

Employment in the Online Industry: Personal Reflections on a Nontraditional Library Career

LINDA PANOVICH-SACHS

I WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS the philosophical connections between traditional librarianship and the nontraditional online profession and then set out similar and different skills in the two professions. As an added and important facet to this discussion of skills, I will discuss the for-profit nature of the majority of online companies and how this fact distinguishes working for a database producer or database vendor from working for a special library in a for-profit corporation. I will include a few pros and cons of working in the online industry as a brief evaluation. Agreement or disagreement with these pros and cons also depends on what company or what institution one is working for in all library/information fields. In each case personalities and management ability can make a job lovely or miserable in either world.

Lastly, a general list of typical activities of an online-industry marketing professional is included to help librarians and other information specialists see the activities that they may not realize they are already doing in their libraries. Alternatively, scheduling and promotional activities that I took for granted as normal because this was my first library/information job, will also be viewed; activities I now know to be outside most normal library functions. My hope is that new librarians and those looking for a change can reflect on my observations and get a clearer picture of how they might fit into this different but related information world.

Linda Panovich-Sachs is Assistant Engineering Librarian, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and formerly Marketing Coordinator, HARFAX Database Publishing, Cambridge, Massachusetts, a subsidiary of Harper and Row, Inc.

Background

After graduating from Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science in 1981, I took a nontraditional position as Marketing Coordinator of HARFAX Database Publishing, producer of HARFAX Industry Data Sources database and "electronic" subsidiary of Harper and Row, Inc. I must say that I am no longer working for HARFAX because of a family move and not because of any dislike of the industry or the company. I found database publishing work to be exciting and rewarding. Although my information experience cannot be totally separated from my marketing position at HARFAX, my observations on this new and developing industry are by necessity and utility industry-broad. There are more jobs at HARFAX than just the one I had, and there are scores of database producers and database vendors with various chains of command and distributions of skill. Therefore, I think it will be more useful to librarians to reflect on my knowledge of the entire industry.

As Marketing Coordinator, I traveled frequently to conferences, presentations and training sessions, and often met with representatives from many databases, and these contacts provide a basis for my opinions. Thus, this discussion will be bigger than my experience at HARFAX. It will not be, however, a scientific survey of professional positions and hierarchies within the online- or electronic-publishing industry; that comprehensive survey must be left to another day, and would by nature be limited, as much of that information is proprietary. In the same vein, I am not an expert; I worked in one position for one company for a short time. And yet, even with all these caveats, I feel my observations will serve some use, as I have done much personal reflection on all these professional issues. Opportunities for online professional positions will be growing for people who have certain interests and qualities, and there is a great deal of conceptual connection between library science and the online profession.

Philosophical Connections

Access to information is the basis of my concept of librarianship. Learning systematic ways of providing access was rooted in my reason for going to library school, and this interest grew into my choice of going into a nontraditional online professional position. I decided to go to library school after reflecting on my previous jobs as a teacher/curriculum designer and secretary and concluding I needed a change. Common skills and abilities in these two occupations and in library and

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information jobs include: (1) being a liaison or intermediary; (2) helping to organize materials so others can use them; (3) having an interest in a variety of subjects; and (4) being capable of handling more than one project at a time. My skills and interests were supported at Simmons College, where I had an excellent preparatory course in online searching, as well as core courses in reference, organization of knowledge, and various electives.

Librarians are skilled intermediaries. Librarians can talk to a person and translate his or her needs into a prescription for information likely to be found in a directory, handbook or report. This translating skill may be most important in science/technical reference positions, as scientists work in a focused research world and need to sort through mountains of published information possibly relevant to their work. Scientists often cannot effectively sift through all the paper because they lack the time. Using divergent thinking, the librarian sifts through publications and assists in bringing relevant, related materials together for the scientist's use. It is just this liaison relationship and sifting function that a good online database performs. A well-organized database which is carefully indexed and edited, assists the information scientist in using it as a reference tool just as using organization and indexing skills in regular print reference tools assists the information scientist in sifting through published material. Reference tools, paper-based or machine readable, classify the published material and help to limit the total number of publications the librarian must see. The librarian chooses among reference tools, further winnowing the pile of published material, to lead the scientist (or other end-user) to relevant reports, articles, proceedings, etc. In this way the levels of winnowing descend demonstrating the connection between the library and database worlds—the reference tool sifting the publications, the librarian/information specialist sifting the reference tools, and the scientist making the final relevance decision among a smaller, more manageable number of publications.

Skill Similarities and Differences

For those who wish to see the connection to day-to-day jobs in the online industry, I will explain some similar and different skills between the two professions. The skills necessary will vary from online job to online job, as well as from one database producer to another. At HAR-FAX, the Marketing Coordinator is in charge of sales promotion and training. There are other less visible positions with managing, index-

ing, editing, and computerization responsibilities—all of which require a variety of information skills and interests and which contribute to the final database product. Therefore, prospective applicants for jobs in the online industry should consider their likes, abilities and goals; and then applicants should evaluate and compare their interests to the skills needed in various online industry jobs.

Skills needed in a promotional position in the online industry are often the same skills acquired in librarianship, but they often remain unlabeled, or worse, undiscussed. It may seem obvious to state that one needs a sales sense to promote a product—even an information product. Sales sense is the ability to understand why a client needs the product, how to find prospective clients, or how to demonstrate the product to the client. These motivational or sales skills closely parallel the ability to understand a library patron, to conduct a reference interview to discover what the patron really needs, and to explain to them the benefits and limitations of the facts or reference tool provided. When I was an online trainer, librarians became my patrons and clients. I sought to discover their information needs, how the database might best address their needs, and how to teach them to use the database product. I was interacting with them the way they would, in turn, interact with their own patrons.

Investigative reference skills are required of both librarians and online professionals. Librarians hesitating over a career change should remind themselves that when trying to find the answer to a reference question, the thorough, curious librarian searches his/her mind among reference tools. Each reference librarian looks for the tool with the right combination of topic and access point, and if that one doesn't do it, librarians search repeatedly for another reference tool that could have the answer. This common pattern of tracking down the answer by thinking through appropriate tools and access points is similar to the process an online promoter uses. Promoters are always thinking of other user groups and professional associations to speak to, additional appropriate periodicals in which to place advertisements, or other relevant conferences to attend to publicize the database. A marketing coordinator is gratified by discovering a new professional association in an important city, or from listing the product in the preprints or exhibiting the product at the conference. In the same way, the reference librarian is pleased when the question is answered by the tool. Thus, able investigators are satisfied in both professions.

The librarian tailors the collection to local topics or to research interests to reflect the needs of the patrons. In like manner, the online

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promoter may strive to discover particular regional industrial interests. Further, promoters need to be aware of audience composition. For example, online trainers will augment their presentation if the audience contains both special librarians and academic librarians, because these librarians have different budgets, client demands, and document focuses. Academic librarians often are more interested in the reference works and periodical articles the database cites, while special librarians are more apt to be interested in hard-to-find market-research reports, journal special issues, and progress reports that are too esoteric and expensive for most academic libraries. This interest-tailoring skill is a strong part of librarianship as well as database promotion.

Another skill similarity is the need in both professions for people who can deal simultaneously with projects involving a great deal of detail work. Library work is very detail-oriented, and much of what a nonlibrarian might call a distracting range of activities, a librarian might call attractive and interesting. There is a comparable level of detail between database marketing positions and those of librarians. The librarian has multiple patrons and projects. The marketer has multiple conferences, presentations and exhibits to organize, which makes the library detail skill transferable to the online industry.

Factors to Consider in Choosing an Online-Industry Job

While a sales/motivational skill, an investigative skill, a local-interest skill, and a skill with details have been mentioned as evidence of the similarities between librarianship and positions in the online industry, there are aspects of promotional jobs within the online industry that are quite different from jobs in libraries. Some of the differences are an exaggeration or extension of the similarities. Even so, the differences should not be minimized when looking at a nontraditional information career. The first difference is related to the sales skills mentioned previously. There is an additional training aspect of most marketing positions that is rarely part of library education or the library profession. Background in teaching and curriculum development helps here. A teacher or curriculum developer is prepared to break up facts into lesson plans, and can provide the triple reinforcement of overhead transparencies, oral presentation and an information packet with the text outline. Understanding what makes a clear presentation, recognizing limits in attention spans and knowing how to keep a group from disintegrating are complex processes. These are complicated by inevitable differences in skill level and interest in each audience. A marketing coordinator—

the database expert—has to understand the novice's needs for explanation in nonjargon terms. These requirements put the trainer on the spot, because if users don't understand the presentation, they might not use the database.

A second difference between librarianship and the online industry—particularly for jobs outside of promotion—is that even though both professions have many details to consider, the online professional has fewer public contacts than the traditional librarian. While working the public-contact position at HARFAX, I went for weeks without seeing people other than my coworkers. Although I spent a great deal of time on the telephone to conference coordinators and online user-group representatives, I did not have the high number of interruptions evident in academic, public or school libraries. A special librarian, who has fewer patron interruptions than other traditional library types, is closest in this context to the online professional. In turn, most of my work was paper oriented: memos, letters and notes to document phone conversations were just some of the records I had to keep. Therefore, if you prefer personal contact to paper-oriented service, you would prefer the traditional library setting.

Planning in the online industry represents the third difference from traditional library jobs. The ability to plan one to two years in advance, to set priorities, to budget, and to deal with multiple simultaneous projects involving different time requirements was very important in my position. It was critical for me to spend from one-quarter to one-third of my work time just choosing what order I would do things in. This may sound like a ridiculous simplification, or even for some like a waste of time. Yet it became paramount for me to be able to juggle my tasks; and so I took time to assess priorities and my work flow, even when there were many things sitting on my desk. I could not just do the items in sequence in my in-basket and have a clear day's work finished. Another aspect of coordinating multiple simultaneous events is that most of them were in the future, which is not the case in a library. By the time a conference happened, I had less to do with it. Three to four months later, I was planning for the next year's conference. Six months' advance notice before online user-group presentations became ordinary—if my calendar was crowded—and a requirement of one month's advance mailing of notices to group members of any proposed meeting was minimum. I always had one to two years of conference and online training schedules penciled on my calendar, often including as many as twenty events in various stages of preparation on any one day. Each had several due dates—e.g., for exhibit submission, registration

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payments, or product outlines for the proceedings. A related difference was that in order to do the main portion of my job, I did not need to be on-site, whereas most librarians must be. I could work in the office, at home, or on the road. My main tasks were managing my small department and planning my job time, but, I also needed to see the bigger picture of the marketing plan, along with keeping track of the details.

Time-management skills are seldom emphasized to this degree in most library positions. You can do your projects and leave, with most library jobs involving some simultaneous tasks and some short-term planning. The degree of scheduling and planning necessary is a big difference between librarian's and an online promoter's position. Nevertheless, many librarians use management skills such as planning, budgeting and setting priorities—especially those librarians in high-level positions. In my opinion, many librarians who haven't done much planning would get more done and feel more organized if they were willing to spend one-eighth to one-fourth of their work time in setting priorities and laying plans.

Careful use of time leads into the fourth and most interesting difference between most library positions and positions in the online industry—the for-profit nature of the online industry. Most database producers and vendors are for-profit companies. The major difference between nonprofit enterprises such as libraries (operating at minimum cost for maximum public service) and for-profit information companies is simple: for-profit companies want to make money and they believe you have to spend money to make money. A corollary to this statement is that time is money. As an online professional, particularly in the promotional area, you cannot be afraid to spend money and you cannot act as though a company's budget appropriations are your housekeeping money. A more specific example of the difference is that librarians in the nonprofit sector might take the least expensive route from the airport to the conference because they are either paying for the conference expenses themselves or they are trying not to diminish their library budgets. An online professional working for a for-profit corporation will probably take the *most convenient* method of transportation and accommodation. Sometimes this is the cheapest, and sometimes—but not always—it is the most expensive way. Executives and marketers in for-profit companies realized it is important for people who are going to sell a product or represent their company to be rested, relaxed and well-prepared. Staying in the conference hotel and paying porters to carry mountains of equipment and handouts will help sell the product, and by association, will help to make money. Going the cheaper route

may save a few pennies, but such travelers arrive at the conference tired and perhaps late. The promoter will not be as effective if he/she has to trek through traffic each day of the conference to and from the cheaper hotel.

Related to this attitude of spending money to make money is the frequency of company-paid travel involved in a promotional position. Some online promoters travel two weeks out of a month. I enjoyed my traveling, but I only needed to travel about one week every other month. You must be aware of travel requirements, even for some of the nonpromotional employees. Going to a national conference can give you a stimulating view of broad professional issues. However, fear of flying or having many home responsibilities would eliminate this kind of promotional position from consideration.

A for-profit company also has you as their product's representative. You often are the only person the buyer sees. You must be gracious and have a pleasant manner so the clients feel the company cares about having their business. The online promoter has to take the initiative in matters of convenience and service. The opposite is also true, that any lack of amenity—coffee, heat, chairs, publicity, handouts—no matter whose responsibility—or less-than-gracious telephone manners will reflect on you, your product, and your company. Oftentimes the lack of an amenity is all the client remembers and the company's representative cannot take that chance. A for-profit company normally budgets for convenience and amenities at product demonstrations to project a good image and an online promoter should expect this.

A fifth difference related to the for-profit aspect of most database producers or vendors is the direct contact with the buyer. A traditional librarian has a higher number of patrons, but the online promoter has to deal with a few (but very important) paying customers. Most libraries are intermediary service units. Although many special librarians are in for-profit organizations, their patrons are the internal staff who in turn serve the paying customer. Most special librarians are seldom in direct contact with the paying customer. Even though academic, public and school libraries deal with their users directly, these libraries are usually nonprofit organizations, and so a different atmosphere exists there. For-profit information professionals—like information brokers, document-delivery agents, consultants, as well as database producers—usually deal directly with the paying customer. The transactions involve more eagerness and more expectations for one's money on the part of each. This is true even though the paying customer for the online professional is most often a librarian, because that librarian pays for part of the database every time he or she searches. When you represent

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for-profit companies at a conference, for example, it is best to be natural. Yet you are still “on stage” and conference work can be surprisingly exhausting.

A sixth and last difference is that the promotional areas of the online industry require graphic skills. An evaluative knowledge of such skills is very useful, even if you are not directly involved in designing or formatting brochures or exhibit booths. You will be the quality control and production manager for the printed material representing your company. In order to evaluate and administer the production of printed material, you must know simple design, mock-up, paper types, ink colors, and graphic designers’/printers’ jargon and expect to deal with time requirements. None of these skills is taught in library school, and together they represent very different job aspects than those required in most traditional library settings. I might add that these skills could be useful in any library, as it expands its outreach publicity.

These similarities and differences in skills have been listed for the reader’s reflection and as such, I have not judged either librarianship or the online profession to be better or worse. Choosing between jobs in the online industry or in librarianship depends on the individual’s assessment of his or her own strengths, in light of those skills central to each profession. Yet, even in the absence of an overall judgment, there are a few attributes of online industry jobs I would like to mention that might help a person choose *among* jobs within the industry.

Attributes of the Online Industry Experience

The first pro or con is that database-product quality varies considerably. If you found yourself in the position of representing a poorly organized database product, the job would be difficult. If you disagreed with the marketing plan, indexing policy, proofreading practices, or searchable fields of the database; or if you had no say in those policies; your job would be out of your control. In such a situation, you must sell a product you do not fully endorse or you must quit. In most for-profit promotional positions, you cannot hide in an administrative niche—as in some large institutions—and just do your own job well. If you are the promoter, you are on the front line and are the person to whom the clients complain. This shows why you should be a critical interviewer when job hunting in the online industry. Before accepting a position, you should ask any database producer about policies, database configuration, and decision-making procedures; and you should ask how you would be involved in each of these aspects.

The refreshing part is the obverse of the coin: If the database is a good product, it practically sells itself and is fun to talk about. Promoters who have been involved in the decision-making and understand and agree with the indexing policies can answer questions succinctly and feel confident that the database product will assist the buyer as outlined. It is especially comforting to be a trained librarian talking to librarians about a high-quality product. Even if a librarian's needs do not jibe with the database, you can say that with confidence and know that your product never claimed to answer all questions for all comers.

My second general attribute is that no matter how great the database product is, if you are giving the same presentation/training speech for the fifth time in five days, it is very difficult to sound fresh and excited. Applying teaching techniques can help in altering presentations for each audience's interest with the added advantage of making the presentation new and different for you. But the more frequently you travel and present, the more difficult this becomes. A satisfying division of time for me was presenting/traveling 25 percent of the time and administering the marketing department 75 percent of the time. Each person would need to reflect and then inquire of their possible database employer about this time balance.

To give an idea of what a marketing coordinator might do, I will list some typical tasks. Many of these were alluded to in the description of similarities and differences between traditional and nontraditional settings. I would like to restate that one-quarter to one-third of my work time was spent sorting priorities among the duties listed below:

- arrange upcoming conferences, presentations, and training sessions;
- coordinate operations at conferences, presentations and training sessions;
- represent the company at some conferences, presentations and training sessions;
- plan marketing department budgets and expenditures;
- coordinate marketing department correspondence;
- find database directories and place descriptions in them of your product;
- survey professional magazines for advertising opportunities and new technologies;
- supervise exhibit and brochure design;
- organize brochure mailings;
- write advertising copy of various lengths for insertion in journals, newsletters, brochures, directories, etc.;

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- develop presentation text: handouts, script and sample searches;
- explore opportunities for scholarly articles or product reviews for staff;
- find local professional associations (e.g., online user groups) around the country;
- make and receive phone calls on all these items and record the results;
- supervise marketing clerical staff;
- look for new database prospects; and
- advertise tape leasing feature.

Summary

Not everyone is good at all the tasks in an online promotional position and not all promotional positions are the same. Also, there are a variety of nonpromotional jobs with database producers and vendors—such as software or computer specialists, database designers, indexers, editors, or managers. Many of the skills—especially the most conceptual—are transferable from skills learned within a traditional library setting. A source of satisfaction and enjoyment for me in any job is the diversity of tasks performed and subjects explored. Diverse tasks and subjects are evident in librarianship as well as in the online industry; the tasks and subjects are only a little different in each. Now that I am an academic librarian, I can see that both traditional and nontraditional jobs are attractive. I hope to enter into a bit of both worlds by consulting while working in an academic library.

Traits that I feel are of overall importance in a promotional online position are: online searching ability, training skills, graphics knowledge, organizational abilities, management skills, and above all, patience and tact. Not all good online professionals are librarians by training and not all librarians would be good online professionals. But, the two have many conceptual connections and both groups can learn from the other: online professionals may learn more about library-specific user needs and librarians may become more proactive, less reactive—becoming interactive in professional as well as technology-based ways.

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