

Working in the Health Information Profession: Perspectives, Experiences and Trends. Project WHIPPET.

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Abstract

Project WHIPPET funded by the European Association for Health Information and Libraries (EAHIL) aims to understand the diversity of information roles in the health sector. A pilot survey was distributed at the EAHIL workshop, Stockholm (2013). Ninety-eight questionnaires were distributed and 47 completed responses were received (48% response rate). The results demonstrate the continued use of the terms 'library' and 'librarian'. Key roles are teaching and training, literature searching, and management. A wide range of skills and attributes are needed to carry out these roles. Soft skills were mentioned most frequently, followed by LIS skills, management, and IT skills. Skills development needs were identified, with IT and new technologies cited most frequently, followed by management and pedagogical skills. Issues relating to budgets and finance were identified as a major challenge. Other challenges included staff issues, new technologies, keeping up-to-date and promoting services. Impact is primarily through teaching, research support and effective service management. The issues will be explored through a wider survey and analysis of focus groups and interviews. The findings will support future planning, training and development within the profession.

Keywords: Health professionals, information skills, job roles

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1 Introduction

Project WHIPPET¹ aims to record the experiences of health information professionals currently practising across Europe. The project is investigating the diversity of roles that exist in the health information sector; the skills that health information professionals have and need; and the critical nature of those roles and skills in supporting effective healthcare in a rapidly changing environment (Brettle & Urquhart, 2012).

2 Pilot questionnaire

A pilot survey was distributed at the EAHIL workshop in Stockholm, Sweden during June 2013, prior to a full survey being distributed via EAHIL and other mailing lists. Ninety-eight questionnaires were distributed and 47 completed responses were received, giving a response rate of 48%. The survey questions are provided in Appendix 1. The majority of questions were open-ended producing mainly qualitative data. The data were then coded; coding frequencies were calculated, enabling descriptive statistics to be produced.

Thirty-four respondents (72%) were female and the majority, (62%) were between 35 and 54. Respondents came from a wide range of European countries, with three respondents coming from further afield (the Caribbean, US and United Arab Emirates). Most respondents came from the education sector or state healthcare, or a combination of the two (87%). The remaining individuals worked in industry, independent organisations or government-funded bodies.

¹ <http://projectwhippet.shef.ac.uk>

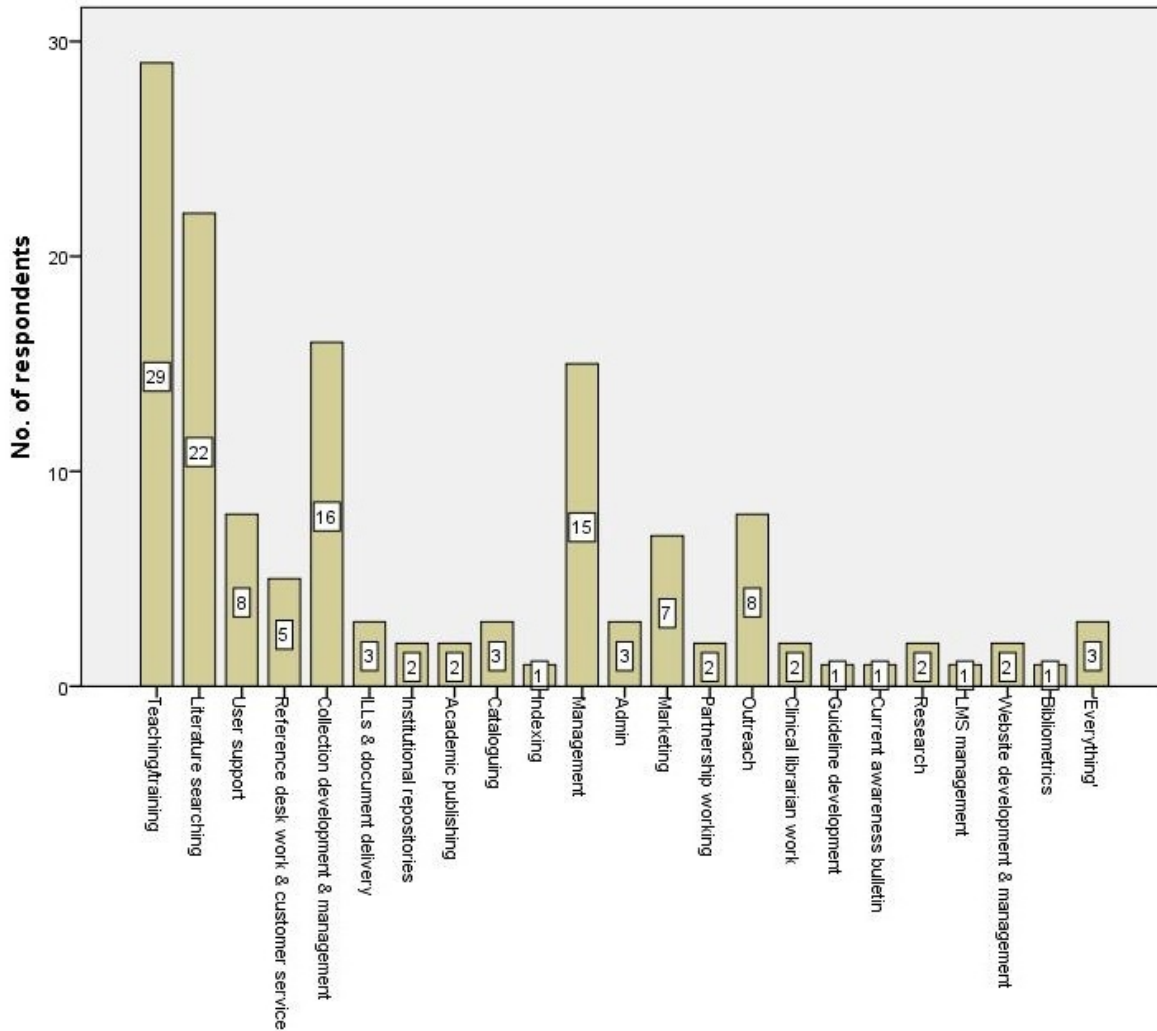


Figure 1: Job roles

3 Results

3.1 Job titles

Thirty-three respondents (70%) had job titles that included the words ‘Librarian’, or ‘librarian’, while five respondents (11%) had ‘information’ in their title. Twenty-one respondents (45%) had a title implying a leadership/management role and 4 (9%) had a title which implied an educational role.

3.2 Job roles (Figure 1)

The most frequently-mentioned role was teaching or training, with 29 respondents (62%) identifying this as a key role. Within this, 17 (36%) mentioned information literacy training specifically. Other types of training mentioned included data management training (1), critical appraisal training (1) and evidence-based medicine / research training (1).

Literature searching was identified as a key role by 22 respondents (47%). Roles related to collection development and management were identified by 16 (34%). This covered a range of roles including purchasing resources, negotiating licenses, and providing access to the resources.

Management roles such as strategic management, budget management, staff/competence management and quality management were mentioned by 15 respondents (32%).

3.3 Key skills (Figure 2)

Soft skills were seen as greatly in demand, with communication skills mentioned most frequently by 16 respondents (34%) and generic people skills mentioned by 11 (23%). Pedagogical skills were also viewed as highly important, mentioned by 13 (28%). LIS-specific skills were not identified so frequently, with information literacy and/or search skills mentioned by 10 respondents (21%) and knowledge of sources mentioned by eight (17%).

Management skills were mentioned by 10 respondents (21%). Some specific areas of management were identified such as people management (3, 6%); change management (2, 4%); financial management (2, 4%); and strategic management (1).

IT and technical skills were mentioned by 9 respondents (19%) and research skills by 7 (15%). Research skills were employed in a variety of different contexts. One respondent carried out his own research, while others specified that they used research skills to carry out surveys or performance management. Others found knowledge of research methodology useful in assessing evidence.

The most frequently-mentioned personal attribute was willingness to learn or intellectual curiosity, mentioned by 8 respondents (17%). Comments relating to the changing skill-set, and to the perception that (some) information professionals do ‘everything’, recurred in the data.

Other than willingness to learn, there seemed to be relatively little consensus about the personal attributes required for the job. This may reflect the wide range of roles carried out by respondents.

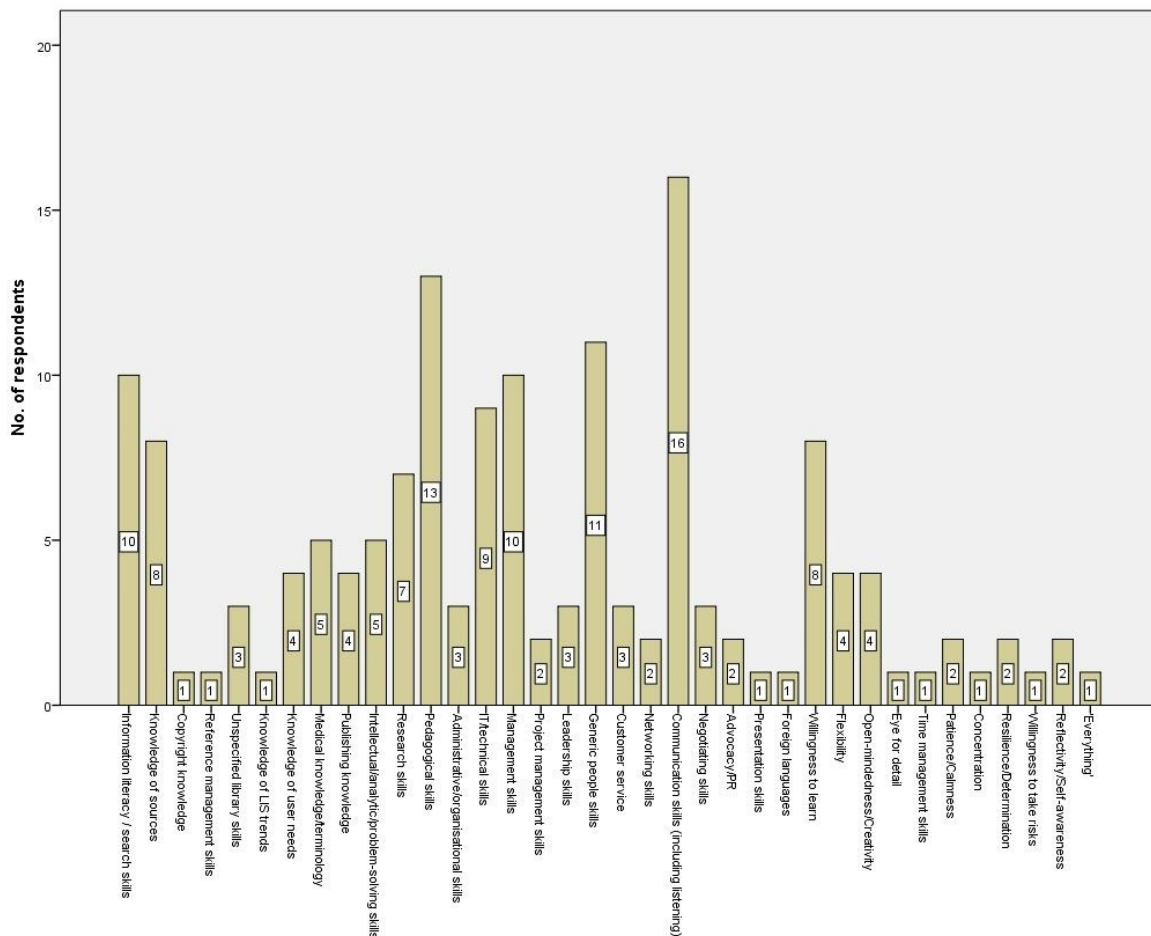


Figure 2: Key skills

3.4 Skills that need developing (Figure 3)

IT and new technologies were mentioned most frequently as skills that need developing, by 15 respondents (31%) suggesting that they are perceived as a growth area for the future. Within this category, some specific areas were mentioned, such as m-libraries (3 respondents, 6%) and e-learning (3 respondents, 6%). Management skills were mentioned as an area for development by 7 respondents, (15%). Within this category, the most frequently mentioned area was leadership skills (5 respondents, 10%), followed by strategic management skills (4 respondents, 8%) and budget management skills (3 respondents, 6%). Other skills needs identified were pedagogical skills (6 respondents, 13%), and research skills, 5 respondents (10%).

Aside from the areas discussed above, there seemed to be relatively little consensus on the skills that need developing: a large number of areas were each identified by a minority of respondents. This may reflect the range of roles carried out by health information professionals.

It is also notable that 13 respondents (28%) made reference to developing existing skills and/or keeping up-to-date. Comments included, *“Always looking to hone existing skills”* and *“In different trends like research data - there is always something to develop!”* This suggests that in many cases, respondents are building on knowledge rather than acquiring skills from scratch.

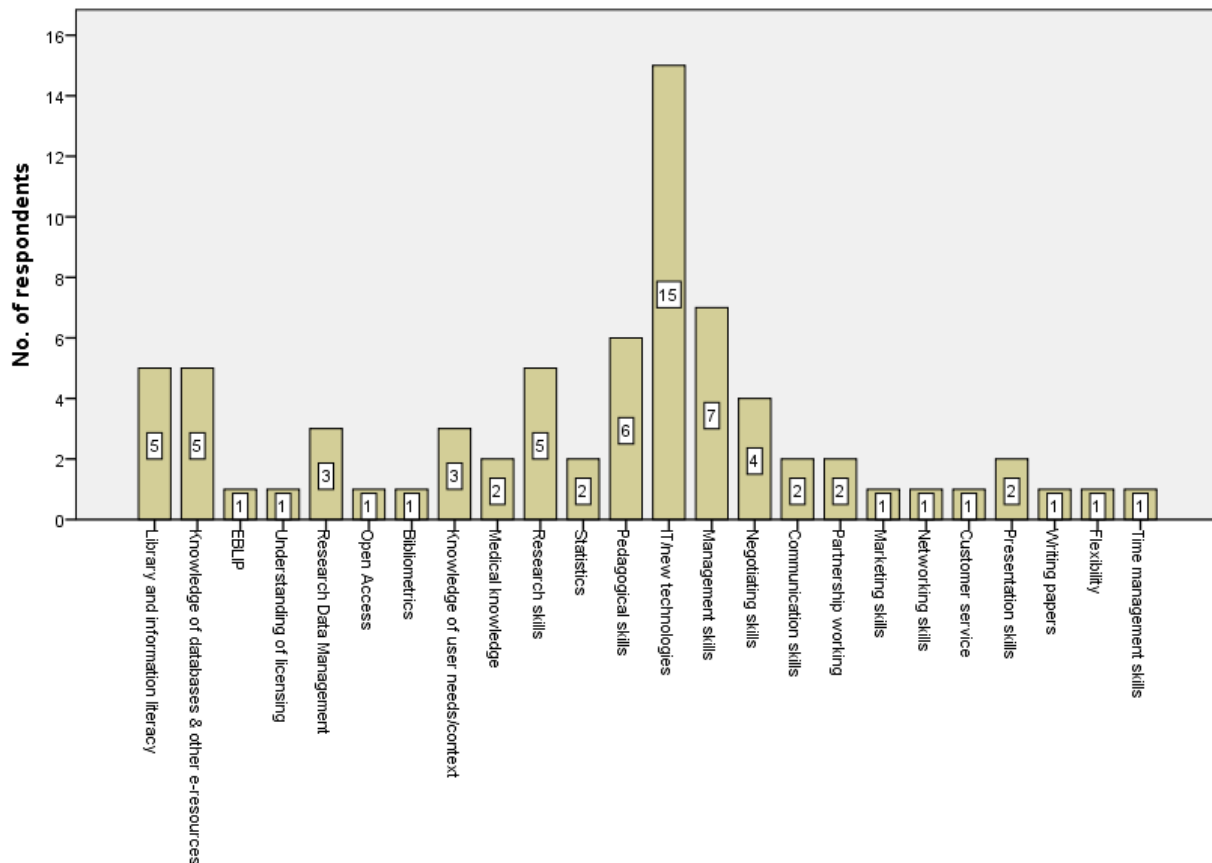


Figure 3: Skills that need developing

3.5 Challenges (Figure 4)

The overwhelming challenge identified by respondents was budgets and finance with 20 respondents (43%) identifying this as a challenge (14 budget, 5 paymasters, 1 budgeting skills). Other management challenges identified included staff and staff skills with 14 respondents (30%) commenting on these issues. Another

key challenge is around promoting the service (11, 23%), and meeting user needs (9, 19%), with users sometimes not understanding the relevance of the service (6, 13%). In a fast-moving profession, keeping up-to-date presented respondents with problems with 12 (26%) identifying this as a challenge and 13 (28%) mentioning new technologies specifically (13, 28%). This tallies with the findings presented in section 3.4, which showed that IT and new technologies constituted the most frequently mentioned area where skills development was needed. The challenges are perhaps accentuated when set against the frequently-identified problem of time and heavy workload (8, 17%).

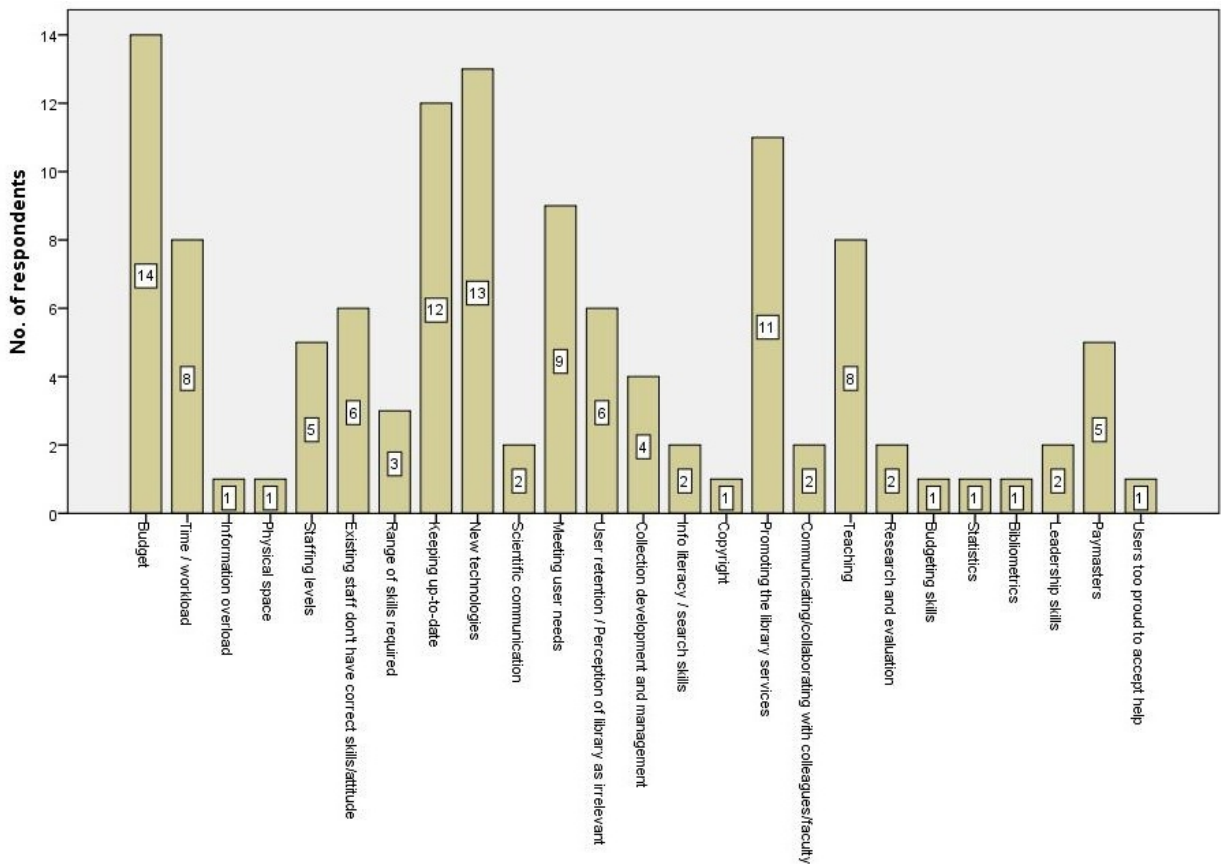


Figure 4: Challenges faced

3.6 Making an impact

Despite the challenges, 42 of the respondents were able to give an example of a time when they felt they had made an impact in their job. These fell into six categories (Figure 5) largely related to their key roles of teaching, supporting research, supporting users and the management of their services. They did not find it easy to identify direct impact on healthcare, with only one respondent acknowledging this. However, much of what they do supports the research, knowledge, learning, and effectiveness within the healthcare organizations employing them and is likely to have an indirect role on more effective healthcare.

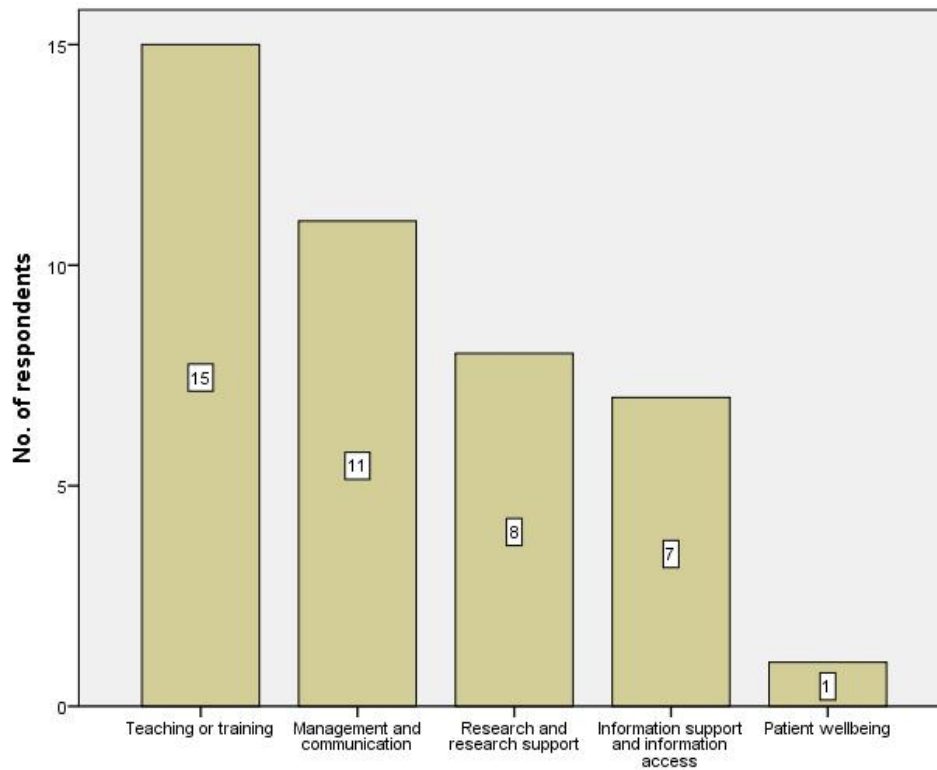


Figure 5: Ways in which health information professionals make an impact

4 Limitations

The pilot survey sample was small, and it is therefore not possible to make statistical generalizations from the results. Moreover, the survey was distributed at the EAHIL conference, so respondents may not be typical of all health information professionals. Project WHIPPET focuses primarily on the European context and the results may therefore not be transferable to other geographical contexts.

The main survey endeavours to address some of these limitations. A link to the online survey was distributed via the EAHIL mailing list and national mailing lists aimed at (health) library and information professionals. 512 usable responses have been received. In addition, analysis of focus group and interview transcripts will provide more in-depth data on health information professionals' roles, skills and career paths, and on the contributions they make to effective healthcare.

5 Conclusion

The preliminary results demonstrate the continued use and relevance of the terms 'library' and 'librarian' in the health information sector. Other key terms used reflected leadership and educational roles held by those surveyed.

Key roles included teaching and training, literature searching, and management roles. Health information and library professionals require a wide range of skills and attributes to enable them to carry out these roles. These can be categorized into soft skills, LIS-specific skills, management skills, IT and technical skills, and personal attributes.

Throughout Europe, countries have identified the need for increased skills and professional standards to meet changing demands on health information professionals (Robu & Bakker, 2010; Tsalapatani & Kalogeraki, 2010). The findings of the present study contribute to this growing body of knowledge by identifying areas in which health information professionals felt their skills needed developing. IT and new technologies constituted the most frequently-mentioned area, other areas identified being

management skills, pedagogical skills and research skills. Comments suggested a commitment to lifelong learning among respondents.

Despite facing a number of challenges – most significantly budgetary issues – respondents were able to identify various areas in which they felt they made an impact. This was primarily through supporting roles including research support, teaching and training, and through effective management of the services to support their users. Thus, the early indications from this study support the findings of Harrison, Creaser, and Greenwood (2011) in the Irish context: health information professionals are applying their specialized skill-set to add value and benefit across the health sector.

6 References

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8 Appendix 1: Survey questions

1. What is your job title?
2. What type of organisation do you work for?
 - State healthcare
 - Private healthcare
 - Charity / voluntary sector
 - Education sector (e.g. university, college)
 - Industry (e.g. pharmaceutical company)
 - Other (please specify)
3. What country do you work in?
4. Who are your main user groups? (e.g. clinicians, undergraduates, general public, etc.)
5. Please briefly summarise the key elements of your role (e.g. literature searching, information literacy training, outreach, etc.)

6. What are the main challenges you face in your role?
 7. What key skills are needed to do your job?
 8. How did you acquire these skills? Please tick all that apply
 - Within the workplace
 - University degree in library/information studies
 - University degree in other subject (please specify)
 - Short courses
 - Mentoring
 - Shadowing
 - Professional networks
 - Online learning
 - Other (please specify)
 9. Are there any areas in which you need to develop your skills?
 10. Please give an example of a time when you felt you made a real impact in your job
 11. As part of the project, we are developing a website to support information and knowledge sharing between health information professionals. What sort of resources would you like to see on the website?
 12. What is your age?
 - 18 to 24
 - 25 to 34
 - 35 to 44
 - 45 to 54
 - 55 to 64
 - 65 or older
 - Rather not say
 13. What is your gender?
 - Female
 - Male
 - Rather not say
 14. Do you have any comments about the design of this questionnaire?
 15. Would you be interested in participating in later stages of the research? Please tick one or more boxes
 - I would potentially be willing to take part in a face-to-face interview in the UK
 - I would potentially be willing to take part in an interview by Skype or instant messenger
 - I do not wish to participate further, but would like to be informed of the results
- If you have ticked any of the boxes above, please provide your email address