

Exploring a Categorization of Main Competencies for Digital Librarians

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1. Introduction

This brief essay is concerned with the main topic “Job Analysis in a Digital Library Context” and its purpose is to explore some of the competencies that digital librarians must have to successfully work in a digital library context. For this exploration, I collected some pertinent articles by searching in commercial databases and the Internet, the search criteria used was articles or websites written within 2000-2009, which included the keywords “digital libraries” AND “digital librarians” AND “competencies”.

It is important to start by defining some of terms used here to avoid any kind of confusion about what the dimensions of this exploration are. The key definitions are:

- Digital libraries: “organizations that provide the resources, including the specialized staff, to select, structure, offer intellectual access to, interpret, distribute, preserve the integrity of, and ensure the persistence over time of collections of digital works so that they are readily and economically available for use by a defined community or set of communities.” (Waters, 1998) We can also include hybrid libraries in this essay, because some of the competencies are useful for both environments, although the competencies as developed on this essay are more centered on the digital environment.
- Digital librarians: I define digital librarians as a professional with some background in library and information science and applied knowledge on ICTs, digital documents, applications and environments.
- Competencies: are “a collection of characteristics (i.e. skills, knowledge, selfconcept, traits and motives), that enables us to be successful in our interactions with others at work, school, home, and in our community at large.” (MIT Career Development Center, 2005)

2. Grouping of basic competencies for digital librarians

After reading some of the literature about competencies, I can categorize them in the following four groups of categories, this is a exploration of them, so this list doesn't mean to be definitive.

- a) Information Management Competencies: these types of competencies are the most basic among traditional librarians; it is very common for them to have cataloguing, classification and indexing skills. But these competencies are labeled with different names in the digital environment, and even if they are called by the same names as always, some aspects of them change. For example, on a digital environment, it's not that necessary to classify documents, because that's not vital for document retrieval, but in change, a digital librarian must know how to construct ontologies, which is a conceptual representation of an area of knowledge, defining relationships between concepts. Another example is that instead of talking about cataloguing a document, now it's more common to see the term metadata, which in the end is more or less the same as assigning words to the descriptive fields on a traditional document. There is a challenge for digital librarians in this regard, however, and it's about the current trend of social tagging, where systems allow users to tag themselves digital content, this is on one side useful, because keywords would be understandable for wider audiences, but the cons are duplication of similar terms, ambiguity, etc.
- b) Technological Competencies: are related to the use of information and communication technologies, depending on the tasks of the digital librarian they could be more demanding. In the blog post Basic Competencies of a 2.0 Librarian (King, 2008) lists specific 2.0 skills, the competencies are taken from this source, copied in italics and with some comments by me:

- Write and post to a blog: some institutions and even commercial organizations have embraced blogs as the model for their websites, they are frequently updated, its entries are displayed in a reverse-chronological order. It is important for a digital librarian because it's a more recent way to develop websites, including web 2.0 resources and technologies specially to attract be in touch with their Internet users, discovering new ways to interact with them, to foment reading and develop information and digital literacy programs.
- Social network knowledge - basic understanding of Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, etc and the ability to explain them to others. All these social network applications can be used with a website or blog, because they can be easily integrated with it and between each other. They can be used to provide new ways of contact between librarians and users and also to deliver them updates.
- Create, upload and edit photos, short videos, podcasts, and screencasts: as the above, librarians can use them to find new ways of communication and training to users and between librarians.
- Use and explain rss and rss readers to others: rss has become a way of delivering updates and the readers are used to gather updates from different sources automatically, once users are able to configure them. Rss is also used in every major journals databases, to request automatic updates about a certain journal title or even for a search query submitted, so users interested in some particular topic have to perform their searches less frequently.
- Basic console gaming skills: some hybrid libraries like the Arlington Heights Memorial Library in Chicago, USA, are acquiring also videogames to provide new services, especially to attract a younger audience, so it's important that librarians know how to use them. Also there are some educational simulators which are also videogames, like the business Tycoon series and finally, there are virtual environments like Second Life and Playstation Home: 3D virtual worlds where you can interact with a community of users, I think that the possibilities of games for educational purposes and especially for libraries are not well explored yet.

- Ability to do basic HTML editing, an understanding of (X)HTML and CSS: not “web developer” skills but enough to make minor adjustments to blogs or websites without the need of relying on the developers for simple changes.
- The ability to learn the basics of a new digital service or tool within 15 minutes of fiddling around with it and be able to assess them.
- Understand how everything above works in a library setting and how it complements a physical, traditional library.
- The ability to tell the library’s story, through various media - writing, photography, audio, and video: it’s a perfect way to communicate new development and best practices achieved in the library and also it saves money to the organization if librarians are able to develop these types of resources.

c) **Information Literacy related Competencies:** librarians have a important role to play on information literacy, and recently, librarians have found themselves in the role of trainers, to teach their users and -why not- broad communities, on how to use information in a effective way. The Guidelines on Information Literacy for Lifelong Learning (IFLA, 2006) defines a simple yet comprehensive model of Information Literacy Competencies:

- Access: be able to define, articulate and understand an information need, and be able to locate where to search for information and access it effectively and efficiently.
- Evaluation: the user evaluates information critically and competently, can evaluate its accuracy, relevance and usefulness given an information need.
- Use: the user applies/uses/communicates information accurately, ethically and creatively.

d) **Interpersonal Competencies:** this category has to do with the ability to work from home, and/or not physically in an organization, which could be multicultural, and with various languages, where the individual must be able

to create working networks and to work in a collaborative way, even without knowing his/her peers.

3. Conclusion

After this very brief exploration, I can say that there is a large variety of sources on the literature, which could be used to further develop these categories and include some competencies not included in this essay. Nowadays, librarians face a great challenge and at the same time they have a good opportunity to cope with the technological advances in information technologies and actively change the general stereotype of librarians, to become digital librarians and/or something more. In this social-networking-web2.0 era in which users are the most important players in the digital content creation, librarians must learn how to create content by themselves to update library services and create digital libraries. It is important that librarians develop technological competencies because it will allow them to create themselves without relying on third parties or other organizations contracted by the library to create resources like blogs, videos, tutorials, podcasts, etc. This will add value to the digital librarian as a very versatile professional and save money for the library institution where they work in. Activities like information literacy are also important, because in a library context they could be used to accomplish two main objectives: to empower information users and at the same time to promote library and information services; users at the same time, could get a better understanding on librarians roles and regard them as valuable professionals.

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