

Skills, Knowledge, and Competencies in Special Librarianship

Information Professions

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Abstract

Special librarianship requires extensive educational credentials and specialized knowledge and experience. As society marches tirelessly towards the 'age of big data,' special librarians are charged with an ever-increasing load of information to harness, filter, analyze, and deliver. The challenges presented by the continually evolving landscape of the information profession can best be met with a firm foundation in conventional core competencies in addition to the flexibility to engage with new trends and technologies. Employment opportunities for special librarians can be considerably broadened by thinking outside the box and applying valuable information skills, knowledge and competencies to jobs in non-traditional settings.

Special Librarianship is a profession that requires a high level of education, as well as knowledge and experience in a particular area. Due to the accelerating rate of technological advancements, the role of the special librarian is evolving correspondingly. Modern special librarians are expected to possess the traditional skills of information professionals, in addition to technical competencies and an ability to adapt to a rapidly changing information environment. Traditional and technical skills can be applied to not only conventional roles, but can also be transferred to a wide range of employment opportunities in other sectors.

Dee, Abram & Hunt (2015) point out that special libraries "uniquely focus on diverse and specialized resources with a limited scope, serve specialized and limited users, and often deliver technologically advanced specialized services" (Chapter 9). A significant challenge in delivering these services in the age of information, therefore, is to manage information overload by "filtering for information that is useful (relevant, accurate and timely)" (Financial Times & Special Libraries Association). In order to succeed in a professional environment, special librarians must come to the field prepared with a large scope of skills and competencies.

Special librarianship demands all of the skills that are fundamental to all information professionals. A supplemental set of professional and personal competencies is also desirable. In addition to a master's degree in library and information science (MLIS), special librarians usually "have a second subject-related master's degree with expertise in their organization's subject areas or extensive continuing education and training" (Dee, Abram & Hunt, 2015, Chapter 9). A solid foundation, however, does not begin and end in

the classroom. "Much of the real, practical training happens in internship settings " (Landis, 2015, p. 47).

Shreyer (2006) identifies features that distinguish special collections librarians and archivists as skills "related to format, function, subject, or language, depending on the needs of positions as varied as rare book cataloger, university archivist, metadata specialist, archival processor, conservator, reader services librarian, digital collections specialist, and curator of medieval manuscripts, photography and graphic arts, popular culture, or Western Americana" (p. 49). The work of special librarianship is dependent on "intellectual curiosity that extends to deep interest in the 'stuff'...This, perhaps more than any other personal quality or body of academic and professional expertise, is 'special' about special collections librarianship" (p. 52).

The Special Libraries Association (SLA) defines the necessary professional competencies as: managing information organizations, managing information resources, managing information services, and applying information tools and technologies. Personal competencies include communication skills, the ability to demonstrate their value to the organization, and the flexibility to adapt to changes (Abels, Jones, Latham, Magnoni, & Marshall, 2003).

Based on the results of a study by Robati & Singh (2013), information technology (IT) skills were the most highly valued skills in special librarians. IT skills were followed by information organization, research, and communication and interpersonal skills. The study cited the importance of the abilities to work with and improve an integrated library management system, use search engines and search strategies, use IT to acquire, organize, and disseminate information, work with information banks, and lead information services

to digitization (p. 126-127). These findings are supported by a consultation with special collection librarians, who identified a series of qualities and skills they look for in LIS graduates. They included "collegiality and flexibility, subject specialization at the graduate level, cataloguing and digitization, public service orientation, fundraising ability, interest in working with faculty, and effective teaching" (Fleming, 2006, p.72). Trends in Special Libraries that reinforce the necessity of these competencies include the use of social media, intranets, e-learning, electronic communication, mobile strategies, and quality digital resources (Dee, Abram & Hunt, 2015).

Considering the long list of desired skills, competencies and knowledge required for special librarianship, it is not surprising that a report by a Special Collections Task Force indicated a crisis in filling administrative positions. "Anecdotal evidence suggests that applicant pools are large for the small number of entry-level professional positions, but finding well-suited candidates for middle and senior management roles often proves difficult" (Shreyer, 2006, p. 50).

Fraser-Arnott (2013) analyzed commonly requested competencies in job advertisements. Findings suggest that library and information science professionals have a "skill set that is highly transferable and will be increasingly desirable in the modern knowledge economy" (p. 2). Traditional skills "such as cataloging, reference, instruction, and collection maintenance can be adapted and applied to broader information management activities" (Murray, 2014, p. 328). While maintaining these indispensable core technical capabilities, special librarians can succeed as integrated members of organizations by developing strategic thinking and communication skills, and building key relationships (Financial Times & SLA). "Today's successful special librarians are managing intranets,

digitizing collections, creating archives, synthesizing and analyzing information, and embedding themselves in project teams" (Murray, 2014, p. 328).

The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* of the Bureau of Labor Statistics provides statistics only for the general job description of librarian, and not for the specific job of special librarian. It is predicted that until 2022, jobs for librarians will grow at a slower rate than average for all occupation. The median pay in 2012 was \$55,370 per year. However, the research and analytical skills possessed by librarians could be applied to jobs in other fields. Jobs as market research analysts, for example, will grow at a much faster rate than average. The yearly median pay in 2012 was \$60,300. Jobs as computer and information systems managers are predicted to grow at a faster than average rate. The median pay in 2012 was \$120,950 per year. Therefore, it would be wise for candidates who wish to enter the field of special librarianship to carefully consider how their skill set can be applied to non-traditional jobs.

Special librarians are an organized group of dynamic professionals that take advantage of modern networking opportunities. The SLA, the Society of American Archivists, and ARMA each have websites with links to social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn, as well as RSS feeds. The SLA produces *Information Outlook*, its own online magazine. The *Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship* is an example of a peer-reviewed scholarly literature resource in the field.

The foundational skills of special librarians are firmly planted in tradition, but modern professionals are flexible with the methods and tools they use. As the scope of information services continues to grow and change, and new opportunities emerge, library and information professionals need to keep up with technological developments

without losing sight of the information needs of their clients. The future holds promise for the creative, adaptable, forward thinking special librarian.

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