The Clerical Staff

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Up to the present time comparatively little of the literature devoted to library personnel problems has concerned the clerical staff. In the bulk of published material the clerical worker has been referred to only negatively, as the person to perform the tasks no longer to be done by the professional.

The report by C. C. Williamson to the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 1923 did identify a clerical worker and prescribed for her preparation a short period of instruction in library methods combined with practice to insure proficiency—this training to be done by the individual library and to be training in its specific methods. Again, the report of the Bureau of Public Personnel Administration to the Committee on the Classification of Library Personnel of the American Library Association, generally called the Telford Report, marked out a dividing line between professional and clerical jobs. The suggested classification and pay plans published by the American Library Association in 1939 and 1943 included several categories of clerical workers.

In the above reports the principle of difference between professional and clerical work was apparently accepted, yet it is significant that in 1945 Louis R. Wilson was still looking to the future when he noted that recognition of this difference should eventually lead to the concentration of professional effort in distinctly professional areas. At the University of Chicago Library Institute in 1948 it was re-emphasized that the professional librarian’s training should be directed to the achievement of the library’s functions and objectives, rather than to its processes, and a proposal for the preparation of another person to be responsible for the performance of subsidiary techniques was outlined. Disagreement with this proposal was based on the appropriateness and practicality of the place suggested for training rather than on any objection to the idea of a distinct sphere of activity.

The focus of attention in the immediate past has been on the chang-

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ing direction of preparation for professional librarianship; there has not been a corresponding concentration on training that part of the staff which will carry the responsibility for performance of the tasks defined as "clerical." The concept of the professional librarian as administrator, designer of services, stimulator of reading, leader of public opinion, is taking shape; the outlines of the clerical staff and definition of its place in the functioning whole still remain hazy.

Three things are bringing about a new concern for the clerical staff: first, the growing demand for library service of all kinds, challenging the planning skills of all librarians; second, the rising costs of operation, bringing a demand for the soundest allocation of funds; third, the shortage of qualified professional personnel, making it imperative to use the available supply to the best advantage. These factors reflect the changing attitude toward the function of the library as it constantly broadens its service to its community. From an earlier concept of supplying the demand for books, the library now recognizes and accepts the challenge to take the lead in contributing to an informed public opinion. This reorientation of function imposes upon the librarian, among other things, a responsibility for spending more time on the development of services and on finding ways to increase the library's effectiveness, and less on the details that can be done by individuals with less training. Thus it imposes the need for weighing values in the tasks to be done in order to arrive at a division of tasks that is both economical and productive. The California Library Association's Library Development Committee, faced with the demand for expanded library service, stated its belief that a significant part of the shortage of professional librarians could be eliminated if librarians performed only professional work.

Preliminary to the development of a clerical staff is an examination and evaluation of all library tasks on the basis of a sound definition of what constitutes professional activity. Duties have been considered professional if they involved any knowledge whatever of library methods and routines. Errett W. McDiarmid would make the dividing line one of judgment: "The professional is called upon to make decisions or to do things for which judgment and discretion are required. . . . the distinguishing feature of nonprofessional duties is that they are either (1) performed according to adopted practice and methods or (2) performed under the direction of someone who exercises judgment in deciding how they should be done." A comprehensive, uniformly acceptable definition has yet to be formed.

It has been estimated that two-thirds of the work done in public
libraries, and a large proportion of the work done in university libraries, is nonprofessional in nature, consisting of routines that could be done by instructed clerical workers. The descriptive list of duties prepared by the Board on Personnel Administration of the American Library Association analyzes library tasks in a dozen areas and divides them into professional and nonprofessional categories, a division which, with some local adaptation, could serve as a guide for libraries of all kinds and sizes. The study by E. A. Wight of the assignment of duties between clerical and professional personnel not only suggests principles on which the division can be made, but outlines the steps for a simple self-study. Such a study of tasks in the individual library must precede, and be quite independent of, the study and classification of jobs.

The principle of distinctions between tasks is generally unquestioned today. The problem is one of putting these principles into practice. It has been argued, for example, that the contact of the librarian with the reader at the circulation desk is so valuable that it justifies using professional personnel in a job that is clearly clerical in nature. Instead of using that fact as a defense for assuming the performance of clerical duties, a more constructive solution would be the development of new avenues of contact with readers. Better distribution of duties between professional and nonprofessional personnel must always remain a major administrative goal. Achieving this goal in libraries of limited staff may involve changes in organizational pattern and experimentation in the allocation of staffs in new divisions.

The successful use of clerical workers and their development as an integral part of the library staff is affected by the attitudes of the professional librarians. The clerical assistant must be accepted as an individual with a distinct, if different, contribution to make toward the realization of the library's goals. We cannot ignore the effect on clerical workers themselves of a clearly defined status that carries its own opportunities for growth and advancement and its own place of dignity and usefulness in the whole library service pattern. We cannot hope to attract and hold the type of clerical worker we need if the only inducements are the pay envelope, convenient hours, and a comfortable place to work. Industry, after long observation, is learning that job satisfaction continues to be a strong force in productivity, regardless of the size of the pay envelope. The principle applies in any work situation. In this connection the written job description, with its sampling of duties and specifications for performance skills, not only describes for the employment office the job and the person

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who can do it, but serves also to establish the identity of the job for the individual employee and for his fellow workers.

The goal of any personnel program is the creation of a staff that is stable, productive, and satisfied. The dollar costs of high turnover may not be apparent until we are able to pinpoint unit costs and establish production norms for clerical routines, as is being done in industry. The costs are expressed now chiefly in the frustrations that come with the need for constant training of new recruits.

In contrast with the recruiting of professional staff, recruiting clerical personnel is done locally and in direct competition with business and industry in the local labor market. Clerical jobs in libraries and in business make use of the same basic skills. In building up a stable, efficient clerical force, selection practices that have been tried and found useful in business must have some relevance for libraries. A study of selection practices relating to clerical employees in New York City reveals trends that have significance for libraries in setting up clerical selection procedures. The use of clerical aptitude tests and clerical performance tests to predict success in the job is increasing rapidly. In a study of 628 business firms, 75 per cent were using tests in the selection process. In another study 80 per cent of life insurance firms questioned made use of aptitude tests. The rate of increase in the use of almost every type of testing procedure has been striking.

Getting the new worker started on the job begins with the induction interview, where the initial attitude toward the job is established, and ends with a planned orientation period designed to give him some insight into his place in the whole organization, as well as some understanding of the function of the library itself. If orientation is valuable to the professional staff member, whose formal training has been directed to this end, it is much more necessary for the clerical worker to whom the job is just another typing, or filing, or general office job. Identification of the worker with the new institution is essential. The question is not whether it shall be done, for the process we call orientation takes place inevitably. It is a question of whether the new employee will share our understanding of what is his job and our common goal, or will perform mechanically the seemingly meaningless tasks assigned him. It is the difference between effective integration and just working in the library.

Where there is a recognized career service, and particularly where employees are selected initially for eventual promotion to a higher level, a planned program of training is essential. Although in libraries
we make use of the basic clerical skills, the largest volume of library work is concerned with tasks peculiar to libraries. We can expect the basic skills such as typing, bookkeeping, recording, and counting statistics to be acquired in a general business training course, but it remains the responsibility of the employing institution to teach specific techniques such as those connected with the acquisition of materials, cataloging and processing, and maintaining records of library materials and library users. Business recognizes this problem of adapting basic skills to a specific job. Ten years ago, in a study of the work of clerical employees, Thelma M. Potter\textsuperscript{12} noted an increasing number of training programs for office employees. A 1952 survey of white-collar workers\textsuperscript{13} revealed that some kind of training program for office workers is now in effect in approximately one out of four companies, both large and small.

It has been the experience in business that training needs occur largely in three broad areas: skills and techniques of actual performance, human relations, and supervision. Employees receive training in any or all of these areas because of a deficiency which affects their productive capacity, or for the purpose of promotion. Training is most frequently done on the job, by the immediate supervisor, in the course of assigned duties. Formal training in groups, by a separate training staff, is found to be feasible only in large organizations where a significant number of workers is hired at one time to do an identical job. Psychologically the formal training situation is artificial, and is found less effective than training on productive work. For most libraries training probably will and should remain individual, on-the-job, taught by the immediate supervisor, just as in most business offices. Even the smallest library can, nevertheless, carry out its individualized training on a carefully planned basis.

When training is done on the job by the immediate supervisor, the training problem becomes one of training the trainer. Alice Dunlap experimented with, and strongly recommended, the adaptation of job instruction training techniques that had proved effective in industry to the teaching of library tasks.\textsuperscript{14} Films prepared by the United States Office of Education for training supervisors in industry illustrate the principles on which these techniques are based, and can be applied to situations involving office workers.

In training clerical workers no tool is more valuable than the procedure manual. It is precisely in the clerical processes that the procedure manual has its natural place. After policy decisions have been made, the manual provides the breakdown for each task on which
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all instruction is based, whether it is done by the immediate supervisor or a centralized training staff. Where training is completely decentralized the manual provides for uniformity and continuity in procedure. It helps to insure adequate instruction of workers before they are given responsibility for new duties and makes it easier to train competent clerical workers to supervise the work of others doing routine clerical tasks.

It will be recognized that in the development of the clerical staff the supervisor is in the most sensitive spot. This aspect of the librarian's work is treated more fully in this issue in the article on supervision and morale. It is the supervisor who sets the tone of the operating unit and who is largely responsible for the attitudes of its members. It is the supervisor who stimulates the cooperation of staff members toward the common goal so that the task each performs is seen in its relation to the whole function of the library. In the end, it is upon the supervisor's success in developing an attitude of identification with the organization, sound performance, and pride in accomplishment, that the goal of a stable, productive, and satisfied clerical staff will be achieved.

References


