



Evidence Summary

Literature Suggests Information Professionals Have Adopted New Roles

A Review of:

Vassilakaki, E. & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, V. (2015). A systematic literature review informing library and information professionals' emerging roles. *New Library World*, 116(1/2), 37-66. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/NLW-05-2014-0060>

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Abstract

Objective – To provide a systematic review of the emerging or newly adopted roles of information professionals, over the past 14 years, as described in the Library and Information Science (LIS) professional literature.

Design – Systematic review of the literature.

Setting – Databases featuring information science content, including ACM Digital Library, Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts (LISTA), Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA), Citeseer, Google Scholar, e-prints in Library and Information Science (e-LiS), Digital Library of Information Science and Technology (DLIST),

Scopus, and Science Direct. The database Library Literature & Information Science Index was not included.

Subjects – Through a systematic literature search, the authors identified 114 peer-reviewed studies published between 2000-2014.

Methods – The authors searched selected databases using the terms “librarian/s role” and “information professional/s role” to collect literature about the roles of information professionals. The authors searched the selected databases in two phases. The initial search yielded 600 search results and the authors included 100 articles about “roles” information professionals have adopted. The authors excluded articles focused on specific

positions, health and medical libraries, librarians' professional skills, and development of specific programs or initiatives within libraries. In the second phase of searching, the authors refined search terms to include phrases specifically related to the roles identified in the 100 articles initially included in the review. There were 48 articles identified in the second search and 14 were included in the final pool of articles. The authors also cross-checked the references of all included literature.

Main Results – The authors identified six roles of information professionals described in the literature during the review period. The role of “embedded librarian” was described in the largest number of articles (42%), followed by “librarian as teacher” (20%), “knowledge manager” (20%), “technology specialist” (9%), “subject librarian” (6%), and “information consultant” (3%).

The study did not identify a dominant journal title or professional conference publishing research on information professionals' roles. Some included literature reported a specific method for investigation, including questionnaires, content analyses, and mixed methods. However, the researchers report that the majority of articles represented personal views or perceptions of the authors.

Conclusion – The roles of information professionals are continually changing, both in practice and in description. In particular, information professionals expanded their roles in teaching during the review period, shedding light on institutional and professional priorities.

Commentary

The authors identified information professional roles that may have emerged or evolved during the review period. In synthesizing the reviewed literature's discussion of each role, the authors offer a detailed view of the scholarly conversation about the evolution of the information profession. This research may indicate that information professionals have assumed new

roles as embedded librarians, particularly in light of changing pedagogical resources and tools that foster new methods of patron interaction. However, the authors' discussion of the other roles – librarian as teacher, knowledge manager, technology specialist, subject librarian, and information consultant – seem more indicative of changing rhetoric than the emergence of new conceptual roles for information professionals. A longer review period might alter this perspective.

The systematic review method is a promising means of quantifying professional discussions on changing roles in the information field. The evidence presented in this article may largely apply to academic libraries because, as the authors note, the majority of articles included in the review were about academic libraries. The authors searched a wide range of databases, following the guidance of Hemingway and Brereton (2009). The focus on peer-reviewed literature discovered through database searches may be the reason that the majority of included articles address academic libraries. This limitation was acknowledged by the authors. While trade and grey literature published by professional associations and consortia may be more difficult to locate in databases, such literature might expand the subject matter to information professionals working outside of higher education.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria employed by the authors reveal ambiguities in LIS professional rhetoric that this research may be unable to overcome. The search terms “librarian/s roles” and “information professional/s roles” were employed to search several databases. However, the authors do not define “role,” nor do they identify other terms they considered and discarded. Research about the “skills” of librarians was also excluded, though the 114 articles ultimately included do discuss librarian “competencies,” “expertise,” “knowledge,” and “training.” “Papers referring to specific positions or specific occupational groups” (p. 39) were excluded, though the article does not explain the distinction between a librarian's “role” and “professional responsibilities.” For example, the authors indicate that the role of

“embedded librarian” dominated the scholarly conversation in the included literature, but the exclusion criteria indicate that “embedded librarianship” is a “type” of librarianship that was excluded from systematic review (2015). New positions and titles in information organizations may well represent emerging roles in areas like scholarly communication, assessment, outreach, emerging technology, and instructional design. Are these roles, professional responsibilities, skills, competencies, or something else?

How information professionals describe their work is a useful inquiry. As a survey of articles about the work information professionals do, this research may inform hiring managers or

other librarians who seek to redefine existing roles or create new roles to fill needs within their libraries. This research could be expanded to include trade and grey literature. Practical applications of this research would be enhanced with refined search terms and terminology that distinguishes between librarian position titles, responsibilities, and competencies.

References

- Hemingway, P. & Brereton, N. (2009). What is a systematic review? *What is...? Series*. Retrieved from <http://www.bandolier.org.uk/painres/download/whatis/Syst-review.pdf>