There is general agreement that libraries have both an informational and an educational function. The extent and depth of each function will vary depending on the library's perception of its mission and its community's needs. The definition of its mission causes each library to react differently to the needs of its users.

The broadest definition of literacy is that an individual have the skills needed to function effectively in society; by this definition, the skills and information the library can provide on employability are part of the overall drive to have a literate society. The question of the role of the library in relation to the employability of its users is not a question that arises in good times or in stable times. However, the last ten years have been times of great change and very unsettled employment. The computerization of the office, the automation of factories, the baby boomers hitting their thirties, the energy crisis, soaring imports, and the graying of America are all factors in the destabilized work picture.

It was not very long ago that career decisions were made by persons in their midteens who, for the most part, continued to do the same job for all their working lives—or at least that was the expectation. Radical changes were rare and often perceived as inappropriate when made. But the more people do something the more acceptable it becomes. This applies to job and career changing.

Due to plant closings and moves to other states or countries, changing production techniques, jobs ceasing to exist, and whole new categories of jobs, employment is no longer static. The result is that a person

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may expect to make five or more job or career changes. The expansion of many surviving businesses into large multinational companies and the accompanying complexity of hiring structures to meet governmental regulations have changed the way many people get a job: it is ineffective just to file an application with the local major employer and wait to be called to work.

Provision of the information and skills needed to cope with this changing working world is an appropriate activity for the information services section of the library. The needs of this type of user fall into three categories: (1) career choice or career change information; (2) job-hunting skills; and (3) career development skills. With these goes the need to disseminate information about educational opportunities to enhance the user's skills since this type of development is generally perceived by the user to be concurrent with the effective development of other employability skills.

These are not radical new areas in which no services have been provided. In the past, information on all of these topics existed within a general public library collection and the good reader adviser pulled them out. Few, if any, public libraries lack items that deal with career choice. Most, for instance, have the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* from the U.S. Department of Labor, the local newspaper (and perhaps the nearby larger city newspapers), a college guide, and a couple of résumé books. However, the depth and the diversity of the needs of the many persons involved in job displacement, career change, and initial job hunting force the consideration by library administrators of ways to better deal with this general area. The exploration of possible ways to improve service has been aided by the availability of Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) monies.

The ACE (Adult Continuing Education) program of the Forsyth County Public Library system in Winston-Salem, North Carolina is an example of the use of LSCA seed money to start a long-term program. (This is cited not because it is one of the older programs but because as its head since 1978, the author is most familiar with it.) The ACE project was started in fiscal year 1976 by Nancy Doyle Bolt and received three years of federal funding before it was absorbed totally into the library budget; it has remained an intrinsic part of that budget ever since. ACE was begun at the request of two different Forsyth County agencies: the Winston-Salem Chamber of Commerce and the Academic Urban Affairs Consortium. The former expressed the community's need for coordination of efforts to aid the adult seeking work; the latter needed to determine what educational information adults want and what was
being offered to meet those needs. ACE has grown from serving an average of twenty users a day to serving an average of eighty-five users or more, depending largely on the current local employment picture. ACE is a broker of programs and options available in the community. In this way cooperation among many agencies is assured and the library functions in its more comfortable role as the provider of neutral information. The Adult Continuing Education program has always included those options related to employability partly because of the initial mandate but mostly because these are what adults need to know and want to learn.

Two Approaches to Service Implementation

The first approach to service implementation adds material and resources to the present collection leaving it within the traditional structures but increasing its visibility to both staff and potential users. Ohio’s Books/Jobs Program started out using this approach and grew. This approach works well with small collections or as a first step when resources for large, more intensive projects are lacking.

For example, the Wake County Public Library was one of the first in North Carolina to offer a special program (Adult Learning Information Center) in employability skills. Wake County no longer has this program but has continued to cater to the needs of the job seeker by buying heavily in this area and by offering a self-service section of job listings, tips on job hunting, and the do-it-yourself career guidance tool OCC-U-SORT.3

The second approach pulls existing material out into a separate collection and assigns it a special subject status. This approach requires more commitment of resources in terms of space, technical services, and specialization of staff. It is exemplified by Learner’s Advisory/Job Information Services at New York Public Library and ACE at Forsyth County Public Library. Both these programs have separate departmental status within the library; this includes not only staffing but such mundane but necessary things as separate phone lines, work space, publications, and community relations. Both have maintained a continuity of leadership in service delivery that enables the programs to be both the referral of choice for other job service-providers and effective advocates for those seeking both basic and advanced employability skills.4 A hybrid of the two approaches is found in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, where collections are at the branches but the specialist visits on a regularly scheduled basis to provide in-depth services to prescheduled users.5
The Need for Special Skills

A commonality of skills is needed by the professionals who advise those seeking employability skills through the services of the reader’s adviser, the educational broker, or the information and referral (I&R) librarian. All these positions require a thorough knowledge of the resources available including both print and nonprint materials, good reference interviewing skills, and ability to present materials so as to encourage use while at the same time remaining neutral about the person’s final selection from options provided in response to their questions. There is in this type of reference no right answer, only a selection of possible choices. This in turn engenders a need for an open, nonjudgmental attitude on the part of the librarian (or other professional) toward the user’s questions, needs and goals, and decisions.

Many of the answers to the questions of the “recareeerer” of novice job hunters are best found in a thorough knowledge of local resources and personal contacts. The use of community resources (while not previously unheard of) now becomes one of the best ways to respond to a user’s need. The system of reciprocal referral among agencies can improve the library’s image as a usable resource. It will also involve the librarian in the structures of other service providers. This can be seen in Enoch Pratt Free Library’s participation in Baltimore’s Community Action program or Forsyth County’s participation on the advisory boards of the Winston-Salem Urban League (Women in Non-traditional Jobs Programs) and Forsyth Technical College (Individualized Learning Centers) as well as membership in the Winston-Salem Personnel Association, which motivates personnel officers in the local area.

Choice and flexibility are important for any adult learner. Learning to find or change jobs in the work environment of the 1980s is of necessity a preoccupation of adults who find themselves (or those they know) to be burned out, displaced, on the outplacement list, or without the career mobility they expected. Tools for coping are part of the information resources of libraries. While not every person seeking increased employability skills will use the library, its anonymity, familiarity, and neutrality will appeal to a certain percentage. (This is no different from any other library service, each of which attracts only part of the total users.)

This user group will need different levels of service at different stages of their career development process. Some may just need basic job-hunting or job-holding material such as that in the Ohio/Jobs Project or that which is repeatedly cited in basic lists. The person
preparing for employment will also find it helpful if the library is able to provide public access computers and typewriters. At another point they might want some major career interest evaluation or selection aids that come in a variety of forms including the pen-and-pencil, no-score variety, the interpreted-by-a-psychologist test, and computer databases such as SIGI PLUS, COIN, GIS (to identify some of the more commonly used self-scoring programs). The purpose of all this variety is to provide the user with options in the selection of a career; this in turn necessitates the provision of ample information on the careers themselves and on decision-making skills.

Job hunting requires other skills in self-appraisal and presentation. These needs are met not just with print and nonprint material but with workshops on how to do it (that is, become employed), critiqued résumés, dress for success, and successful interviewing. These should be presented by personnel officers or other community experts. These same resource people can aid in the presentation of other support workshops on financial aid for the adult student, selection of the right continuing education program to meet individual goals, or retirement as a career transition. This group activity can lead to other support activities that encourage the job hunter to continued effort such as job clubs.

Bethlehem Public Library in Delmar, New York, has developed a system for the delivery of specialized job-hunting support. They provide the facilities and the guidance needed for the job seeker to form a successful job club. A job club meets once or twice a week to encourage its members in the job-hunting process, exchange job leads, and practice job-hunting and interviewing skills.

Most adult learning is triggered by transitions in an adult's career. It may involve skills needed to obtain a new job, to maintain the current position, or to get a promotion. These common needs have led most programs that deal with employability skills to be aware of all the educational opportunities relating to their users' needs. This need in turn creates a whole different network of community connections among those groups offering adult learning opportunities. Thus there are interlocking boards and cooperative consortia such as AREA (Admissions Recruiters in Education Association). Both Forsyth County Public Library ACE and Greensboro Public Library North Carolina LEO (Lifetime Educational Opportunities) are members of this five-county organization, and their membership ensures that the recruiters for two-year and four-year schools in the area are informed and sensitive to the needs of the adult learner. The recruiters in turn
provide information on new offerings and ways to ease the entry of adults into the educational world. They are also excellent resources for back-to-school programs or paying for skill upgrading when the employer will not. This educational gap is also why many of the library programs meeting the needs of the job hunter or career changer are closely identified with either educational brokering or adult learner projects.11

The concept of the library as a resource for employability skills has gone from the innovative stage to being part of the standard role of the library in providing the community with needed information. This becomes clear when the widespread geographic locations of such programs (Spokane to Newark and Pascagoula, Mississippi, to Westchester County, New York) as well as the variety of populations are considered. Programs of this type are found in rural upstate New York and in metropolitan areas of declining and expanding employment. Statewide funding in New York and local funding in North Carolina, Ohio, and Illinois provide the hard monies needed to sustain these services and to refine them into forms that can be attempted by most libraries at reasonable costs. These operating programs provide other libraries with a selection of approaches from which they may choose the parts that best meet the level of their users' needs and best utilize their communities' resources.

References

2. These factors are common knowledge, but, at times, one tends to look at them separately rather than as concurrent contributors to the problem.
5. Patterson to Gehlen, personal communication, 1979.
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9. The trademarks SIGI PLUS, COIN, GIS are owned by Education Testing Service, Bell and Howell, and Time Share Corp. respectively.


Additional References


