

Beyond the counter: What skills can the newly qualified professional offer as a Librarian in the public library sector.

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Abstract:

There are general murmurings within the field of Public Libraries that question the need for trained information professionals to fill the post of Librarian. It is proposed by some that the distinction between the roles of Library Assistants and Librarians will effectively disappear. The belief that Library Assistants will be able to take on more or even all of the aspects of the traditional Librarian's job raises concerns, particularly for the newly qualified professional entering the public sector. In an area where reorganisation has resulted in fewer job opportunities, how can the newly qualified Librarian ensure that they provide value in a competitive market?

Three years spent working as a Library Assistant and several months as a RDSM Librarian for a large County Council allows for reflection on the relative roles. What distinct skills can newly qualified professionals offer to the Public Library sector beyond those gained at the counter? What is the role of Public Librarian and which skills are required in today's Public Library service? What is the best way of obtaining these skills?

This paper will use personal reflection to address these questions by considering the current skills needed when working on both sides of the counter and discussing how gaining an information and librarianship qualification was of assistance in preparing for a new career in the public sector.

Introduction:

If you work in a public library there is no way to escape the knowledge that their use has declined over the last 20 years. In more recent times authorities and experts around the UK have looked again at libraries and attempted to update the service for a more modern audience. What is exactly required of the new and improved public library is still open for debate. There are those that believe a return to the traditional is required as the "importance of book collections needs to be emphasised" (Coates 2004, p.8). In other areas a more radical rethink has occurred which presents the public library in a completely different way, as shown by initiatives such as the Idea Stores (Garrod 2004). It may be that there is room for both approaches within the Public Library sector, though not necessarily within any one library building. The type of service provided should depend on what is most appropriate for the majority of the community that the library serves. It is this idea of creating a library service, "in working partnership to engage with communities and enable people to access resources and expertise, information and knowledge" (Dolan 2007, p.2), that unifies most of those who have responsibility for the overall development of the service. The exact method with which this ideal will be achieved is not always clear but the need for change is.

Whatever changes are implemented, they will result in many new challenges for the staff working within the Public library service. When considering who would best provide the type of service required in the future there is a difference of opinion. There are those that believe that it is frontline branch staff that can provide the

expertise that will develop community centred libraries. In some cases and some Local Authorities, the need for qualified librarians has been questioned and the roles traditionally filled by professional staff are now open to all (UNISON 2008, p.32). Throughout the profession numbers of qualified staff are falling in the public sector with 20.5% of library staff in the year 2007-2008 being professional staff as opposed to 23.3% five years previously (LISU 2009). In fact there has been a steady decrease in both total numbers of staff in public libraries and in the percentage of qualified staff (UNISON 2008, p. 31). In many cases reorganisation has resulted in fewer professional posts and the role that remaining professionals are expected to take has also changed. Although aware of differing situations in different authorities, being new to the profession it would be inappropriate to comment on the experiences of others. Therefore, only the situation within one authority will be looked at in any detail. Thus the personal impact of working within a Public Library both as a Library assistant and as a newly qualified Librarian will be considered. The requirements of both posts regarding roles, skills and input will be looked at. In reviewing the two positions the validity of obtaining a further qualification can also be considered.

Background:

The majority of my experience of working in Public Libraries has been gained during the three years working as a Library assistant in Long Eaton Library. This library is a medium sized local library on the border between Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. During this period there were several major changes to the service. Reorganisation affected the whole service during the course of 2006 and 2007. A new library management system was introduced in 2007 and supplier selection was implemented in 2008.

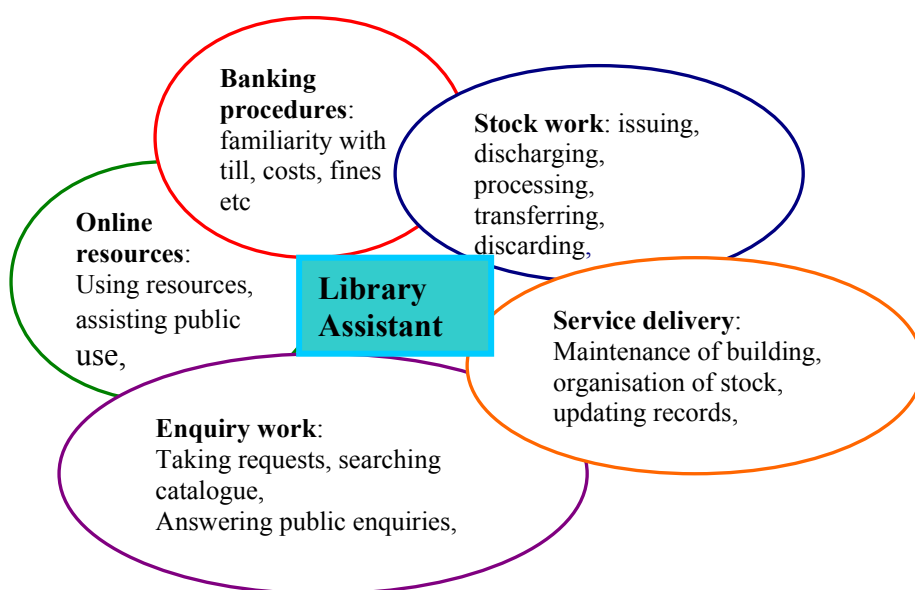
After working as an assistant for a year it was time to extend my experience and the opportunity arose to study for a Masters in Library and Information Management at Loughborough University. This course was completed at the end of 2008 at the same time a vacancy for a RDSM librarian was advertised. Since December 2008 I have been based in Long Eaton Library in this new professional position.

Having been involved with today's Public Library service on both sides of the counter during a period of great change it is possible to reflect on the two different roles from a personal perspective.

Life as a Library assistant:

The day to day role of a Library Assistant will vary in many instances depending on the type of branch that they are working in. It is important to note that at present the vast majority of the work a library assistant is expected to cover is in branch. Most assistants are doing far more than simply shelving and stamping and between them they have the majority of the responsibility for service delivery. Assistants in Charge particularly have responsibilities for buildings, staffing, health and safety and other aspects that must be considered when running a public access building. The main areas involved in the day to day role of a Library Assistant are summarised in diagram 1.

Diagram 1- Summary of tasks undertaken as a Library Assistant.

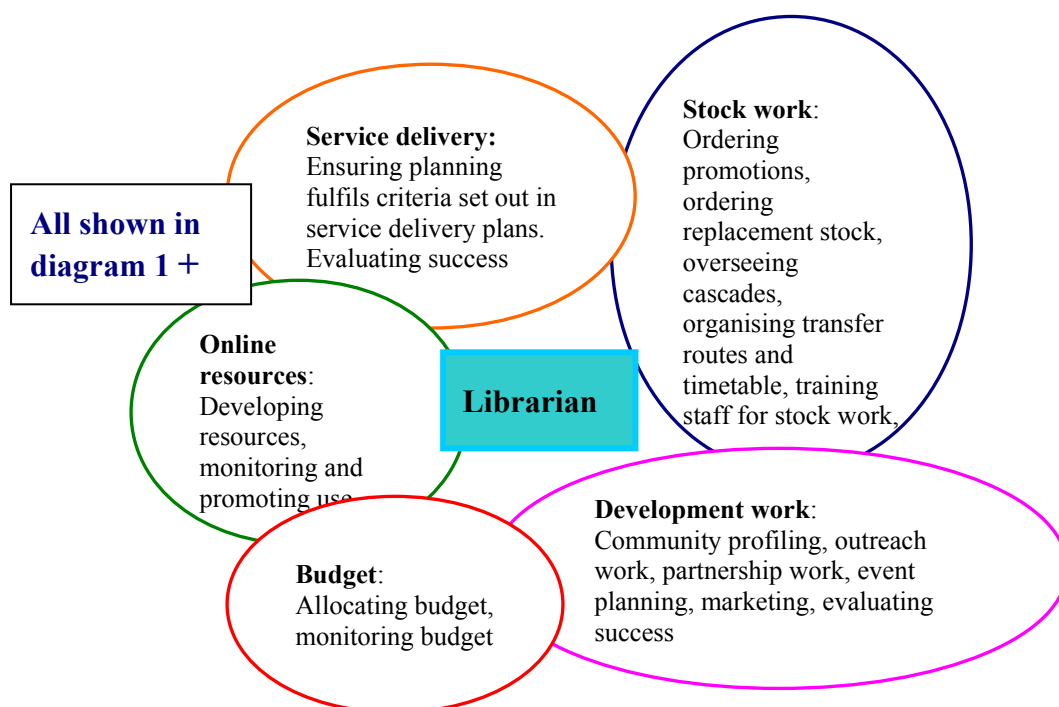


It should be noted that the Library Assistant does not, in general, have to concern themselves beyond the tasks of any particular day. Yes, they deal with the public and so need to be flexible and adjust those tasks but they are not involved in any long term planning or service development. Assistants in Charge are responsible for submitting branch plans but it is the Librarians that provide guidance on the planning process and form the link between the department as a whole and the individual branch. Whether it is necessary for Librarians to do this or whether Senior Library Assistants are capable of taking on the whole of the developmental role are not valid questions at this point. Library Assistants are not traditionally used to doing this type of work and in many cases may prove unwilling to do so. Even if they were able and willing it would still cause difficulties for other branch staff. Falling staff numbers and increased work load are already putting Library Assistants under pressure.

Life as a Librarian

In the same way that the actual role of Library Assistants varies within different branches the expected role of Librarians varies depending on the specific areas they are involved in and the Local Authorities they work for. Within Derbyshire the role of Librarian is perceived as a developmental one. This involves responsibilities with aspects of planning, evaluation and community engagement. Although Librarians are based at a particular branch they may be working in any branch in the area or within community situations. The Librarian has stated work hours but will often be expected to work beyond those hours with evening and weekend events becoming more common. The Librarian has a designated area of expertise but may be called on to input into other areas of the service. There is still an element of branch work that interlinks with the Library Assistants but on the whole, at least in Derbyshire the role of the Librarian takes the work that occurs in branch and extends it beyond the library building. It is the Librarians that are the “Staff- enabled and empowered to lead and deliver customer-focussed services that meet the national entitlement” (Dolan 2007, p.7). The main areas that are involved in the work of a Librarian are summarised in diagram 2.

Diagram 2- Summary of tasks undertaken as a Librarian.



The developmental role of Librarians requires a very different skill set to that of a Library Assistant as the two jobs stand today. Areas such as partnership work, marketing and project planning are all part of a Librarian's brief. Skills such as negotiation, communication and effective time management are required. Expertise in new technologies, continued training and an awareness of the bigger picture are also needed. Librarians must look at the long term and the wider considerations whereas Library Assistants deal with the immediate.

Conclusion

The roles of all staff working within the Public Library service are changing to meet the new requirements of an effective community centred resource. The public perception of library staff may not make the distinction between qualified and non qualified personnel but the differences in roles, required skills and approaches does exist. Obtaining further training will enable staff to take on a more developmental role. The method by which this training is delivered, whether via traditional graduate and postgraduate courses or alternative methods such as ACLIP, is not as important as ensuring that the types of area covered is applicable. Traditional aspects of Librarianship such as cataloguing, collection management and information retrieval should not be ignored as they form the solid foundations of any information management role but they should be amalgamated with those areas that have an increasing influence in the profession. Areas such as marketing and management need to be covered as do the use of electronic resources and the development of personal IT skills. If training providers regularly update the areas their courses cover then the argument that, "Library leaders of the future need skills, crucially including management skills, beyond those that come with a professional librarianship qualification" (DCMS 2005, p.115) will no longer be valid.

Thoughts for the future

Public libraries are changing and the roles of professional staff will continue to alter in response to these changes. It is the responsibility of the individual to continue to adapt and develop within their chosen career. By building on existing skills and remaining open to new ideas and alternative ways of approaching this established field the newly qualified professional has the potential to provide the skills that may be perceived as missing in the service today. It is important that newly qualified staff wishing to prove their value to potential employers emphasise the ability to be a part of developing area and to reinforce the ideas that the Public Library today is about far more than buildings with books and that Librarians are involved in far more than passively over-seeing their use. It is time to accept that;

“Qualified librarians are a community’s guarantee of a quality service. They have the expertise to find, manage and exploit information relevant to the needs of their users. They have the vision and strategic ability to develop services to meet community needs.” (CILIP 2008).

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