

**SKILLS FOR FUTURE AND CURRENT LIBRARY
AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS –
PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS IN NEW DELHI**

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ABSTRACT

New Delhi academic librarians were asked to rank traditional as well as new skills needed for future library and information professionals. For this study, skills were identified based on the published literature. A simple web based questionnaire was administered to 25 academic librarians in the city of New Delhi, India. Twenty librarians responded and it was found that the majority are not fully satisfied with the present skill sets of the new information professionals. The study showed that communication skills were perceived as the most important skills required for emerging information professionals, followed by information-communication-technology (ICT), management, organization, research, marketing and negotiation skills. Ninety-two per cent of the librarians stated that re-training was essential especially in the areas of ICT applications for professionals already working in libraries. The study highlights the need to reinforce education and training programmes in the country to turn out fully skilled future library and information professionals, as well as to update current practitioners' skills.

INTRODUCTION

“Library is a growing organism” – so states one of the laws of Dr. S. R. Ranganathan. As libraries grow, changes are inevitable. Changes sweeping across libraries have never been so pronounced as seen in recent times with the advent of ICT applications in libraries. Phenomenal changes are seen in the way users access information and how libraries are managing their information resources in the present era. These changes are also affecting library and information science (LIS) professionals in new ways as never before. The professionals of today need to be skilled in many ways.

In India, a large number of library schools churn out graduates, post-graduates, and PhDs in library and information science. Additionally, certificate and diploma level students are also produced by many institutes thus making available a large potential workforce for the library and information services sector. While this potential workforce is knowledgeable about the LIS discipline by virtue of their education, the question remains whether graduates are skilled enough to launch them-

selves in the workplace, that is, the modern libraries and information centres of today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Librarians and their professional bodies have identified a range of skills and these have been grouped or classified in a number of different ways. For example, one of the classifications categorizes skills as either professional or personal.¹ Authors have emphasized the importance of different skills but what could be generally agreed upon is that information professionals in new library environments need hybrid skills or should have multiple skills. Nicholas Joint states that generic skills such as cataloging and indexing formed the bedrock for LIS professionals in the traditional library whereas the skills required in the digital library are more heterogeneous, fluid, and fast changing.²

Stephens and Hamblin³ have identified skills required by the library and information management sector in academic, pharmaceutical, school/college, public, law, health, business, government, non-profit, and banking libraries. LIS education programmes in India do not particularly aim at producing library professionals for specific libraries such as academic libraries, special libraries, corporate libraries, etc., although students can elect projects and paper topics that focus on specialized areas. Many of the skills such as the core and ICT skills that emerging library professionals acquire through their academic programmes are common to any type of librarianship, although specialized LIS programmes are desirable. It is only in recent years that courses such as Post Graduate Diploma in Library Automation and Networking, which is a more specialized course, have been introduced in some universities.

Academic libraries constitute a significant proportion among the various types of libraries. The present study focuses on skills largely within the context of academic libraries. With regard to the skills needed for the academic library professional, Morgan⁴ has dwelt on core skills which are grouped under credibility with academic staff, teaching and training, IT related skills, and management skills. As credibility with academic staff deals with status, academic degrees, subject knowledge, etc., which are more qualifications than skills, these have not been considered for the present study.

As shown above, LIS professionals need a variety of skills, and various authors have through different studies attempted to identify these. Fisher⁵ categorizes them broadly as professional information skills and generic skill, as shown in Table 1.

Another study on skills for 21st century LIS professionals analyses four skills using innovative developments in library and information services, grouping them under the metaphors of mountain climbing, jumping, orienteering and endurance, and suggests that the range of skills should be fostered both by education and in the workplace.⁶

Table 1: Fisher's skills needed by information professionals

Professional Information skills	Generic skills
Knowledge Management Information architecture ICT skills Technical (traditional) professional skills	Project management **Planning and evaluation People management Research skills Bids and proposals
Subject expertise Collection management Collection description Technical (traditional) professional skills	Critical skills Thinking **Planning and evaluation Analysis Problem solving Research
Information technology Design Application Systems User support (problem solving)	Leadership General management Communication skills Strategic management People skills Financial skills
Service Development User information Surveys Service impact analysis Planning and evaluation** Promotion and marketing*	*Promotion and marketing Design appreciation Presentation skills Multi-professional appreciation

Continuing professional development (CPD) is essential in order to adapt to the changes that are happening in the workplace, especially libraries, so that library professionals can remain valuable in their jobs. A survey carried out among information professionals in the health and energy/oil sectors to understand professionals' attitudes toward CPD and to identify their transferable skills revealed that computer skills, communication and interpersonal skills, technical skills, management skills, and teaching skills were selected by the respondents as those that they considered to be transferable to other sectors within and without the information profession.⁷

While a large number of universities offer BLIS, MLIS and other higher education programmes, there are a very few organizations that give short term courses on emerging areas for continuous professional development. Nyamboga⁸ lists organizations involved in training of library and information professionals in India. These include the Indian National Scientific Documentation Centre [presently National Institute of Science Communication and Information Resources], Documentation Research and Training Centre, Information and Library Network, National

Information System for Science and Technology, and Developing Library Network.

There are several studies that have assessed the information skills of the respondents themselves, be it LIS professionals or students.⁹⁻¹¹ But there are few studies that seek to survey librarians about their perceptions of the information skills required by new information professionals, particularly in developing countries. Here an attempt has been made to fill that gap by studying librarians presently working in academic libraries in the city of New Delhi, India.

METHODOLOGY

There are a number of academic libraries in New Delhi; however, for the present study 25 select librarians were chosen to explore their perceptions of skills needed by future information professionals. A web based questionnaire using QuestionPro (www.questionpro.com) was prepared. The 25 librarians are mostly library heads, senior or middle level librarians of academic institutions, including universities, colleges, and institutes of higher learning. Their e-mail addresses were obtained, and the link to the questionnaire was sent to them.

Out of the 25 questionnaires sent, 20 responses were received. These have been analyzed with the aim of determining opinions about the skills required by future library and information professionals, as well as new skills needed by those already in the field.

Table 2: Questions posed to the respondents

1. Do you think the emerging or new LIS professionals are skilled enough to work in the modern libraries of today?
2. Are LIS courses in India imparting the necessary skills to the students to enable them to work in modern libraries of today?
3. Some skills identified for emerging library professionals are given below. Kindly rank the skills you perceive as most important to less important ones.
 - a. Research skills
 - b. Marketing skills
 - c. Communication skills
 - d. ICT Skills
 - e. Negotiation skills
 - f. Management skills
 - g. Training skills
 - h. Organizational skills
4. Kindly list below the professionals skills that you feel are essential in emerging information professionals.

5. Do you think working LIS professionals of today are skilled enough to handle the operations in the changing work environment of today's libraries?
6. How important do you think are re-skilling of working LIS professionals necessary?
7. Are the short term training courses conducted for working LIS professionals by different organisations in India adequate?
8. Does your library provide any in-house continuing professional development programme for your own library professionals?
9. Please list the areas in which you feel the information professionals in your library can work better with training?

To understand what the librarians perceive about the importance of the various skills, we selected eight and asked the respondents to rank these skills. The choice was made by consolidating lists of skills that have been identified in various studies.¹² There were eight skills that were repeatedly discussed in the literature and that also corresponded with the insight of the authors of the present study.

RESULTS

Are emerging information professionals well prepared?

Out of the twenty respondents, 50% of the respondents felt that the emerging information professionals are skilled enough to work in the modern libraries of today to some extent only. Twelve percent felt that they are not skilled enough and only 37% felt that the new professionals are skilled enough. Since 12% have stated that new information professionals are not skilled enough and 50% feel that they are skilled enough to some extent only, it can be deduced that the majority of respondents are not fully satisfied with the skill levels of the new professionals.

The respondents were also asked if the LIS courses in India are imparting the necessary skills that enable graduates to work in modern libraries. Half of the respondents' (50%) perception is that it is to some extent only that the LIS courses in India are imparting the necessary skills to the students that enable them to work in modern libraries of today. Another 25% clearly stated that the necessary skills are not being imparted.

From the foregoing, it is seen that, firstly, the majority of the librarians are not fully satisfied with the skill sets of the new information professionals and secondly, majority of them feel that the library schools are not imparting all the requisite skill sets. In view of the responses on these two counts, there is an urgent need to revisit the curriculum and make suitable changes so that a skilled workforce can be produced by the LIS schools.

Table 3 gives the ranking of the eight skills by the respondents. From the table it can be seen that the communication skills have been identified as the most important skill required by the emerging information professional even ahead of the ICT skills which has been identified as the second most important skill. This is followed by management skills, organization skills, research skills, marketing skills and negotiation skills.

Table 3: Ranking of skills new professionals should have

Rank	Skill
1.	Communication skills
2.	ICT skills
3.	Management skills
4.	Organization skill
5.	Research skills
6.	Training skills
7.	Marketing skills
8.	Negotiation skills

In addition to the ranking of the skills given in Table 3, the respondents were also asked to name any other skills that they thought were important for emerging information professionals. Although none of the respondents identified any other new skill, the respondents pointed to certain qualities that new information professionals should have such as innovativeness, keenness to learn and explore new and emerging developments, self-propelling behaviour, and a positive attitude. This highlights that in addition to knowledge and skills, librarians also look for certain personal qualities in emerging information professionals.

Re-skilling of the current LIS workforce

LIS professionals presently working in libraries have completed their education more than a decade ago and need to be provided training on various aspects that have emerged during the last decade, particularly in the area of ICT applications. These library professionals are “digital migrants” but are serving users many of whom are “digital natives.” To bridge any gap between the two and also to enable coping with the changing digital environment, training of existing LIS professionals is essential.

With regard to the re-skilling aspect in the present survey, it was found that 93% of the respondents felt that re-skilling of the working LIS professionals is necessary and the rest thought it was not very important. None of the respondents mentioned that it is not required. This clearly shows that periodic training is to be

imparted on new developments to the working professionals to enable them to function in the modern library environment in an effective and efficient manner.

The respondents were asked whether the range of short-term training courses for working LIS professionals conducted by different organizations in India is adequate. Forty-three percent of the respondents stated that the courses were adequate only to some extent, whereas 38% stated that the provision was adequate and 18% stated that it was inadequate. From the responses, it is clear that the majority of the respondents feel that the existing short-term training courses provided by the different institutions in India are not adequate.

When asked about the provision of in-house professional development, it was found in the present study that about 69% of the libraries offer in-house training programmes and the remaining libraries do not offer any in-house training.

Areas identified for training/skilling

A library has several operations to carry out which could include routine house keeping operations or others such as rendering information services. The final question asked the librarians to list the areas in their libraries where their staff can function better with training. Though this can be specific to libraries concerned, still eliciting this information could give an overall picture on such areas that need attention by trainers. A number of areas/aspects as given in Table 4 were identified by the respondents.

Table 4: Current staff training needs

	Areas in which training is needed
1.	Library automation
2.	Reference service
3.	Networking
4.	Digitization & Digital Libraries
5.	Open Source Software
6.	Handling e-resources
7.	Managerial skills
8.	Web based information services
9.	Negotiation
10.	Internet search and access

DISCUSSION

In view of the responses to the questions about what skills are needed by new professionals and whether library schools are teaching them adequately, the results show that there is an urgent need to revisit the curriculum and make suitable changes so that a skilled workforce can be produced by the LIS schools. It is rather interesting to note that communication skills have been rated ahead of other skills, particularly ICT skills, because given the technological wave that is sweeping across the libraries and given that many libraries in India today fall short when it comes to automation, it was expected that ICT skill might be rated as the most desirable skill. In other developing countries, ICT frequently heads the list. Mahmood and Khan¹³ reflect the varied ICT skills required by the LIS professionals in Pakistan by carrying out a needs assessment. Adomi and Anie¹⁴ have assessed the computer literacy skills of professionals in Nigerian University libraries. A study on the ICT skills among the librarians in engineering educational institution in Tamil Nadu shows that the LIS professionals are acquiring considerable basic ICT skills, but they are limited with regard to network based services and library skills.¹⁵

The literature abounds with papers about the need for ICT skills among LIS professionals in various countries. However, since the present study is limited to the city of New Delhi, it can be said that ICT trained staff are easier to come by. Training centres and better quipped educational facilities are relatively more available. Therefore, it is understandable that ICT skills are ranked after communication which in many other studies has also been identified as a vital skill. But it is surprising to note that negotiation, a skill closely related to the communication, has been ranked the lowest. The ability to negotiate can be considered to be an important skill, as libraries are increasingly negotiating with e-publishers for access to e-resources. Ashcroft has identified, among other skills, negotiating as important in order to address issues of purchasing and collaboration. Purchasing is no longer a simple process, as the bundling of subscriptions to e-journals is increasingly the norm for obtaining the best deals.¹⁶

In a populous country like India, which has a large number of working and emerging information professionals, there is a need for educational institutions to come forward and provide a greater number of courses in emerging areas of LIS. It can be inferred that there is a need to strengthen short course offerings for practitioners as well. The fact that 69% percent of the respondents' libraries offer in-house training seems a rather healthy sign and shows the realization among the library heads about the importance of training the library's staff on-the-job. A combination of such onsite and offsite training can keep the staff motivated as they are skilled to perform in the changing work environments. In-house training is a cost-effective way of providing continuing education to the staff of a particular library. The training can be provided by a knowledgeable and skilled in-house staff member who might have undergone training for a particular skill. For example, a staff

member who has learned installation and operation of software can impart that skill to the rest of his or her colleagues in the library by providing an in-house programme. The other way is to have on-site training provided by an expert in a special area. Such onsite training cannot only be cost effective but can also be focused on the specific requirements of the library concerned.

It is interesting to note from Table 4 that a majority of the areas identified as those in which librarians need further training are related to ICT and its applications. This is in sharp contrast to the skills that the respondents perceive as important for new information professionals, that is, communication skills (Table 3). This highlights the perception that new library professionals are clearly lacking in communication skills whereas existing staff are lacking in ICT skills. As is the situation worldwide, ICT skills among the working professionals in libraries are lacking in India too.

CONCLUSION

Librarians and library heads are the key decision makers when selecting library professionals for their libraries. So, understanding their perception of skill sets that are required by new information professionals is useful not only for education and training institutions to modify their curricula, but it is also useful for new information professionals to understand the expected skill sets in the employment sector and assess their own skills and bridge any gap that may exist between the two. From this study, it is clear that the librarians who responded are neither fully satisfied with the skills sets or the new information professionals nor with the education and training programmes that are expected to impart such skills. This makes it necessary that curricula of LIS programmes in India need to be revised and such revision needs to be done more frequently. Although the University Grants Commission model curriculum is revised only after long intervals, the education institutions need to update the curriculum at least once in two years. There is also a need for drawing up specialized course curricula for different types of librarianship such as academic, corporate, law, health, and so on. It may not be possible for one institution to provide different librarianship programmes owing to constraints, but different library schools could focus on specializations in librarianship and go on to become centres of excellence in that domain. Moreover, the library schools should focus on communication skill which clearly has been accorded importance ahead of ICT skills for the future information professionals. Most library schools have realized the importance of imparting ICT skills but the ICT topics and skills taught should be constantly upgraded so that the new information professionals acquire the latest ICT skills. The institutions providing short term training courses should revitalize such courses by adding more contemporary courses and modifying existing courses to meet changing library needs. Further, more and more insti-

tutions need to conduct such short term training courses so as to have a wider outreach.

The present study is limited in size of sample, scope, and region. There is a need to carry out similar studies on a larger scale in order to have a deeper understanding of perceptions of librarians about what skills are required by information professionals in the future. This study paves way for that.

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