Chapter 8.11
Staffing the Transition to the Virtual Academic Library:
Competencies, Characteristics, and Change

Todd Chavez
Tampa Library at the University of South Florida-Tampa, USA

Change brought about by innovations in computing technologies has fundamentally altered the nature of work in academic libraries. In his description of the term informatica electronica, Gilbert (1998) suggests that despite the way technology is changing how library staff do their work, it should not change the emphases on traditional services to patrons, such as accessing and retrieving information. This chapter also focuses on human changes that accompany the migration from print to electronic collections, from traditional to online services, and from the academic research library of a decade ago to the virtual library of today and tomorrow.

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The most important management decision to be made remains staffing the academic research library (Tennant, 1998). Historically, this has been a rather straightforward process, including the selection of a pool of candidates, each possessing similar experiences, skills, and competencies. A senior librarian would chair the search committee, with a selection of existing staff. Following one or more interviews, and perhaps a presentation, the library would solicit employment references, make the decision, tender the offer of employment, and the new employee would begin work.

In a nationwide survey, over 4,000 human resources professionals identified the two most significant issues facing their organizations (KnowledgePoint, 2001). Seventy-nine percent of the respondents stated that recruitment of qualified employees was their greatest challenge into the near future while 51% identified retention. Further elements contributing to the challenges of recruitment and retention included compensation, the need to demonstrate value for the employee,

and poor management. Seventy-one percent of the human resources professionals stated that their employees cited improved communication as the most important factor contributing to retention rates. They also identified poor selection skills and practices as contributing to difficulties (KnowledgePoint, 2001).

Clearly, academic libraries are not exempt from many of the same pressures facing the respondents to the survey. In the past, it was possible to identify the specific skills and experiences that were desirable in an employee and either hire an individual with those skill sets or train an existing employee. Given the pace of change in today's academic library, this requires that library administration possess a crystal ball to predict which knowledge base and skills will remain important in the future (Tennant, 1998).

TECHNO-CHANGE AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Lynch and Smith (2001) reported on the results of a content analysis of 220 job announcements over a 25-year period (1973-1998) in College and Research Libraries News. Their research focused on the specific job characteristics listed in the position advertisements. They posited that position announcements in the News were probably representative of current trends and job requirements of the profession as a whole. Several significant trends were reported in this study.

The authors found that few traditional job elements persisted throughout the job announcements. First, although the requirement for a Master's degree in Library Science (MLS) from an American Library Association (ALA) accredited program in Library and Information Science was the most persistent (present in 80% of the advertisements), there has been a decline in M.L.S. requirements, particularly among the largest academic research libraries where special-

ized degrees are often required (Lynch & Smith, 2001). Association of Research Libraries (ARL) salary surveys for the period 1985 to 1998 reveal that a growing percentage of the professionals in these libraries were without the MLS (Lynch & Smith, 2001). Although the authors state that the knowledge, skills, and abilities formed from a library and information science (LIS) education continue to dominate the academic library workforce, an equally valid interpretation is that the ARL institutions are functioning as harbingers of future trends.

Lynch and Smith (2001) also found that computing technologies as they relate to library and information science were incorporated into all jobs and thus were present in all position announcements (emphasis added). The authors conclude that new hires alone cannot meet the academic library's increasing need for technological proficiency; rather, that the institutions must invest in a systematic program of continuing education and training.

In addition, Lynch and Smith discuss the increasing incidence of requirements for instructional experience, emphasizing a desire for teaching skills and knowledge of learning theories and methodologies and a growing and recent emphasis on departmental and unit team environments. Coupled with a concurrent emphasis on behavioral skills, such as effective oral and written communication, flexibility, and creativity, Lynch and Smith conclude that organizational cultures are changing. However, the changing emphasis on teams and increasing solicitation for behavioral skills supporting team organization and interaction is challenged by an apparent contradiction: position announcements for administrative jobs do not reflect the changes in organizational structure implied by the non-administrative position advertisements. What this apparent "disconnect" means for future organizations is not explored, but one may assume that some future crisis will emerge to challenge the existence of two divergent sets of expectations.

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