Chapter XII

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

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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 specialized degrees are often required (Lynch & Smith, 2001). Association of Research Libraries (ARL) salary surveys for the period 1985 to 1998 reveal that a growing
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