Reorganizing Canadian Libraries: A Giant Step Back from the Front

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ABSTRACT

THE NAGGING QUESTION OF WHO DOES WHAT in libraries has been exacerbated
in recent years by significant restructuring initiatives, driven by ongoing
budgetary pressures and constant technological change. In the study re-
ported here, senior administrators as well as middle managers and front-
line librarians in public and academic library settings were asked to de-
scribe the nature of organizational change in their workplaces and how
new technologies affect or fit into the pattern of restructuring.

BACKGROUND

In the 1990s, libraries are undergoing unprecedented change deriv-
ing from a combination of accelerating prices of library materials and
space, an enormous increase in the amount and types of materials avail-
able, and rapid developments in electronic technologies (Cummings et al.,
1992). Library decision-makers have employed a number of common strat-
egies to manage this change, particularly with respect to the deployment of
staff. For example, following the passage of Proposition 13, a limitation on
property tax that severely curtailed the revenue of local governments, Willett
(1992) found that, although managers in four California libraries varied in
their ability to represent their organizations well to funders and maintain
good relations with their staff, all of them attempted to deal with declining
resources by restructuring library services, reducing programs and materi-

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als, cutting back on staff, and deprofessionalizing work (i.e., assigning tasks formerly done by professional librarians to less expensive nonprofessional staff). Similarly, Crist (1994) reported that six academic library administrators, who were interviewed about their approaches to organizational change, used managerial strategies that included reducing the staff complement, redeploying professional staff away from functional roles such as reference, and establishing work teams in order to flatten the organizational structure (i.e., reducing the proportion of managerial positions and pushing decision-making responsibilities lower in the staff hierarchy). Neal and Steele (1993) described similar methods in the Indiana university libraries, where reorganization was designed on the basis of the assumption that continued budgetary restraint and a move from "automated to electronic status" would involve a "contraction of staff size and greater expectations of staff" (p. 93). Each of these examples illustrates that current managerial practice in libraries almost inevitably involves staff redeployment, especially through the assignment of greater responsibility to staff working in the lower-paid, lower-status ranks of the organizational hierarchy. Too, as a result of the use of new technologies, these staffing decisions take place within a context where many of the traditional work roles performed by library workers are being altered significantly.

Expectations concerning what an investment in new technologies should achieve for libraries, and the perceptions of library staff as to the impact and efficacy of restructuring initiatives, have not been widely explored. Although several recently published papers suggest that libraries should be organized differently in order to respond to the stresses of a rapidly changing external environment, few provide any empirical evidence to support the efficacy of new organizational forms. Most rely on interviews or mail surveys of a few library directors, case studies of a small group of similar libraries or, in some instances, a description of the change process undertaken in a single library (see for example, Jacobson, 1994; Lawson et al., 1989; Shapiro & Long, 1994). In the study reported here, an effort was made to provide a somewhat more substantial base of observations about the perceived connections among restructuring, staffing, and technological change in libraries. The investigation involved face-to-face interviews with directors of academic and public libraries, followed by a survey questionnaire mailed to librarians working in major academic and public library systems across Canada. This project builds on the findings of an earlier study of retrenchment in Canadian academic libraries during the 1970s and early 1980s (Auster, 1991).

METHOD

At the outset of the present study, seven directors of libraries participated in in-depth interviews, including five chief executive officers who

head large public library systems in three Canadian provinces, as well as two directors of libraries who are the senior managers of major academic libraries in two Canadian provinces. Following the interviews, 182 academic and public librarians completed a ten-page mail survey questionnaire which explored their perceptions of the impact of library restructuring and their assumptions about the intended uses of new information technologies.

Sample

The largest urban public library systems in Canada are represented by administrators who participate in CALUPL (Council of Administrators of Large Urban Public Libraries). In the first part of the study, five of these administrators were contacted and agreed to a two-hour personal interview. They were approached because their libraries are located in different parts of the country and vary somewhat in size. As well, two chief librarians from CARL-member libraries (Canadian Association of Research Libraries) agreed to take part. They were included because their libraries are located in different parts of the country and represent two of the larger academic library systems in Canada. The first investigator traveled to each of these libraries and tape-recorded the interviews during which the directors were asked to describe their views on the management of change, particularly their expectations regarding staffing needs in the present and into the future.

In the second phase of the study, the senior administrators of thirty-three CALUPL-member libraries located in all provinces except Québec[1] and the chief librarians of twenty-one university library systems included in the membership of the Canadian Association of Research Libraries were asked to permit members of their staff to complete a mailed survey questionnaire. Some administrators permitted the researchers to contact library employees directly while others preferred to distribute questionnaires personally to the members of their staff.[2]

Questionnaires were directed toward three employee groups: "front-line professionals" who are MLS-trained librarians working at the lower professional end of the organizational hierarchy, especially those in public services whose jobs involve face-to-face contact with users; "middle managers" who are experienced librarians holding positions involving managerial responsibilities at the mid-level of the organizational hierarchy, such as branch heads or heads of medium- to large-sized departments, especially in the areas of public services, technical services and systems; and "senior managers" who are individuals with considerable managerial experience holding top-level positions within the organization, such as chief executive officers, chief librarians, or directors of libraries and their deputies.

Respondent Profile

Questionnaires were returned from respondents working in twenty-eight of the CALUPL systems, representing an institutional response rate of 85 percent. Questionnaires were returned by respondents working in nineteen of the CARL systems, for an institutional response rate of 90 percent. Thus, information about organizational restructuring was received from nearly all the large public and academic library systems in English Canada.

Of the 182 respondents who returned the questionnaires, 72 percent are women and 28 percent men, a distribution that closely reflects the distribution of male and female MLS graduates in Canada. Their median age was in the range between forty-one and forty-five years. Thirty-one percent worked in academic library systems and 69 percent in public libraries. The different strata of management were evenly represented in the sample. Forty percent of the questionnaires (seventy-four) were returned by front-line professionals (most of whom perform primarily non-managerial work in public service, reference, or children's librarian positions), 30 percent (fifty-four) were returned by middle managers (primarily area heads or branch managers), and 30 percent (fifty-four) by senior managers (chief, deputy, or associate library directors or heads of very large divisions).

The Survey Instrument

With the help of eight experienced librarians working in two academic libraries and a public library system, a ten-page questionnaire was compiled and pretested. The purpose of the questionnaire was to allow respondents a chance to describe their organizations' change attempts from their own point of view, with sufficient prompts through the questions to enable them to focus their attention on particular managerial strategies. Although some close-ended categorical and scaled items were included in the questionnaire, the majority of the questions were open-ended,[3] allowing respondents the opportunity to elaborate on their views if they wished.

The librarians who took part in the study were asked to list the most pressing issues facing their library system and to describe any steps being taken in their organizations to address these issues. Next, they were asked to indicate the extent to which restructuring is underway in their library system and its relative importance. Respondents, in whose libraries restructuring was planned, taking place, or recently completed, were asked to indicate the extent and nature of changes arising from the restructuring. They were asked whether they had observed reduced staffing levels in their library systems and, if so, in which functional areas or departments, in which staff groups, and with what effects. They were also asked to describe the types of technologies in which their libraries have been

investing and, for each type, the expected outcomes of the investment. They were asked to include information about their age, sex, and the nature of their positions. Finally, they were invited to discuss any issue facing their library system which they regarded to be of particular concern and invited to add any other comments.

RESULTS

The Interviews

The recorded interviews with the library directors were transcribed, providing a rich source of background information about the motivation of senior decision-makers who bear much of the responsibility for the direction of change in their libraries. All seven were concerned about the future health of their libraries, both with respect to their financial stability and their political viability (within the setting of local government or the universities in which they are located). All suggested that libraries are losing their competitive edge due to financial cutbacks which have resulted in a decline in services and staff. All shared the view that the future of libraries depends on whether these institutions are able to capitalize on the opportunities presented by new technologies.

New Roles for Librarians. According to the directors, the situation facing libraries demands change; consequently, the proper preoccupation of professional librarians should be the management of change. A recurring theme in their remarks is that it is no longer enough for librarians to simply fit new technologies into the traditional framework of professional roles and activities because these roles and activities are no longer valid. As one of them put it, "the change that's happening isn't at all like the automation change we went through when we took something we did one way and did it another way. It's a fundamental kind of change to who we are and what we do." This type of reasoning justifies shrinkage in the proportion of professional librarians within the total complement of library staff. One of the directors claimed, for example, that rather than hiring new graduates from library schools, it makes more sense to upgrade library assistants because: "[New graduates] . . . don't have the kind of skills we need. There is no recognition that this is a political world and that librarianship is not a sheltered place where you can escape reality . . . we are customer driven . . . we are politics driven. This is not some kind of aristocracy."

Another director admitted that when positions become vacant she asks: "Is there some way to fill this job other than with a librarian for whom there is so much overhead?" All seven directors regard professional positions as a great expense to the library requiring major scrutiny, not only with respect to productivity but according to new criteria about the actual jobs to be performed. As one of them said, the distinction between librarians and nonprofessional staff has become "very blurred. The real difference is that

the librarians get paid more." All indicated that, in return for the library's investment in professional staff, they want something more and different from that which most librarians were trained and once expected to provide. While each director used somewhat different words to describe just what that "something different" might be, all agreed that the correct role for professional librarians is to provide leadership and training, vision and goal setting, quality assurance, and performance measurement.

The directors present a picture of a new professional role for librarians who are increasingly expected to make things happen through their work behind the scenes in evaluating, training, and supervising those who work with the public. "It's the idea of manager as coach and facilitator." In this organizational model, librarians are expected to drive productivity, not by interacting directly with users but by orchestrating the delivery of public service through other less expensive staff.

The Perfect Record and New Approaches to Collection Development. The directors expect librarians to enforce "realistic" standards in cataloging. An academic library director commented:

> Just like there are bibliographers who buy books that no one will ever read, there are catalogers who will correct records that no one will ever read. . . . There is a polishing that is going on in terms of access and we have people who are just determined [that everything will be included in the catalog]. I just don't think we will ever be able to afford to do that.

Also on the subject of the "perfect record," a public library director observed: "I think we worry far too much about that sort of thing in public libraries. You know, 95 percent is good enough. It's double your costs to get the other 5 percent. It's the diminishing returns argument."

Automation makes it possible to meet an acceptable standard of cataloging with fewer and less expensive staff. In addition to the usual use of cataloging utilities and other sources of cataloging copy, the directors also recommended loading commercial databases of cataloging records for bibliographic sets without reference to accuracy of local holdings or local revision of records. Through such means, cataloging can be transformed into a largely clerical process wherein the only role for the librarian is supervisory. Given this expectation, it is not surprising that the directors regard librarians to be "wasted" in cataloging. As one put it, "I could see a librarian managing the catalogers but not doing the cataloging. It's just not that interesting."

Cataloging is not the only target for efficiency improvements. Although most of the directors agreed that collection development is the "last bastion" of traditional librarian work, they suggest that a more "businesslike" approach is in order, meaning that librarians should spend less time pursuing this activity:

> I don't think that collection development is particularly less impor-
> tant and I don't think that approval plans are the answer, but I also
> think that we can't do it in such a leisured, scholarly way . . . . I think
> that the knowing, the cultivating relationships with vendors, the
> knowing the canon are not the requirements they were . . . . To build
> a collection for the researcher of the future? We simply cannot do
> that.

This perceived need for increased efficiency may eventually lead to
outsourcing. Recently, a well-publicized and controversial decision in Ha-
waii sees nearly all of the State Public Library System's book selection
outsourced to a private vendor, a move which has "infuriated librarians who
fear evisceration of a central part of their professional identity" (Oder, 1997,
p. 28).

Refitting Public Services. The centrality of the user to the survival of libraries
was a recurring theme in the interviews. As one director noted, "every
management book you pick up . . . will tell you that the [companies] that are
concerned about their customers are the ones that are going to stay in
business." This credo has had serious implications for staff deployment.
According to one of the directors, "public service has to be number one so
I have deployed all of the bodies that I could possibly find from nonpublic
services areas." These "bodies," however, are not necessarily librarians. In-
deed, the opinion of many of the directors is that librarians are wasted on
the "desk" and that "really sharp people" who are nonlibrarians should be
shifted into public service roles.

The view of these senior managers is that librarians' direct contact with
the public should be limited to two areas: reference questions, which can-
not be managed by the regular staff, and online searching. The latter is left
in the librarians' job description because, as one put it, "with their educa-
tion, they are quicker to train and faster at it." Nonprofessional front line
staff should be given more "freedom to act," said one, instead of "having
them run to mommy if there's a problem. They've got the skills themselves,
if we provide them with some training." This management strategy is inter-
esting because, depending on one's point of view, it can be regarded either
as exploitation or a virtue. It is a means by which the work of library support
staff can be "upgraded" in terms of prestige and responsibility but probably
not in terms of pay.

Each of these examples illustrates that pushing tasks down the organi-
zational hierarchy is an important element of the strategic thinking of se-
nior library managers. Through this mechanism, traditional functions that
were at one time the responsibility of professional librarians are now as-
signed to less expensive nonprofessional staff. Moreover, the directors are
attracted to technologies which allow the public to perform routine library
duties themselves. As a result, tasks that were at one time performed by
library staff at the bottom of the organizational pyramid may be pushed

entirely out of the waged work structure in libraries. According to one senior manager, "routine public service, such as checking out materials or placing holds, should be given to machines."

Not only are lower-level tasks being reallocated to the public domain, but users are expected to undertake their own reference database search-ing. This activity is a hybrid of paper index searching for which users used to be responsible after training (at least in academic libraries) and online searching which is supposed to be the preserve of the specialist—i.e., a professional librarian. The directors acknowledge that this transition may not always be entirely smooth. As one of the directors who wants to encour-age the public to use electronic reference sources themselves points out, library staff are reluctant to have users undertake this task because "they just don't have a lot of confidence in the public." While staff may be concerned that users may have trouble using electronic reference sources on their own, staff reluctance to embrace the self-service ethic may also arise from their concerns about job security. Such concerns may be well founded since, according to one of the public library directors, "what we are looking for as a savior in the staffing area is self service."

The Standardization of Work. The elimination of professional and clerical staff positions for budgetary reasons coincides with a managerial interest in "streamlining" and "standardization." With fewer people in the library la-bor force, the directors expressed a concern about the need to standardize practice, centralize control, amalgamate units and programs, and generally reduce the size and variability of their organizations. Processes, services, or products that can be characterized as "specialties," "branch-specific," "indi-vidualized," or "one-off" are regarded as too expensive and inefficient to maintain, just as is the presence of professionally classified positions in unit or subunit supervision.

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a similar decline in the level of specialization. Auster (1991) reported a decrease in subdepartments, a reduction in middle management, and the emergence of the "super man-ager" in Canadian academic libraries during that period. This approach to restructuring has continued in the 1990s as directors point to the ineffi-ciency of having "too many librarians in charge of, or assistant to the librar-ian in charge of, smaller units." These positions are now being handed off to senior paraprofessionals to manage, leading one director to ask "where else are you going to train your next middle managers and CEOs?" (who arise, presumably, from the ranks of the professional librarians).

Results of the Survey Questionnaire

According to Hardy (1990), "retrenchment is a strategy that is employed primarily in response to economic pressures" (p. 5). Like the directors who took part in these interviews, respondents who completed the mailed

questionnaires identified inadequate financing as the major factor behind library restructuring. In fact, 80 percent of the librarians who returned the questionnaires described financial pressure as one of the most pressing issues facing their library systems. In order to deal with this pressure, restructuring was reported to be either under consideration, underway, or recently completed in 61 percent of the academic libraries and 79 percent of the public libraries included in the study (according to the senior managers in these settings).

How is Change Achieved? Seventy percent of the respondents reported that strategic planning, reengineering, and/or the review of organizational priorities comprise part of the managerial response to the major problems facing their institutions. As a result, many respondents reported a change in strategic direction in their libraries. In fact, according to the senior managers, shifts in strategic direction are either contemplated or underway in 86 percent of the public libraries and 72 percent of the academic libraries included in the study.

Twenty-two percent of the respondents reported that restructuring involves, or will involve, a decrease in service levels including: reductions in hours of opening; cutbacks in services such as library tours; closure of branch libraries, especially smaller ones, in favor of larger branches that are more geographically dispersed; curtailing or eliminating bookmobiles; and closure of units such as children's departments. Like the interviewed directors who described the need to eliminate overspecialization, the questionnaire respondents reported greater centralization and consolidation of activities in their libraries through the amalgamation of public service/reference points, the bringing together of "families of service points," and even altering the "point of service" itself by switching from a general reference point with fixed staff to a floating staff who travel between floors of the library to the locus of user need. In many library systems, independent units are losing their autonomous status and being incorporated into larger departments. This situation is particularly true of children's, government documents, interlibrary loan, and A-V departments. Greater centralization was also described with respect to administrative functions (such as support services); the combining of acquisitions, reserves, and interlibrary loans; and the amalgamation of circulating and reference collections.

Like the interviewed directors, the questionnaire respondents reported an increasing use of technology in cataloging and reductions in cataloging standards in order to bring down costs. Others, particularly those working in academic libraries, reported that cataloging and technical services are being outsourced through the purchase of service from outside vendors, thereby allowing internal staffing reductions in these areas.

Most of the respondents also reported a significant shift in the nature of their library's services and, to a lesser extent, a shift in the types of clients

to be served by their institutions. For instance, 13 percent of the respondents described an increasing emphasis in their libraries on services for clients who can pay, and 17 percent anticipate a greater focus on services for business clients, especially in public library settings, while nearly 40 percent referred to a shift in service toward a greater emphasis on the "primary users" of the library.

Staffing

Eighty-six percent of the questionnaire respondents reported that restructuring has resulted, or will result, in reduced staffing levels in their library systems. Nearly 50 percent reported an increase in the deployment of work teams in their organizations which (as one respondent put it) "take on much of the work formerly done by senior staff before cuts." Also, as was reported by some of the interviewed directors, the questionnaire respondents suggest that users will be taking on more of the work that has been performed by library staff. This transfer of work is due, in part, to technologies that allow for automated self-checkout, customer self-placed holds, self-service renewals, as well as computer-aided reference tools—i.e., catalogs, indexes, lists, and even an online help/suggestion box. Linked to this self-service initiative is the increasing presence of user fees. According to one respondent, fees are aimed at "those who don't wish to invest their time in learning to use the self-serve services." Another predicted that "the self-serve ethos will soon eliminate most mediation by librarians unless it is on some pay-for-help basis."

As staff complements decline, many of the library personnel who remain on the payroll are being redeployed, their duties streamlined and merged, and their job descriptions rewritten. As a result, the questionnaire respondents point out, the staff who have survived organizational downsizing must work harder and assume a variety of new tasks, often working in more than one department. As one respondent put it, "staff are becoming generalists, specializing in one area and being trained to also work in other areas." Consistent with the comments of the interviewed directors, another of the questionnaire respondents noted that "there are fewer specialized jobs tolerated in a homogeneous organization." Also consistent with the interviewed directors' views, the questionnaire respondents predict an overall reduction in the need for professional librarians. A senior public library manager who returned the questionnaire spelled out the following blunt assessment:

> The role of the professional librarian is becoming redundant. Other levels of staff can do their jobs. The need is for managers. The key roles are in management. Unless librarians can become managers they are faced with extinction. Paraprofessionals can do most of what professionals used to be needed for. . . . Catalogers are today's dinosaurs and librarians are becoming tomorrow's dinosaurs.

The Anticipated Impact of Technological Change

The questionnaire respondents have high expectations for returns on the investments made in new technologies. Generally speaking, these expectations fall into two categories: (1) improvements in the library's "product," and (2) improvements in the library's efficiency. The respondents view technology both as a means to increase the availability and effectiveness, even glamour, of information resources and services, thereby making the library more attractive to its customers, and as a means to achieve savings in the library's operations, especially in labor costs, as various functions are eliminated, changed, or downgraded. There is nothing oblique about this analysis. Rather, the relationship between technological change and labor is quite direct in the eyes of many of those who took part in the study. With respect to cost savings, for example, one of the senior managers wrote, "technology democratizes organizations as fewer high-end and low-end staff are needed and management can be thinned." Another observed, "better technology removes less skilled work."

Respondents were asked to list the types of technologies in which their libraries had made significant recent investments and the purposes for which these investments have been made—i.e., the expected outcomes of investments in each type of technology. The major categories of technologies in which libraries invest (see Table 1) are not particularly startling. For instance, respondents from most of the participating libraries reported significant investments in CD-ROM technology, including CD-ROM networks, in a large percentage of academic libraries. Most regarded this technology as providing the means for both users and librarians to achieve better results for their search efforts. Several respondents also predict that it will decrease the need to provide user assistance and limit the role of library staff to teaching patrons how to retrieve information themselves. CD-ROM technology is not only expected to "eliminate the need for expensive online searching" but also to speed up cataloging through the elimination of most original cataloging.

Respondents from a number of libraries, although proportionally more from academic than public libraries, also reported significant investments in technologies to support the library staff, such as personal computers and LAN access, in order to increase staff efficiency and effectiveness. For instance, PCs with network connections give staff access to most other facets of staff automation. In academic libraries, the dissemination of PCs has increased the number of resources to which staff have access: e-mail, the Internet, integrated systems, CD-ROM, and any other databases available through networks. Investment in interlibrary loan/document delivery technology was also mentioned but only by respondents from academic libraries. The components of this technology included such items as scanners, fax machines, online access to databases, and specialized software for the

Table 1.

RECENT INVESTMENTS IN TECHNOLOGIES

Technology Type	Academic Libraries %	Public Libraries %
CD-ROM	100	88
Integrated Library Systems	78	92
Electronic Information Resources	89	65
Staff Automated Resources*	78	50
Telephone	6	46
Dial-in Access	6	42
Interlibrary Loan	56	-
Self-Serve Checkout	17	23

* Staff automated resources include PC/LAN access, e-mail, Internet access, office automation, voice mail

communication of interlibrary loan requests. Non-reference uses of the Internet included electronic messaging systems which were reported by respondents from two public libraries as a means for delivering notices through e-mail to individual users about overdues and holds.

References to significant investments in telephone technology were limited almost exclusively to public libraries. Much like emerging electronic messaging systems, new telephone systems allow libraries to communicate messages to their users about holds and overdues. "Telephony" is used to allow users to place holds and renewals from home and, in a few cases, may also enable users to find answers to frequently asked questions.

Investments in integrated online information systems were reported in nearly all participating public libraries and, to a lesser extent, in academic libraries. Respondents indicated that their institutions were purchasing replacements for older, less functional, and more expensive systems. In other cases, the libraries were not buying an entire system but adding components such as self-checkout units and dial-in access facilities. The flexibility offered by integrated systems opens possibilities for the decentralization of technical services routines. Respondents expect productivity to increase through efficiencies in work flow, the elimination of duplicate work, and the ease with which reports can be generated.

The most important benefit expected from the library's investment in new technology is efficiency achieved through staffing reductions. Respondents from both public and academic libraries expected that staff-

ing will be reduced and redirected, and that increased demands for service will be managed without increasing the staff complement as there is less need for "staff mediation" and a concomitant "reduction in public services librarians." The respondents emphasized how the technology will result in "greater client independence," "more self service," and "the public's ability to use the system without assistance."

The automation of routine tasks, especially in circulation, and dial-in access to new systems modules allows libraries to off-load routine services—such as checking-out books and creating holds—onto the patron. Although many respondents pointed to the savings that will accrue from reductions in staffing costs as a result of what one respondent referred to as investments in "cheap technology," others predicted that, as users are able to relay requests electronically, the amount of staffing required to respond to their requests may actually increase. Several respondents reported that, in their experience, as technology increases, convenience, access, and demands for service also rise. One librarian reported increases in requests for specific materials and in phone service requests, another observed that more staff were required to process holds since they can now be phoned in from home. While some worry that systems which encourage self-service will reduce the "frequency of staff interactions" with patrons, others expect that dial-in access will increase the "range of interaction, allowing patrons to access the library 24 hours a day" and allow libraries to "add computer-literate users to its list of clientele."

DISCUSSION

The respondents who took part in this study agree that financial pressure is driving much of the change taking place in their libraries, and most regard new technologies as a means of improving service while simultaneously reducing, or at least holding the line on, staffing costs. New technologies are expected to provide patrons with access to more current information without the necessity for expensive mediated searching. They are seen as enabling new resources to be added to the library's offerings without direct cost, and some technologies are expected to make it possible to offer new services, such as lists of recent acquisitions and telephone renewals. As technology makes access to information more convenient—available when and where the user wants it—it is not only expected to help offset the negative impact of service reductions in the library, such as cutbacks in hours of opening and the elimination of programming, but it will also enhance the glamour and appeal of the library. Technology then is expected to entice a new type of patron to its customer base.

Library staff will pay a significant price for achieving this glamour. Aided by new technology, library restructuring is resulting in a new alignment of "who does what." Staff classified in the "para-" or "sub-professional"

group will assume greater responsibilities taken out of the portfolios of front-line professionals. While employees in this group may enjoy new challenges and be heartened by their employers' confidence in their skills, their redeployment is being undertaken, in large measure, as a result of an attempt to reduce labor costs by downloading tasks from higher-paid employees to lower-paid staff. The same motivation will result in staff who hold low-end clerical positions losing out altogether as their work is off-loaded onto users through technologically assisted self-service initiatives. At the high end of the organizational pyramid, librarians will become a more compressed group, assuming roles as generalist managers responsible for a wide range of functions but without much opportunity to specialize in either function or subject and with little opportunity to participate in front-line service interactions with patrons.

The staffing configurations described by the respondents are consistent with the emerging new model of librarianship outlined by Harris (1992), who predicted that the direct service role formerly played by reference librarians will be "deprofessionalized" as nonprofessional staff assume primary responsibility for most patron contact. As the cadre of professional librarians shrinks, the need for their roles to become very broad will eliminate their ability to specialize in the areas of expertise that have defined the core of the profession. Hence, while their jobs may expand, librarians as a group will experience deprofessionalization as their control over a core skill set declines (see Winter, 1988). In this sense, the "standardization" principle associated with organizational downsizing is inevitably associated with the "de-skilling" and the "routinization" of work (see Harris, 1993). Of course, the staff group in the middle—the library technicians, library assistants, or paraprofessionals—will be "upskilled" by restructuring, their jobs enlarged, perhaps enriched, and they may even receive a higher level of compensation while the staff at the bottom of the organizational structure who lose their jobs to patrons face the ultimate form of de-skilling—unemployment. The trend toward greater patron self-service (with the exception of patrons who are prepared to pay for mediated assistance) is consistent with what has already been occurring in the United Kingdom where, Moon (1988) reports, the trend has been "toward more self-service by readers as advisory staff are reduced in number" (p. 98).

The justifications paving the way for the deprofessionalization of the traditional work of librarians is reflected in the common discourse about work roles woven throughout the remarks made by the participants in the study. For instance, in their description of events associated with restructuring, a number of the participants used language which suggested a minimizing of the value of the traditional core skills of the profession. With respect to cataloging, for example, the interviewed directors appeared to share the view that, in a time of diminishing resources, turning out a reasonable cataloging product with excellent efficiency takes precedence over

creating an excellent cataloging product within a reasonable time. Denigrating those who have applied "excessively high" standards in cataloging justifies a downgrading of professional cataloging positions and the outsourcing of cataloging work. The work of cataloging is not skilled work, their comments suggest, rather it is an activity over-rated and over-controlled by the people who performed it. In this fashion, professional catalogers are held up to be somehow silly, small-minded or, at the very least, off base.

In an interesting article on the outsourcing of cataloging, Dunkle (1996) notes the danger of assuming that vendors will provide a high-quality product if they have not been specifically directed to do so. In the case of cataloging, "quality" in the record rests on how accurate it is and "how well it enhances access to the item it describes," a quality that, as Dunkle points out, is difficult to define (p. 37). According to Dunkle, "the careless manager is tempted . . . to assume that quality in the catalog record is too ethereal to really matter" (p. 37) thereby becoming vulnerable to making hasty decisions that may have a long-term negative effect on users. Dunkle explains that the first rule of business when making an outsourcing decision is to know "exactly what you are buying and why" (p. 39). She suggests that the main reason given for outsourcing cataloging is the perception that "cataloging departments . . . perform a process which is not critical to the organization's mission," in other words, cataloging is not a "core" department (p. 39). While the cataloging "operation" per se, may not be core to the library, the outcome of the operation is, in the minds of many librarians and users, central to the purpose of the library. Dunkle also presents the idea that managers may wish to outsource cataloging because it is a troublesome area of library operations. "Unfortunately, some managers simply distrust cataloging because they have no insight into it" (p. 40), leading some to outsource "as a way to eliminate the bother of the unknown" (p. 40) leading, again, to unanticipated and sometimes negative consequences.

With respect to reference, it is not clear that increased user independence necessarily leads to an improved outcome. Some investigators report that, while users may be capable of working more quickly and getting better results through the ability to search electronic resources, many may not be able to make the best use of these resources without a librarian's assistance in choosing the correct database, constructing searches, and finding the best subject headings (see, for example, Bucknall & Mangrum, 1992; Mendelsohn, 1994; Kramer, 1996). Nevertheless, some library administrators appear convinced that there is little need for professional librarians in the future provision of direct reference service to users. One of the directors in this study remarked, for example, that, with proper training, library technicians could be taught to handle reference questions "without running to mommy." This remark betrays disdain, not just for the technicians but for the persons to whom they might turn for help. "Mommy"

suggests that the next level up the staffing hierarchy is occupied by women. Implied in the remark is the implication that traditional professional roles are "women's work," thus not too important and probably overrated. This is echoed in the comments of another of the directors who observed that

> some of the things about what librarians are supposed to do really puzzle me. All the cachet involved in cataloging and selection.... It's not enough. It's a larger thing that makes a librarian. And it's got something to do with management, and commitment, and analysis, and adapting to change, but it doesn't have to do with those *little things.*

This minimizing of traditional professional functions in the language of senior managers is a means by which they can protect themselves from accusations of professional betrayal. If the work traditionally performed by higher paid women in the library system is really over-rated, "little," or silly, it makes good sense to pass it on to other women who are a little lower-paid, and who can, with training, take on increased responsibility. This leaves professional librarians with an opportunity to embrace a less infantilized or feminized role, that of "manager," which, we are given to understand, is bigger, more important, and more far-reaching. Hence, fewer people should do it, only those who remain in a select managerial cadre at the top of the organizational hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

Fueled by financial constraint and opportunities for the application of new technologies, a radical restructuring of library work is underway. A recent study by Leckie and Brett (1997) reveals that, of all the work roles performed by librarians, the opportunity to be in direct contact with patrons remains the most highly regarded, yet the work of librarians is rapidly being reorganized in such a way that this opportunity for contact may become increasingly rare. As the data from the present study reveal, when para- and sub-professional staff are "empowered" to assume more front-line tasks formerly carried out by professionals, librarians are leaving behind what, for many, are the most significant roles in their work repertoire, thereby taking a "giant step back from the front."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

NOTES

[1]The province of Quebec has a relatively recent history of government support for public libraries. Hence, public libraries in Quebec tend to have a much smaller resource base than is true elsewhere in Canada. In addition, they operate under a different governance structure, making comparisons difficult for the purpose of the present study.

[2]This system of distribution respected the wishes of the informants in this study and met the ethical obligations of the investigators.

[3]Complete copies of the survey instrument are available from Roma Harris.

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