COMPETENCY BASED TRAINING: A SPECIAL LIBRARY ASSOCIATION (SLA) STRATEGIC PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TOOL FOR THE 21st CENTURY

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Abstract
The Special Libraries Association (SLA) was founded in 1909 and currently has its headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia, USA and serves more than 12,000 members in 83 countries. SLA embraces innovative solutions for the enhancement of services and intellectual advancement within the profession. This is achieved through the SLA Professional Development Department which provides educational products and services to increase its membership value in the information profession and to further members’ career goals. The document Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century which guides these products and services was developed and first published in 1997 and revised in 2003. This paper describes how within the framework of this document SLA is meeting the professional development requirements of its membership through competency based training and the use of diverse delivery mechanisms.

Introduction
The Special Libraries Association (SLA) is the USA based organization for innovative information professionals and their strategic partners. Its mission is to promote and strengthens its members through learning, advocacy, and networking initiatives. SLA believes that the librarian is an active intermediary between users and resources, and that professional and continuing education of the librarian is therefore indispensable. With adequate service depending on staff that are well prepared and continuously learning the quality of ongoing educational opportunities provided is of vital concern. There is also a responsibility for continuing education and professional development to be shared by individuals, their employing institutions, professional associations, and library/ information science education programmes.

In 1997 the SLA decided to take a more formal approach to providing continuing education for its membership. As a first step it charged one of its committees to prepare a document which would describe the competencies which information professionals would need to have in order to be relevant in the 21st century. The document entitled Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century is the result of this charge. It is used as a point of reference by the three Professional Development pillars of the association namely, the Professional Development Committee, the staff of the Professional Development Centre, and the various units of the association who have a responsibility for selecting and delivering continuing education programmes to the members.

Reviewing and updating the professional development activities of SLA is an ongoing process and is part of the Association’s philosophy of continuous improvement in all areas of its activities. The quality of service provided to the private and public sectors by library and information science professionals depends on the expertise and continuous updating of the skills of their staff. Constant flux in the needs of societies, changing technologies, and growth in professional knowledge demand that information workers must expand their understanding.
and update their skills on an ongoing basis. The content of the document is therefore under constant review and is updated as the information environment changes.

**Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century**

The *Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century* document is a point of reference for all aspects of continuing learning and professional development within the association. Competencies relate to the practitioner’s knowledge of information resources, access, technology and management, and the ability to use this knowledge as a basis for providing the highest quality information services. The Competencies document identifies four major areas of competencies in which the information professional must demonstrate professional skill; namely managing information organizations, managing information resources, managing information services and applying information tools and technologies.

Information professionals manage information organizations ranging in size from one employee to several hundred employees. These organizations may be in any environment from corporate, education, public, government, to non-profit. Information professionals excel at managing these organizations whose offerings are intangible, whose markets are constantly changing and in which both high-tech and high-touch are vitally important in achieving organizational success. They also have expertise in total management of information resources, including identifying, selecting, evaluating, securing and providing access to pertinent information resources. These resources may be in any media or format. Information professionals recognize the importance of people as a key information resource. Managing the entire life cycle of information services, from the concept stage through the design, development, testing, marketing, packaging, delivery and divestment of these offerings is also within their remit. Information professionals may oversee this entire process or may concentrate on specific stages, but their expertise is unquestionable in providing offerings that enable clients to immediately integrate and apply information in their work or learning processes. There is an imperative to harness the current and appropriate technology tools to deliver the best services, provide the most relevant and accessible resources, develop and deliver teaching tools to maximize clients’ use of information, and capitalize on the library and information environment of the 21st century.

In addition to the four major areas mentioned above, *Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century* also identified personal and core competencies as being crucial to the success of anyone working in the profession. Personal Competencies represent a set of attitudes, skills and values that enable practitioners to work effectively and contribute positively to their organizations, clients and profession. These competencies included being strong communicators, demonstrating the value-add of their contributions, remaining flexible and positive in an ever-changing environment. Core Competencies anchor the professional and personal competencies. SLA believes that these two competencies are also absolutely essential for the success of every information professional.

Information Professionals (IPs) understand the value of developing and sharing their knowledge; this is accomplished through association networks and by conducting and sharing research at conferences, in publications and in collaborative arrangements of all kinds. IPs also acknowledge and adhere to the ethics of the profession. The importance of all of the competencies described above cannot be emphasized enough. They are paramount to the value and viability of the profession. Courses and other educational opportunities developed for membership must always be mapped back to the competencies outlined above and presenters are asked to indicate which of these competencies or skill will be learnt for any course proposal submission.
Strategic priorities

SLA has embedded (and regularly reaffirms) the importance of learning as a key activity in its strategic plan. There is also a concerted effort to ensure that all appropriate media are used to deliver professional development offerings. The objective is ease of access for all. One of the strategic priorities therefore is, Innovation and Learning, a concept which embraces the content of Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century and expands it at the same time. There are a range of approaches to the implementation of Innovation and Learning. The findings of the Professional Development Committee learning surveys are used to develop a matrix of topics for the Professional Development Centre to deliver to the membership at large throughout the year as well as to recommend topics to the 52 Chapters (geographically located) and the 28 Divisions (subject interest groups). As the Competencies document dictates, the content offerings are targeted to professionals at different levels in their career - for example, emerging leaders, mid-career leaders, and experienced leaders. An online learning community for information professionals at different levels of experience and different stages of their careers has been established. This ensures that members who cannot attend annual conferences at which professional development opportunities are available can take advantage of the same offerings from their desktops or via video-conferencing.

Efforts have taken place to expand and improve the Virtual Seminar Series, offering at least two programmes per month. Chapters, Divisions or individual members can sign up to listen in to these presentations from their own location. In some cases, members will gather at a local site in order to share the cost of participating in these seminars. This series will be regularly measured to verify increases in overall participation year over year as well as to see if there is a positive financial impact to the bottom line.

Another strategy has been the development of a detailed course plan outline for a certification programme and seek accreditation by a recognized accrediting body. The Competencies document sets out a curriculum which enhances and upgrades the normal curriculum of the library and information science schools. Certification of the Competencies curriculum once recognized, can be used by practicing information professionals on the job for hiring, promotion, and advancement. The feasibility of partnerships with institutions of higher learning to provide discounts to SLA members who participate in their schools’ distance learning programmes have been explored. The Competencies document content will be mapped against the offerings of the institutions to ensure that members are indeed getting courses comparable to those described in the document. Several institutions have been identified and some Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) have been drawn up between SLA and these institutions.

Joint professional development programming with Association partners in the information industry have been investigated who have bought into the philosophy and content of the Competencies document. The goal is to have these partners provide financial sponsorship for sections of the curriculum. This is especially feasible for our partners in the information technology sectors since there is a large technology component in the Competencies document and there are opportunities for delivering some training via electronic means which they own. Examination has taken place of SLA’s annual conference programming and logistics since there is a large educational component to the annual conference, where two to three days of courses are delivered, as part of the pre-conference offerings. The objective is to engage members, partners, and prospective members in this process in order to verify the relevance of the programme offerings as well as to gauge customer satisfaction. The plan is also to seek new participants, instructors, and method of delivery as part of the continuous improvement process. The association receives an average
of 5,000 to 7,000 members at its annual conference which is held for 4-5 days. This therefore provides a captive audience of a significant number of its members.

**SLA structure for delivering professional development and continuous learning**

SLA is structured in such a way that members have access to professional development and continuous learning from four major groups. The Professional Development Department (PDD), is responsible for the strategic priorities embodied in the Innovation and Learning concept and its vision is to help information professionals become indispensable through learning. Its mission is to help information professionals become more capable learners and more capable professionals. It has set itself an ambitious goal that is to set the standards for learning and development throughout the global community of Information Professionals. As described above, it has a grand plan for implementing its Innovation and Learning concept and is making good progress in signing on partners. The Professional Development Department is also responsible for the implementation of best practices and assists the local units in this area as well. Best practice requires that there be:

- regular learning needs assessment,
- a broad range of learning opportunities in a choice of formats that are designed to meet identified needs and that cover topics sequentially from introductory through advanced,
- widely disseminated information about continuing education and resources,
- course instructors selected on the basis of both subject knowledge and teaching ability,
- consistent documentation of individuals' participation in learning so that recognition of participation in continuous learning will be considered in hiring and promotion decisions,
- evaluation of continuing education and staff development offerings and programmes,
- research to examine the efficacy and outcomes of continuing education and staff development programmes.

One of the guiding principles of SLA is that information professionals can play many varied roles—from creating and sharing knowledge and influencing strategic decision-making to creating new sources of competitive advantage and facilitating the learning of others. This will lead to them becoming exceptional contributors to their organisations. The Professional Development Department is charged to support this principle while ensuring customer satisfaction and financial stability.

The Professional Development Committee (PDC) is named by the President of the Association and is made up of members with different levels of skills and years in the profession. This mix ensures that the programmes designed by the committee take into consideration the requirements of members at different levels in their careers. The PDC has a strategic role in working with the SLA Board to develop strategies for the professional development role as well as for updating Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century when necessary. This is the group that has the ear of the membership in terms of their educational requirements. The Committee uses the input received from members to collaborate with the Professional Development Department in providing a well-rounded curriculum of courses as reflected in the Competencies document.

The other two Divisions are made up of members with a common subject interest and Chapters which are geographically dispersed. They also have a professional development and continuous learning responsibility for their constituents. These two units also collaborate with both the PDD and the PCC in their efforts to provide courses, seminars and other educational
offerings to their membership throughout the year. These units are at liberty to concentrate on any aspect of the curriculum set out in the Competencies document depending on the stated requirements of their constituents. SLA headquarters will assist them in finding speakers and teachers when called upon to do so.

**Educational priorities in progress with some strategic partners**

As SLA continues to refine its PD programmes, it continuously reviews all aspects of its offerings and all input received and changes course when indicated. The changing environment and the rapidly evolving technology are also playing a role. These factors, coupled with the Association’s ability to attract financial support and educational partners, have led to the recent establishment of several significant initiatives.

The SLA Online University has been developed which is an online system that will provide information professionals with access to courses and content in a variety of subject areas. The Creation of the SLA Online University in partnership with Elsevier will serve the continuing education needs of information professionals worldwide. Because of reduced budgets for professional development and travel, many SLA members around the globe lack the ability to participate in person at learning events. Using a technologically advanced learning system, the SLA Online University will give information professionals access to course libraries focusing on development of critical business skills. In addition the curriculum will comprise custom-designed courses on competencies that are crucial to the profession, such as content management, competitive intelligence, and identifying client needs. SLA also expects to enhance the offerings of the Online University by including discounted access to online learning courses from many leading universities. It will also give information professionals worldwide, the opportunity to learn where and when they choose, collaborate with others in multiple languages, and engage other learners to expand their perspectives.

Three distinct course libraries have been acquired that will include over 200 courses focusing on broad areas of the Competencies document as well as on executive development. Translation of a focused set of courses into other languages, particularly French and Spanish in order to serve its diverse membership better has taken place. There has also been the conversion of a variety of SLA learning experiences into self-paced online courses to improve access by those who cannot attend face-to-face presentations. Enhancement has occurred of the Virtual Learning Series and the Career Development Series content including hiring professional instructors. An Internet-based video and audio delivery system has been purchased for all live and recorded SLA learning experiences. This will improve the chances of more members gaining access to these offerings. Contracting with internationally recognized field experts has been set up to deliver a balanced set of learning experiences that meet the needs of SLA’s diverse audience both in North America and abroad. An Internet studio at SLA’s Global Headquarters has been constructed for the purpose of producing live and recorded learning experiences for SLA members.

In addition, SLA has been in discussions with various external partners to identify common interests and joint working opportunities. Working with SLA, the President of Drexel eLearning has developed a proposal to match Drexel’s online courses to SLA’s competency document and to offer these courses to SLA members at a discount. The proposal was approved by the Dean of the Library School and final approval is expected in the near future. Syracuse University has agreed to partner with SLA by offering their summer online courses to SLA members at a substantial discount. WISE is the Web-enabled Information Science Education Consortium, headed by Syracuse and the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign. This is a group of 12 universities with robust online programmes who are operating under a special grant to share courses and develop standards for online information
science education. They have not only agreed to partner with SLA, but have chosen the SLA 2005 Annual Conference as the site at which they will announce and launch their initiative. Once their shared courses have been established, they will offer them on the SLA online university site at a discount to members. The Director of the Professional Learning Centre at the School of Information Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada is in discussion to partner with SLA to offer their courses to SLA members at a discounted rate. The plan is to initiate this programme in conjunction with the launch of the SLA Online University.

**Engaging users in the process**

SLA is very aware of the importance of engaging its members and other constituents in any process that requires their buy-in. With this in mind, surveys are sent regularly to members requesting their input, and that input is taken into consideration when designing a plan of action for Professional Development. Various key messages were gleaned from recent surveys. The message that ‘the price is too high’ figured repeatedly (both for virtual seminars and for Continuing Education (CE) courses). Members specifically identified US$100 as the preferable cost. However, a significant number were willing to pay up to US$500. One can assume that those willing to pay the higher price generally get financial support from their employers. Given this finding, there is clearly a need to come up with inexpensive solutions within the budgets of many who do not receive institutional support. Many also expressed an interest in affordable distance education courses since this delivery method would eliminate the additional cost of travel and subsistence.

The first preference for delivery mechanism is class-room type courses, with self-paced, distance learning, one-day classes, delivered over the web running a strong second. Very few were interested in virtual seminars or other means of delivery. Participants in the survey preferred not to have to take more than a day away from work in order to participate in a course. Courses and other educational opportunities available at the annual conference are the exceptions since participants are generally at the conference for several days. SLA therefore takes advantage of this opportunity to offer a diverse set of professional development courses. SLA will also be testing various ways of fulfilling this need for high quality one-day courses as requested by the membership. Some of the initiatives described above under the Innovation and Learning implementation plan will also alleviate some of high cost.

One interesting finding was that there was a need for instructions in the ‘basics’ for those practicing as librarians but who do not have the benefit of formal library training at the graduate level. SLA is an international organization and has members whose countries do not require education in librarianship at the graduate level. Therefore, hands on practical skills oriented opportunities are wanted. At the other end of the spectrum there is a call, especially by North American members, for a certification programme in specified areas such as Knowledge Management. SLA is in the process of using the competencies content to develop a curriculum in preparation for a certification programme. In addition, a number of subject areas were identified as being of great interest namely:

- **Technology** - opportunities to learn about ‘the latest’ in information architecture, open access, intranets, database design, object modeling, metadata (etc) and how those techniques are applied in real situations.
- **Knowledge Management (KM)** - has been covered widely in recent years but there is a need for courses at a practical level as many are still grappling with the implementation of a KM programme within their organizations.
- **Business skills** - ranging from finance/budgeting to dealing with staff and co-workers, communicating with management, improving negotiating skills,
needs assessment; information audit, business plan development -- in short, survival skills in a competitive market. These skills are not peculiar to information professionals but are the same skills required by other professional groups. These competencies will help the practicing professional to remain relevant and advance their careers in their organizations.

- Marketing/Selling - including lobbying and presentation skills are seen as key requirements in getting adequate resources as well as attracting target groups to their services.
- Future trends - such as information technology coming on stream as well as those going out of use. In addition, there is great interest in business trends, including globalization and its effects and impact on the information industry and the information professional.

Over the years, SLA has been making a concerted effort to attract high quality presenters and educators. In terms of educational level and the quality of instructions, the members have continued to express some concern for the quality of the instruction. They would prefer fewer course offerings but with instructors with high quality knowledge and the ability to teach. The sentiment was that not everyone who knows a subject is able to impart that knowledge to others in an inspiring way therefore in many instances learning did not take place. SLA’s response to this is to create standards against which instructors would be selected. For example, presenters will be pre-tested for course knowledge; the level at which they can deliver, and evidence of past success in delivering such courses.

In addition, there is a requirement for the instructor to answer questions around course content evaluation, course description, intended audience and prerequisite, course content, key take aways, teaching approaches, course design and instructor qualifications. In order to collect data on courses offered by SLA each participant in a course is asked to fill out an evaluation form, one for class room delivery and one for electronic delivery. This input is reviewed and recorded for future use. The Professional Development Department has implemented an electronic system which will hold these evaluations for no less than 3 years and may hold them as long as 5 years. The objective is to be able to use this database as a PD management decision tool.

SLA expects that collecting this data before approving continuing education courses will help to eliminate unsuitable topics and instructors and therefore improve customer satisfaction ratings. There is also a desire to seek appropriate partnerships with other professional associations in order to leverage off their skills, especially in areas which are common to all professions, namely management and technology.

Conclusion

Providing professional development and continuous learning opportunities for a membership as diverse as that of the SLA is a challenge. SLA’s strategy to base its professional development and continuous learning offerings on Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century ensures that its members in particular and information professionals in general, who participate in its programme, will be well prepared for the future job market. Because the document is continuously updated and mapped to the information environment, it ensures the information professional’s relevance in the information market. Many of its innovative programmes are in their infancy and will continue to evolve as the environment in which information professionals work, changes. SLA’s responsibility to its members to ensure that they receive value for their money is taken very seriously. Therefore, courses, presenters, and evaluations are scrutinized to verify that the established standards for delivering professional offerings are met.
SLA sees professional development and continuous learning as key deliverables to its members and is in the process of utilizing a host of delivery mechanisms in the process. The plan to develop a detailed course plan outline for a certification programme which would be accredited by a recognized accrediting body has not yet been realized but is on the agenda for the near future. In addition, SLA is just settling into its new headquarters, and so construction of an Internet studio at SLA’s Global Headquarters for the purpose of producing live and recorded learning experiences for SLA members is also on the agenda for the near future.

By consistently asking for customer input in order to improve the programme and keeping abreast of, and employing the new technological tools, the Association will be a key player in the professional development arena. In addition, its ability to attract significant partners in the industry and in academia can only serve to improve accessibility, reduce cost to its clients, and ensure relevance of its professional development programme. Finally, members’ feedback has indicated to SLA that the established professional development structure, in conjunction with the implementation of Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century, meet their requirements for remaining relevant and valuable within their place of work.

References