Personnel in Circulation Service

RALPH E. MCCOY

The staffing of a library circulation department calls for a clear understanding of the department's role in serving the public and an awareness of the component skills required to provide this service. Personnel planning is complicated by the fact that circulation operations generally embrace three categories or levels of work—clerical, managerial, and professional—and many of the tasks are difficult to segregate and classify. For years librarians have been attempting to arrive at a better distribution between professional and nonprofessional work, realizing the adverse effect on morale as well as on operating efficiency when professionally trained persons spend their time doing clerical work. These efforts have been stimulated in recent years by increased demands for service coupled with rising costs and a shortage of professional librarians.

The basic components of circulation work—fetching a book from the shelves, charging it to a patron, discharging and shelving it when the book is returned—are clerical in nature. But when these tasks are performed hundreds and thousands of times a day and by numerous persons, they present certain organizational problems. Such problems with respect to books, records, and people call for managerial and supervisory skills, but not necessarily the attention of professional librarians. It is in the peripheral areas of circulation work that professional training and experience may be needed. At some point circulation work may cease to be routine and will call for bibliographical knowledge or professional judgment.

While it is clear that the backstage work of record-keeping can best be done by clerks, and fetching and shelving can best be done by student help, considerable difference of opinion exists as to who shall meet the public at the loan desk. Jennie M. Flexner, writing about public library circulation work in a day (1927) when professional training was less frequently required than it is today, stressed the importance of a professional attitude in all dealings with the public.¹

Mr. McCoy is Director of Libraries, Southern Illinois University.

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She listed twenty-three personality traits desirable for all circulation assistants, whether or not they were library school graduates. A good personality, no less than book knowledge and professional training, was deemed a requisite for contacts at the public library circulation desk.

C. H. Brown and H. G. Bousfield recommended in 1933 that all contacts with patrons in a college and university library be handled by professionally trained librarians. In some libraries professionals are prevented from doing clerical work at the circulation desk and clerks are prevented from dealing with the public by the simple device of placing all record-keeping behind the scenes. Besides improving the efficiency of the circulation operation, such a plan has the advantage of elevating the professional librarian in the eyes of the patron, who too often thinks of a librarian as one who potters with cards while the patron waits for his book.

E. W. McDiarmid, speaking at a University of Chicago Library Institute in 1948, doubted that all public contacts at the circulation desk need to be handled by a professional. Many contacts, he stated, are clerical, involving questions as to the location of various units of the library, the mechanics of the card catalog, and library rules and regulations. In the interest of efficiency and economy we should give up the idea of providing experts for every public contact. To perform the large body of library work which requires somewhat less than professional training and somewhat more than clerical, McDiarmid proposed a third category of library personnel—the library technician. Such an employee should have a good general education, should be trained in library methods, and be capable of performing supervisory assignments. While there has been general recognition of the usefulness of the library technician, there has not been agreement as to where and how he should be trained. McDiarmid suggested that library schools accept this responsibility, but these institutions have been more inclined to view the job as in-service training for promising clerks. Alice I. Bryan recognized the existence of a sizeable group of such subprofessional employees in her survey of personnel in public libraries.

The rearrangement of service within the circulation department is one method of assuring that clerical, managerial, and professional work is done at the lowest level consistent with efficiency. More fundamental, however, is an examination of the over-all public service activities in the library with a view to discovering new patterns of organization. For example, in a public or university library that is
organized into subject reading rooms, professional assistance to readers may be handled by departmental or divisional librarians. Circulation is then left with only a clerical operation: the charge-out function at the exit and the maintenance of the stacks. The amount of bibliographical assistance that is required at the loan desk will also be affected by the quality of the public catalog, the percentage of books on open shelves and thus readily available to the patron, the presence of an information assistant at the catalog, and, in the case of the college and university library, the amount of formal training in the use of the library.

Much of the writing about organization of circulation services has been based on supposition and general observation rather than on any scientific analysis of the work performed, its characteristics, its flow, and the quantity in a given library. Such a systematic self-survey will not only indicate ways of streamlining circulation procedures but will serve as a necessary first step in classifying the positions in the department. Herbert Goldhor and R. H. Logsdon review the growing body of literature on work simplification in a recent issue of *Library Trends.* In an effort to assist librarians in conducting a work analysis, the American Library Association's Board on Personnel Administration prepared a list of typical professional and nonprofessional duties performed in libraries. Circulation work is described in this list under these categories: (1) registration and circulation, (2) care of shelves and files, and (3) assistance to readers. The circulation department of a large library will find it easier to avoid the hybrid professional-clerical position by reassignment of duties than will the small library where volume of work does not permit specialization. But even the small library, as evidenced by the writer's own experience, may benefit from a work simplification study.

The formulation of a position classification scheme for the circulation department is a logical outgrowth of the work analysis of the department; in fact, an analysis of the tasks to be done must precede a description of the people needed to perform them. A good position classification plan, according to Miss Bryan, "provides an inventory of the personnel necessary for the operation of the organization as a whole; it differentiates the various levels and types of positions and indicates their functional relationships; it provides the basis for setting up specifications for the selection of properly qualified employees; and it defines the lines of employee promotion." It is to be expected that a work analysis of the circulation department and the position classifi-
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cations that follow would be part of an over-all personnel program for the library. Assistance in developing a position classification plan and an accompanying salary schedule is provided in an A.L.A. manual and in a set of sample plans appropriate to various types of libraries.

As a by-product of work analysis and position classification it might be useful for the circulation department to determine performance standards for individual jobs—the amount of time spent on a task or the amount of work to be done in a given time. Quantitative standards, of course, are more applicable to such clerical and routine jobs as shelving, filing, slipping, and reading of shelves than to reader services. Ralph Shaw refers briefly to a program for establishing performance standards in book charging at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Library, but few libraries seem to have given attention to this tool of scientific management.

A position classification plan provides a sound basis for selecting the staff of the circulation department, for it describes the work to be performed and indicates the personal qualities and technical skills needed for each position. Three categories of workers are generally sought in circulation departments: the professional librarian, the non-professional worker serving as clerk, technician, or supervisor, and the part-time student assistant. Probably no department in the library makes more extensive use of student assistants than does circulation. Economic necessity may force a college or university library to employ student assistants in lieu of full-time clerks, but there are many objections to this practice. The full-time clerk brings continuity to the organization, provides maturity needed in supervisory jobs, and helps with difficult scheduling. He also can acquire technical skills, not economical to develop in the student assistant who, at best, is available for only a few years. It is doubtful whether many libraries have explored fully the use of mature, well-educated technicians in carrying out the work of a circulation department.

Career programs, both for professional librarians and clerks, are brought into focus by a position classification plan, so that the staff member is permitted to see the lines of promotion open to him. Knowing the promotional pattern also enables the employing librarian to select a staff member on the basis of his capacity for growth as well as for his ability to perform the immediate job. There is a tendency to use the circulation department as a training ground for new library personnel. While this arrangement provides good experience for new
staff members, it reduces the efficiency of the department and carries the unwarranted implication that circulation work in itself is not a worthy career.

The most effective method for selecting clerical and student staff is generally considered to be a combination of written testing and personal interviewing. The written test is given to determine skills and aptitudes and the interview to assess personality. In the case of student assistants the grade average is also considered. Evidence of the validity of formal tests for predicting success of student assistants was demonstrated by Grace M. Oberheim in an experiment at Iowa State College. As criteria for measuring success she used the ratings of supervisors and the records of promotion. R. E. McCoy reviews modern selection procedures applicable to libraries in his bibliography on personnel administration.

In the many discussions on selecting student assistants for academic libraries these recommendations are frequently made: (1) Appointment should be based solely on the student’s qualifications and not on his need for work or his expressed interest in librarianship. (2) The library staff should be permitted to make the selection, promotion, and dismissal; the immediate supervisor should take part in these processes. (3) The student assistant should serve a probationary period as part of the selection process, some form of testing being given at the end of this period to determine his comprehension of the job and his general knowledge of the library organization. (4) Underclass students should be selected for initial appointments because of their longer usefulness. (5) Fewer students should be selected, but for more hours per week (15 hours seemed to be a standard); they should not work so many hours that they endanger grades or health. (6) The privileges and educational aspects of a library job should be emphasized. (Student assistants in school libraries generally serve without pay as an extra-curricular activity. The formulation of library clubs with state and regional affiliation has greatly stimulated this program.) (7) One of the most reliable sources of good students is the recommendation of other students who have been successful employees. (8) Student employment offices should be requested to arrange class sectioning so that wherever feasible students can have large blocks of time to devote to their work assignments. (9) Students whose performance or attitudes are not satisfactory should be promptly dismissed.

The serious shortage of trained librarians and the unsatisfactory channels for securing professional library personnel have been discussed frequently in professional literature, most recently by R. J.
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Blasingame, Jr., who recommends ways in which more effective procedures may be applied. F. R. St. John reports on the experience with preprofessional positions at the Brooklyn Public Library, a pattern of recruiting that is being adopted by a number of large libraries that are located close to library schools. Under the Brooklyn plan selected college graduates are offered a preprofessional position while they try out librarianship by attending a library school. Such an arrangement might be effective in filling junior positions in circulation departments of public or university libraries.

When clerical, professional, and student assistants work in a team relationship, so often the case in a circulation department, there should be a clear understanding of the status of each. “The clerical assistant,” writes Dorothy Weber, “must be accepted as an individual with a distinct, if different, contribution to make toward the realization of the library’s goals.” Opportunities should be provided for growth; pay scales for senior clerks should overlap junior professional positions; and distinct rights and privileges should be provided. Since libraries must often compete with local business and government agencies in acquiring and retaining a clerical staff, the library’s total personnel program, no less than its salary scale, must meet this competition.

The success of a new employee on his job is closely related to the manner in which he is introduced to the job, to the organization, and to his colleagues. Experience in industry reveals that the first few days on the job may form the basis for permanent attitudes. The new staff member needs to know not only the specific requirements of his job but its relationship to the work and goals of the department. Some libraries have prepared staff handbooks to answer questions on such matters as pay, vacations, retirement, hours of work, parking facilities, etc.; other libraries have issued checklists of topics that should be covered in interviews with the personnel officer, the department head, and the immediate supervisor. Perhaps no action is more effective in orienting a new staff member than the friendly, informal assistance given by a colleague. Because of the multitude of procedures, lending regulations, and library policies that must be understood by members of the circulation staff, a procedures manual is frequently issued. Such a manual, if kept up-to-date, is especially useful in orienting student employees, where turnover is rapid and training programs are necessarily brief. Manuals may include information on the functions of the department, channels of authority, responsibility for specific tasks, scheduling policies, absences, and the importance of such matters as personal conduct, courtesy with the public, avoidance of
favoritism, accuracy in filing and shelving, and punctuality in meeting desk schedules.

The importance of good public relations for everyone working at the loan desk is repeatedly emphasized in discussions of circulation work. One thoughtless or discourteous act, it is pointed out, can injure the entire library system. And this applies to students, clerks, and librarians. A friendly critic of libraries has written that “many people in subordinate library posts behave toward those they are presumably there to help in a manner that would win them instant dismissal from behind the counter of any self-respecting department store.” Every library staff member who meets the public would benefit from reading Sarah L. Wallace’s booklet, *Patrons Are People*, words of wisdom on public relations offered in palatable form. Sound advice on how to be a good employee is offered by P. F. Drucker in a *Fortune* article that bears the subtitle “What every young college graduate should know—and won’t be taught at school.” Failures in almost every field, Drucker maintains, are due to lack of ability to work with people, rather than lack of job skills.

While some staff members, professional and clerical, can carry on satisfactorily with only a brief introduction to their jobs, others will require an extensive training period either because of their limited experience in circulation work or because of the technical nature of their assignment. The tendency of library schools to place greater emphasis on philosophy and principles rather than on library techniques has increased the need for in-service training programs. E. A. Wight and St. John discuss the experience of libraries in training their staffs through such devices as staff meetings, classes, internships, and institutes. They note the limitations in applying the experience of industry to library situations, particularly to the professional staff. While formal training programs are sometimes used in large libraries, on-the-job training by the immediate supervisor is generally more effective. Further references to in-service training in libraries are found in McCoy’s bibliography.

The real test of a personnel program in the circulation department is in the day-to-day relationship between each staff member and his immediate supervisor. The department head and those assistants who direct the work of others should be selected for their ability to supervise no less than for their expert knowledge of books and library techniques. Fortunately, we have the assurance of personnel psychologists that the attitudes and skills that distinguish a good supervisor from a poor one can be learned and there is an extensive body of literature
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on the subject to which librarians may turn. Adra M. Fay's practical pamphlet on library supervision and the articles by Amy Winslow and E. B. Stanford apply sound principles of human relations to the library scene.

Numerous studies in business and industry have demonstrated that to be a good supervisor requires an understanding of the employee—his goals, his feeling, and his talents. A library supervisor should know that one of the most effective ways to win the loyalty of his staff is to make each employee feel that his work is both important and appreciated. In addition to possessing an employee-centered attitude, a library supervisor should be equipped with certain skills in dealing with people. He should be able to make clear assignments and to delegate authority; he should be competent to instruct and to check completed work; he should know the most effective ways to correct as well as to commend; and he should be able to discuss problems with staff members in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Frequent talks between a library staff member and his supervisor are invaluable in uncovering dissatisfactions, in clarifying misunderstandings, in pointing out strengths and weaknesses, and in adjusting inequities. The circulation assistant who is habitually late for desk duty, the assistant who is short-tempered with the public or dictatorial with his colleagues, the careless worker, or the "goldbrick"—all are in need of counseling if they are to be reclaimed to good membership on the circulation staff. Interviews may likewise reveal one of the most serious occupational hazards in circulation work—boredom. This is a condition found among highly skilled or professional employees whose work is not sufficiently challenging or varied to hold their interest. One of the chief values in using formal merit rating is that it requires periodic conferences of this kind.

In examining the staffing problems of a library circulation department a striking similarity is noted to those of a retail store. Both fields deal with people, merchandise, and records; in both there is the constant responsibility for satisfying the patron; and in both there is the danger of physical exhaustion brought about by long hours of exacting public contact. Such a similarity suggests that the circulation librarian might explore with profit a volume on retail personnel management such as that written by W. R. Spriegel and J. W. Towle.

If a circulation department is to perform its work to the greatest satisfaction of both patrons and staff it must have a well-organized personnel program. Getting and keeping good people and using them effectively requires first of all an analysis of the tasks that are to be
performed and the kinds of people that can perform them. Secondly, it requires care in selection, and thirdly, it requires the kind of day-to-day supervision that will insure that each employee performs his job well and is encouraged to develop to his greatest capacity.

References

1. Flexner, Jennie M.: *Circulation Work in Public Libraries*. Chicago, American Library Association, 1927. [The chapter on personality traits was written by W. W. Charters.]


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