Final academic degree	*Final academic degree*
	Field of study	*Field of study*
	Ownership of certificate of qualification	*Ownership of certificate of qualification*
		Current job position
		Governing institution
Career movement / Career development	Age at the time of the initial career	Age at the time of the initial career
	Career movement path	*Career movement path*
	Organizational and environmental Factors influencing career movement	*Factors influencing career movement*
	Personal factors influencing career movement	
	Number of times changing department	Number of times changing department before becoming a chief librarian
	Efforts made to move careers	*Efforts made to become a chief librarian*
		Initial job
		Time of becoming a chief librarian
		Career movement path after the current job position
		Educational opportunities after becoming a chief librarian

The lowest and highest turnovers were among public librarians (7.1%) and library automation system developer and information professionals at MARC companies (100%). Conversely, the retention rates for all other jobs were also determined. 6.2% of school librarians returned to school libraries after working in other types of libraries. This is the highest rate for returning to the previous job.

The proximity between different types of careers was analyzed based on combining the numbers of instances of career movement from the initial to the forth career. The highest rate of proximity is always the movement between the same types of career. The two highest (not same career type) career movements are university library and public library (2.65%) and university library and special library (2.32%).

Conclusion – It is more likely that male librarians will take on leadership responsibilities in public libraries. Usually, it takes 20 years of library experience before one becomes chief librarian. More librarians hold higher graduate degrees compared to chief librarians. This study also analyzes factors influencing the career movement of librarians and chief librarians. Those factors differ greatly between librarians and chief librarians. The lowest retention rate was 0% for library automation system developers and information professionals at MARC companies, whereas the highest retention rate was for public librarians followed by university libraries. The highest rate for return-to-first-job belongs to school libraries. It is noteworthy to mention that chief librarians have one main career in which they have stayed the longest. This main career is the position immediately before to the current job position. It usually occurs in the midcareer phase and it is when the individual has spent more time developing their skills and expertise and has been getting ready for their leadership role.

Commentary

This article is a great start for a topic that has been neglected. It provides new information regarding the most popular career paths taken by librarians in Korea. Also, understanding the retention and turnover rates of different library positions can be useful for managers and human resources, and it provides ideas for professional development.

Glynn's EBLIP Critical Appraisal Checklist (2006) was used as the critical appraisal tool. Using this tool, several significant flaws call into question the results and applicability of this work. The main problem is the lack of adequate statistical analysis. The methodology is based on descriptive statistics while the conclusions are presented in the form of inferences. Results are presented in simple percentages rather than investigating standard deviation, p-values, or confidence intervals to identify any correlation or significant

difference between variables and groups. Sample size might be insufficient for some groups in this study. Only 24 special librarians and 25 school librarians participated in the survey. Also, selection bias might be the main source of error for the first section of the article. The data obtained for chief librarians in public libraries was compared with librarians in other types of libraries. One should assume that those who choose to work as public librarians are more likely to become a chief librarian in a public library, as this assumption can be supported by 92.9% of cases that have selected public library as initial and final job option (p. 339). Therefore, it is more meaningful to compare the career path and career movement of chief librarians in public libraries with public librarians only.

It is indicated that the questionnaires were written based on research papers on career development (p. 334). Unfortunately, the author does not provide further information about those research papers. There is no report on whether a pilot study was conducted to evaluate alpha-reliability and validity of the instrument. In addition, not all factors have been considered (e.g., all academic degree held by the participants, the positions of authority held in previous careers, or job market condition). Also, there is no rationale presented for those factors that have been selected for the study.

Throughout the article there is no mention of any missing data. Missing data and the approach that is taken by the researcher to handle the missing data can greatly compromise the results of a study.

The author claims that because 26.7% of chief librarians do not have any library related certificates compared to 5.9% of librarians, it is more likely that people without a degree in library and information science become chief librarians compared to librarians (p. 335). There is an indirect relationship between the likelihood of becoming a chief librarian and the lack of a degree in library and information science. One can argue that they held several other degrees in management, business, or

even the age of the individual could be important but not accounted for in the questionnaires or analysis.

The author shows that gender differences might be a factor that causes male librarians to assume leadership responsibilities in public libraries. Bello (1996) has conducted a more in-depth analysis of classical factors that influence choosing librarianship as a profession. In Bello's study, gender difference was considered as a confounding variable. Also, it is known that "opportunities for career change begin decreasing with increasing age" (Johnson, 2002, p. 623). This means that age should be considered as another confounding variable in the analysis.

While career mobility path has been investigated throughout the article, the career movement factors have not been investigated adequately in the article. The factors influencing career movement and the effort

that is put into career movement vary greatly between librarians and chief librarians. A more adequate statistical analysis is required to further investigate whether the difference between variables are statistically significant.

References

Bello, Musa A. (1996). Choosing a career: Librarian? *Librarian Career Development, 4*(4), 15–19.

Glynn, L. (2006). A critical appraisal tool for library and information research. *Library Hi Tech, 24*(3), 387-399.

Johnson, T. J. (2002). Making it to the major leagues: Career movement between library and archival professions and from small college to large university libraries. *Library Trends, 50*(4), 614–630.