

# The Changing Role of the Information Professional

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THE TERM *information professional* is preferable to the term *information manager* because it connotes a broader meaning describing professionals involved in all segments of the information transfer chain—from generation to use. In the last two decades many changes have taken place in the roles of information professionals. Seven broad areas of change are of particular interest.

## Role as Part of the Information Transfer Chain

The first of the broad changes is that the information professional's job is seen as an integral part of the larger information transfer chain, and this part increasingly interacts with other segments of that chain. The information transfer chain is traditionally seen as going from author to presentation at a conference, to publisher, abstracting and indexing services, libraries, online vendors, information-on-demand companies, and to the end user. Over the years, there has been increasing interaction and cooperation among groups within the information community, including sessions at other associations' conferences, joint sessions, and discussions between database producers and vendors, and among database producers. Recently we have gone past this interaction to a blurring of lines between the elements of the chain. Some database producers are retailing their databases, instead of wholesaling them to vendors. Some producers are developing software packages, such as the Institute for Scientific Information's Scimate and the Information

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Access Corporation's Search Helper which provide user-friendly interfaces—menu-driven search systems for ultimate users, rather than intermediaries. Information professionals who want to work for a publisher may find they are called upon to help acquire databases, develop new products, develop indexing systems, or perform any number of tasks not traditionally associated with publishing. As the segments in the information transfer chain interact, the professionals working for those segments are called upon to perform new and different roles.

### **The Need to Harness Technology and Management Tools**

The second major change area is the challenge of learning to use many new tools to improve job performance. Of course, among these tools are the various new technologies, which eliminate much of the detailed drudgery of processing and repetitive tasks, freeing time for more challenging work, such as reference and information analysis.

Microcomputers, videodisk, and optical disk are helping to make the organization of materials, storage, preservation, delivery of documents, and access to them much easier. Some of the most exciting developments are in the technologies. Other important tools are management skills, such as strategic planning, budget analysis, and interpersonal communication skills. The availability of software packages for planning, managing and forecasting makes a difficult job much easier. Teleconferencing has improved communications and saves time. Office automation, especially electronic mail and the introduction of executive work stations, is increasing productivity of managers. These are just a few of the many tools available to the information professional. The challenge is to learn to use them effectively and efficiently.

### **The Shift to Individual-Oriented Information Services**

The third change relates to entering Era IV of our age of information. In the A.D. Little, Inc., report for the National Science Foundation (NSF), *Into the Information Age* (Chicago: ALA, 1977), Vincent Giuliano describes three eras of information. The first refers to subject-oriented information needs filled by discipline-based services, such as *Chemical Abstracts Service*. The second is the mission-oriented era in which information services were developed to assist missions, such as putting a man on the moon. Giuliano contends that we are now in Era III of problem-oriented services which are designed to help solve problems, such as the energy shortage or pollution. I believe that we are entering Era IV of individual-oriented or customized information servi-

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ces. We are designing and repackaging products and services for individuals, either at home or in business and industry. This era introduces exciting new challenges for information professionals, to identify individual user's needs, develop new products, and market and sell them. Delivery of information to home-bound citizens, and the packaging of information for the scientist in industry are just two examples of these services.

### **The Need for New Directions in Education**

The fourth change, the need for new directions in education is self-evident. In such a rapidly changing field, educating future colleagues, sharpening skills, and keeping up with new developments are essential. The Department of Education's study on *New Directions in Library and Information Science Education* should provide insights into what is needed to educate and train our future colleagues. Continuing education is needed both for practicing information professionals and library educators. It is also needed for library users, who are called upon to adapt to the many changes and new services available. Educators need to have well-funded sabbaticals to return to practical experience every few years. All information professionals should remember that they, too, are educators.

One example of an effective cooperative project which may lead to new directions in continuing education and, it is hoped, to a program involving graduate education also is a new program initiated by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS). NCLIS is now involved in a pioneering program with IBM in which IBM has loaned NCLIS two information professionals to examine both the anticipated information environment of 1985-1990 and the impact of information technology on various segments of the population. These information professionals will also help identify those qualities that make technology more useful and acceptable. In a related project, IBM and NCLIS are working with the Drexel University College of Information Studies to develop a program that will encourage bright young students to enter the information field by providing an opportunity for work experience in industry. NCLIS is also currently examining ways to encourage companies to establish exchange programs with library and information schools. Cooperative projects among educational institutions, commercial companies, and government agencies at all levels are one way of expanding education programs.

### **The Changing Image of the Information Professional**

The fifth change in our role is that information professionals are being taken more seriously. In part because of the growing awareness of the importance of information in today's world, publicized through the media, the information profession is being seen as a profession similar to law and medicine. The business press is filled with articles about the need for skilled information workers and the growth of the industry. This should help both the public image of the profession and the self-image of those in it.

### **Ethical Commitment**

Sixth, there is a change in the ethical commitment of information professionals to society. This happens in many professions as each field evolves, but some of the issues being raised, such as censorship, are speeding this process. Information professionals need to continue to confront the issue of ethics in such areas as confidentiality of data and censorship. Because they work with information, which is a very powerful resource and tool, information professionals must safeguard personal and organizational data contained in files, and confidential data about the nature of requests and searches. Perhaps a "Hippocratic oath" is needed for our field. Information professionals have a very powerful and responsible role in society, and they must ensure that they continue to fill that role in an ethical manner.

### **Increased International Awareness**

Finally, information professionals are becoming increasingly aware of international information issues and the implications of them for their work. For example, transborder dataflow concerns and issues of reciprocity are being discussed widely in the library and information literature, as well as in the business and popular press. Several organizations have active international groups, such as the American Society for Information Science's Special Interest Group on International Information Issues or the American Library Association's International Relations Round Table.

### **Implications for Education**

What implications do these seven roles have for library and information science educators? One obvious implication is the need to

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rethink our curricula and entrance requirements. If we set out today to design a curriculum to educate information professionals for the 1980s and 1990s what would we put in it? Courses on organization theory, financial planning, strategic planning, and effective communications should be included. Much more interaction with business schools and departments of communication is also important.

A second implication is the need for increased resources to provide adequate hands-on experience for students, not just in searching databases, but in using microcomputers, participating in teleconferencing, and working with videodisks. Laboratory facilities, equipment and budgets for online search time may not be adequate to meet tomorrow's challenges. Increased cooperation with private sector groups can help. Why not a personal computer for every student and faculty member in every graduate school of library and information science?

A third implication is the need for increased continuing education of practitioners and for those teaching in our graduate schools. Many library schools lack sufficient funds to provide for participation in professional meetings, workshops and continuing education programs. It is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit faculty to teach in the information field because of competition from higher salaries in industry. This problem is likely to become exacerbated rather than alleviated. Cooperative projects with the private sector, both for-profit and not-for-profit, may be needed to get part-time faculty in some areas. Exchange programs and sabbaticals are needed. The mutual sharing of information and expertise should be beneficial to both educators and practicing information professionals.

A final implication is the need to increase participation in international programs, such as student exchange programs, new courses on international issues, and speakers from outside the United States. Library school faculty should be supported in programs to broaden their international experience and attend conferences or work outside the United States.

These changes in the role of the information professional and their implications for educators raise more questions than they answer, but it is important for these questions to be addressed and discussed. Continued, and increased, interaction among educators, practitioners, and professionals in related areas, such as business schools and computer science departments, should help produce answers to these questions. Information professionals are adapting well to these changing roles and will continue to meet the challenges ahead.\*

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