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Preferred Political, Social, and Technological Characteristics of Electronic Resources (ER) Librarians

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SUMMARY. The digital revolution has created a need for a new type of professional called the electronic resources (ER) librarian. This chapter traces the development of this new position in academic libraries, identifies preferred characteristics needed to succeed in this position, and provides a rationale for why some characteristics are essential while others are desirable. Using economic, political, social, and technological factors as determinants, the authors further the discussion and ask the question: has this position become a permanent fixture in the library culture or is it a passing trend?

INTRODUCTION

As the eminent library scholar S. R. Ranganathan stated, the library is a living organism. It continuously evolves and adapts to the ever-changing world. The purpose of this chapter is to outline one aspect of the modern library's adaptation to the so-called digital revolution. When libraries moved from a manuscript culture to a print culture they faced enormous challenges. As paper publications multiplied by leaps and bounds, the book lists and other forms of organizational methods that were adequate for the manuscript culture became inadequate for the ever-growing volume of the print culture. Hence, individuals like Melvil Dewey and Halsey William Wilson invented new methods to organize information through classification and indexing systems. These new methods called for a new breed of trained professional: the cataloger and the indexer.

Today libraries are again faced with a major transition, the shift from a print-based culture to a digital culture. This shift was described in a 29 October 2003 Reuter's news release that read:

A study by the University of California at Berkeley shows that during 2002, five billion gigabytes of data was generated around the world. That amount, which is the equivalent of about 800 megabytes per person, is enough to fill 500,000 U.S. Libraries of Congress. The university conducted a similar study in 1999, and the new results indicate a 30 percent rise since the first study in the amount of stored information. The amount of data stored on hard disk drives was up 114 percent from the earlier study.¹

To address this explosive growth of digital information, libraries found a need to develop new breeds of professionals in possession of new and different skill sets. One of these is the electronic resources (ER) librarian. This chapter draws, primarily, on the authors' experiences to trace the recent, adaptive

changes occurring in libraries, especially in academic libraries; the need for such changes; and the preferred characteristics needed to manage the challenges associated with ER. More specifically, we examine how ER librarianship originated within the context of classic organization theory; how it matured within the context of economic, political, social, and technical factors; and what are the preferred characteristics needed, in the current environment, to be a successful ER librarian.

Talcott Parsons, a leading light in the classic theory of organizations and professions, described an organization as “a social system oriented to the attainment of a relatively specific type of goal, which contributes to a major function of a more comprehensive system, usually the society.”²

Within the organization, Parsons describes the role of professions in terms of functional specificity supporting goal attainment. Professions grow through a series of stages called professionalization. In *The System of Professions*, Andrew Abbott expands on Parsons’ basic construct and analyzes how new professions develop when a disturbance causes the authority in a specific area to become obsolete or replaced by the need for new expertise. As the professions or subspecialties develop their specific expertise in order to respond to the disturbance, the area develops a consistency in its skills and role and balance is restored.³

This role consistency then allows the profession a way to institutionalize its expertise. Organizations identify the new area of expertise and integrate it into their organizations when their decision-makers determine the expertise will assist the organization’s goal attainment. Over the last fifteen years, the library as an organization has increasingly demonstrated its need for the expertise found in the ER librarian.

So, what is an ER librarian? The emergence of micro-electronic tools, such as personal computers, and connectivity tools, such as the Internet, has provided many opportunities for all professions to better serve their clientele. Librarianship has also benefited from the capabilities provided by these electronic tools to expand its services to its clients. Just like other professions, librarianship initially used computer technology to automate its traditional functions, such as acquisitions, cataloging, and circulation. During this phase, libraries, especially academic libraries, demonstrated that they recognized the special, professional skills needed for automated activities by the creation of new positions, e.g., automation librarian and systems librarian. This was also the era of librarian-mediated searches of commercial databases, which resulted in the creation in many libraries of positions such as the online search librarian. It was not until the 1990s, as the Internet began to spread its tentacles around the globe that unmediated searches became popular, publishers began to move into the realm of marketing digital products, and a need became clear for yet another type of library professional. Again, academic libraries were the first to identify this new need and created the ER librarian position to fill it: to coordinate access to the wealth of new ER.

One of the authors of this chapter first encountered the concept of the ER librarian while in service as the Dean of Library Services at Central Missouri State University (CMSU) in 1990. As the local area network (LAN) of the CMSU libraries and its number of ER expanded, its executive council discussed the need for a new type of position. The goal of this new position was to fine-tune CMSU’s dynamic,

electronic systems on a continuous basis and to make them convenient for use by service providers and clients.

In subsequent discussions members of the executive council identified the following requirements for the position:

- technical-savvy and the ability to keep up-to-date in a technology environment that continuously changes
- the ability to interact with ease with both technologists and lay-persons
- effective teaching and communication skills

In July 1990, with this somewhat loose definition in place, an electronic services librarian position was advertised and hired; one of the first positions of this type in the country.

From this type of beginning, the ER librarian position has become one of the most critical in academic libraries over the last decade and a half. However, it is still in question whether the position is transitory or whether it has developed the consistency in expertise that will allow it to become a functional specificity: a true subspecialty. H. G. Wells, the well-known British author, wrote that consistency in four factors determines whether a trend is passing or permanent: economic, political, social, and technological. Is the ER librarian a passing trend or has it developed the consistent economic, political, social, and technological characteristics/skills necessary to enable it to become a permanent part of the field of librarianship?

For the purpose of this discussion, economic characteristics are defined as skills or aspects of behavior that facilitate the procurement and efficient use of resources. Technological characteristics are defined as those skills or aspects of behavior that are acquired, either by education or experience, that allow a person to successfully complete well-defined and specific tasks. Political characteristics are defined as those skills or aspects of behavior that are used in a deliberate way to influence people or decision-making toward a desired outcome. Social characteristics are defined as those skills or aspects of behavior that enhance the development and maintenance of relationships through successful interaction and communication with others.

A first step to determine if the ER librarian has become an integrated subspecialty in library organizations is to look at how representatives of organizations outline the requirements for the position in position descriptions: are libraries, as a whole, looking for the same characteristics when they search for an ER librarian? In general, organizational representatives will, consciously or subconsciously, use Wells' four factors as they develop a new position description. The economic impact of the position is a crucial factor to determine whether or not to create or fill such a position in the first place. Technical skills for the position are systematically identified and evaluated. The social and political skills needed for a position may not be as systematically identified, but when a position advertisement indicates requirements such as excellent communication skills, strong interpersonal skills, team-orientation, and

the ability to work with diverse constituencies, it is an indication of an attempt to recruit social and political skills.

In a 2003 article, William Fisher started to codify the key characteristics of an ER librarian through the use of position requirements listed in job advertisements posted to American Libraries between 1985 and 2001.⁴ Fisher found that the top ten characteristics fell into three categories: (1) traditional public service responsibilities, (2) technology-related skills, and (3) personal characteristics. Listed under traditional, public services characteristics were reference services, collection development, and bibliographic instruction. The instruction component was more frequently directed towards the instruction of library staff than library patrons. The technology-related functions included computer applications, online searches, and Web applications. The personal attributes included communication skills, professional experience, management/ coordination experience, and interpersonal skills. Fisher was surprised to find that the position had a significantly higher public services component than expected and that anticipated responsibilities such as vendor relations and license management were not among the most cited characteristics.

A key component of a mature profession is that the key requirements of a particular position within that profession do not change, dramatically, over time. To see if Fisher's key characteristics have held up since 2001, the authors examined position advertisements found in American Libraries from 2002 through March, 2005. Like Fisher, the authors removed from consideration positions with titles that indicated that the activities of the position were extensions of traditional functions, i.e., ER cataloger. The authors also removed from consideration abbreviated advertisements that referred readers to a Web site for full details, if the Web site no longer existed. After all deletions, a total of 25 advertisements were examined.

Although the sample size was considerably smaller than that of Fisher, the three categories still worked well with the new study. Under traditional, public services characteristics, the most frequently mentioned were still reference and instruction. As in Fisher's study, there was a major, internal focus on instruction duties. Missing from this study's public services characteristics was the collection development component replaced by a more, specific emphasis on the selection of ER as part of a team or a consortial effort. In the technology-related area, Web development skills gained the top position. The online searches and non-specific computer application requirements found in Fisher's study disappeared to be replaced by knowledge or experience with library management systems and specific software applications. Excellent communication skills still took the top place in the personal characteristics category of both studies. In a departure from Fisher, general professional experience was replaced by the need for specific, professional experience requirements. Experience with ER was most frequently requested followed by experience in an academic library and project management experience. To be able to work cooperatively also made its way into a top-ten position. One personal attribute, not mentioned by Fisher that appeared in the top-ten list was knowledge of trends in ER. Finally, in a significant departure from the Fisher study, requirements for the ability to handle vendor relations and license management entered the list of top-ten characteristics.

Examined through the prism of Wells' four factors of professional consistency, the current study suggests that they are still applied by the representatives of organizations. The position descriptions examined attempted to include traits or competencies that would enhance the economic value of the person in the position: they advertised for energetic, innovative, dynamic, and motivated persons. To be able to work efficiently was mentioned or implied in various ways and it was common for the economic value of the position to be extended by the inclusion of requirements for skills in or knowledge of library activities such as reference, cataloging, or interlibrary loan (ILL).

In the area of technical skills, a degree from an ALA-accredited program was still a core requirement for all, but four of the institutions. All had requirements that centered, in some fashion, on handling ER. Web development skills topped the list at 72% followed by the ability to implement, use, and provide access to ER and management tools. Knowledge of trends and emergent technologies was also important to almost 50% of the institutions. Other technical competencies mentioned included skills in the facilitation of resource-connectivity (48%) and experience with an integrated library system (ILS) (44%).

Political skills or qualities that would enhance a candidate's effectiveness in the position were also featured prominently in the advertisements. The negotiation of licenses or contracts was mentioned in 48% of the descriptions. The ability to assess, evaluate, and work with vendors as well as products was a requirement of 52% of the descriptions. One-third of the institutions signaled their need for candidates to have prior knowledge of the political landscape by a requirement for previous academic library experience. One-third, also, wanted candidates to have leadership skills.

Social skills were an important part of the position descriptions. The majority of libraries wanted applicants to have excellent communication and interpersonal skills. Possession of excellent communication skills was the fourth highest trait identified overall. The ability to work collaboratively or in teams or to form working relationships was mentioned by almost half of the institutions.

After looking at specific characteristics, the authors attempted to discover the approaches under which this new role for librarians was to be integrated into the parent organization. It is evident that some ambivalence still exists. The reporting lines could be determined in only 13 of the 25 positions advertised. Of those, five reported to the technical services area, four reported to the library's central administration, three were intended to be part of an electronic services unit, and one reported to a coordinator of reference services-collection management. While several of the position advertisements that did not delineate a reporting line described public services responsibilities, which might have suggested the position's placement in the public services area, this could not be verified. Harkening back to Abbott, some of this ambivalence may arise from the origins of the position in the library. For example, if the resources for the position came from the elimination or reconfiguration of another position, e.g., an online search librarian, the library administration might have chosen to keep the ER librarian position in the same unit. Conversely, if the position was developed due to the need for new expertise, i.e., a license negotiator, the administration might have chosen to place the position in the unit where the need for new expertise arose. Despite the ambiguity that surrounds decisions as to where the position belongs in the organizational structure, the descriptions, as a whole, construct a

prototype of what a fully matured ER librarian position could be and how those technical, political, social, and economic characteristics could be used to strengthen an organization.

The strong demand for the ALA-accredited degree found in the position advertisements demonstrates that, in the area of technical skills, the prime requirement for any successful ER librarian is competent librarianship on a broad scale. Like all librarians, the ER librarian provides access to information resources, only in a new and different format and with new and different tools. Hence, this librarian needs to have the professional competence and knowledge necessary to analyze client information needs and match those needs with the appropriate information resources. The ER librarian, also, is called upon to have specialized knowledge that facilitates access to digital information resources. The growth of Web-based applications and services has created a need for the ER librarians to develop and make use of specific skills sets to understand and make use of the software and electronic tools already in use by their parent organizations. Many of the position descriptions called for candidates to have knowledge of specific software packages. These requirements are meant to allow the hiring organization to plan for a shortened start-up time for the new hire and give the organization immediate knowledge of and access to the ER librarian's expertise.

The position advertisements also reveal that the successful ER librarian must have a wide-range of political skills in order to influence decisionmaking towards a desired outcome. Requirements such as leadership, the ability to negotiate, problem-solving skills, and being innovative indicate the need for the ER librarian to have a strong set of political skills. The need for these skills becomes even more apparent with a further examination of the tasks that the ER librarian might be asked to perform.

For example, many of the position descriptions required that the ER librarian provide leadership in the development of the library's ER program; thus, a major political skill that would be required of successful ER librarians would be the ability to anticipate patron needs. While the majority of services provided by the library profession tend to be on-site and face-to-face interactions, ER librarians face the challenge to work with remote clients in a high-technology, virtual environment. This type of service demands that the ER librarian be able to interpret non-traditional, or even vague, input from clients in order to anticipate their various needs. Once these needs are established the ER librarian must develop outcomes that match them.

Once the desired outcome has been determined, steps must then be taken to secure resources to support the project, which is a core, political skill. Thus, ER librarians practice a high degree of diplomacy when they attempt to secure such resources. It is not uncommon for ER librarians to find themselves in situations where they need to communicate highly complex, technological matters to listeners who understand technology at widely varied levels. More often than not, the members of this latter group are decision-makers/funding authorities and may be skeptical when faced with the high degree of ambiguity that is, often, associated with the development of new, electronic information services, which makes diplomacy especially important for the ER librarian who must explain the utility of these new systems. Diplomacy is especially important, also, when representatives of the library work with university administrators who may have a limited view of the benefits of technological enhancements to library users. In this situation, it is important for the ER librarian to gauge the technological-savvy of the

audience and present information in a manner the listeners can understand and to which they will respond. To do otherwise may result in failure to gain support.

Once resources have been procured another political skill, the art of negotiation comes into play. Though not every ER librarian will be expected to negotiate vendor/publisher contracts for digital products and services they are relied upon, more and more, to do so. In order to utilize such a negotiation skill, the librarian must have a firm grasp of the needs of the organization and the will to advocate for these in the face of vendor/publisher reluctance. Effective negotiation work, also, depends upon the technical knowledge previously mentioned. To negotiate for and facilitate new services, ER librarians must be careful/vigilant to comply with applicable legal/license requirements, which means a thorough familiarity with the laws that govern copyright and intellectual property rights.

If the negotiations are successful and all legalities are in place, ER librarians are, once again, called upon to use their diplomatic skills to navigate through uncertain paths in the implementation of new services, which may lead to the utilization of another political skill/characteristic: risk-taking. It will fall upon the ER librarian, sometimes in collaboration with others, to either implement new systems or upgrade extant ones. When the implementation of a new system or service does not proceed as smoothly as the vendor/publishers have indicated it should, the ER librarian must be prepared to address problems that result from interrupted service and the wrath of frustrated users. Hence, successful ER librarians must have the courage and drive to take and accept reasonable risks in order to create an optimum, electronic services environment and the diplomacy to smooth ruffled feathers when upgrades do not go as well as planned.

While political skills are used to get others to buy into organizational goals, well-developed social skills can be used to ensure that participants maintain positive attitudes. The position descriptions examined highlighted the need for strong, social skills by the requirement of excellent communication and interpersonal skills along with the ability to work cooperatively. Libraries are social organizations that rely on social structures to accomplish tasks; thus, the ability to lead and work with teams is a must for ER librarians. To develop and manage major systems involves work with individuals with various skills, backgrounds, personalities, and egos. An ER librarian has to be a skilled consensus-builder in order to develop a team dedicated to a shared vision and goal, to create a productive technological environment, and to meet client needs. Along with the skill to build a team, ER librarians must have the communication skills to explain systems, technical processes, and procedures in a lucid manner and take into consideration the audience's level of technical knowledge. To be able to discern the technical competencies of the members of the team and tailor presentations to the level of team comprehension are important attributes for ER librarians. Other social skills that will be necessary will be the ability to cope with rapid changes as well as to communicate changes to the team members and to help them accept and cope with the changes. Although adaptation to change is a prime requirement for all professions in the information age, it is especially important for ER librarians. While all professions have to deal with some change, the changes faced by librarians and, especially, ER librarians are more fundamental, constant, and rapid. Without the ability to cope with a volatile environment, one should not undertake an ER librarian position.

Beyond the library's walls, ER librarians also need to have social skills that allow them to act as communication bridges when they work with parties who hold different philosophies of access to information. It is often the ER librarian's responsibility to coordinate with librarians the work of information technologists who are responsible to supply the organization's technological infrastructure. The heritage of the technologist is to be concerned with security and control foremost as most of them work in academic computer centers where the primary function is to control access to the organization's computer systems (and the information they contain) according to a set of pre-determined criteria. For example, most non-library organizational systems require a username/password, sign-on process to gain access. Librarians, on the other hand, make their on-line catalogs and resources available to all users with only grudging acceptance of sign-on controls for commercial resources to which there is a subscription. The ER librarian must display tact in order to reconcile the two opposite views so to create a harmonious work environment.

Finally, the position descriptions revealed the economic characteristics library administrators value in a fully matured ER librarian position. It is to an organization's economic advantage to recruit employees who will share the cost of their professional development. The current ER environment is very dynamic and volatile. To be successful, persons who work in this environment must continue to learn and upgrade their professional and technical skills. Given the travel and professional development budgets of many libraries today the parent organization will value an ER librarian who can acquire grants or who will use personal funds to share in the costs of professional development activities. Library administrators will also expect the ER librarian to work within available avenues of professional advancement. Today, this still means that the publication of articles in peer-reviewed journals and conference presentations are the best ways to improve salary, advance in academic ranks, and achieve tenure. Finally, most library administrators will see an economic incentive if they hire an ER librarian who has a skills set that allows the librarian to perform selected, traditional responsibilities beyond ER activities.

In this chapter, the origins of ER librarianship were examined within the context of classic organization theory as well as how the position has developed within the context of economic, political, social, and technical factors. Based on the examination of position advertisements a set of skills that are preferred for the ideal ER librarian have been identified. It is unrealistic to expect that all applicants for an ER librarian position will have all of the proposed skills, but the majority of these skills should be in place, if the ER librarian is to be successful. Whether the position of ER librarian will retain its current importance over time is still in question. Although the examination of recent position advertisements document that core characteristics have developed long-term consistency, the jurisdiction of foundation responsibilities such as license negotiation as well as the ER librarian's role within the organization are still to be determined.

NOTES

1. "More Data, But No Less Paper," *Technology in the Humanities* 11(1) (winter, 2004); <http://www.humanities.uci.edu/hirc/humtech/articles.html> (viewed September 30, 2005).
2. Talcott Parsons, "Suggestions for a Sociological Approach to the Theory of Organizations-I," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 1(1) (1956): 63.
3. Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 215.
4. Andrew Fisher, "The Electronic Resources Librarian Position: A Public Services Phenomenon?" *Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services* 27(2003): 3-17.