



# An exploration of the library and information science professional skills and personal competencies: An Israeli perspective



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## ABSTRACT

The skills and competencies required of library and information science (LIS) professionals working in libraries and information centers have been greatly affected by rapidly evolving information and communication technologies. To understand the effects that change has brought to the LIS profession, a typology of skills and competencies required of LIS professionals in Israel was developed. This typology resulted from the analysis of three different sets of data: job advertisements, course descriptions from LIS departments, and data collected from a survey administered to directors of libraries and information centers in Israel. The content analysis resulted in a typology of 49 skills that were divided into four different clusters: provision of information services, organization of information, technological skills, and personal competencies. Job listings were found to emphasize skills related to the provision of information services as well as personal competencies, while results from the survey revealed that skills related to the organization of information were perceived as essential by library directors. Data collected from course descriptions suggested that LIS departments prepared students to work in advanced technological environments but they did not develop their personal competencies. Traditional LIS skills that support design and provision of information services and making information accessible are still relevant today, while being flexible enough to adapt to changing information environments based on user-centered philosophies of service.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2007 Christine Mackenzie, the manager of the Yarra Plenty Public Library in Australia posited that “libraries are no longer about books or even information. Instead, libraries are about facilitating people to participate, interact and create, to provide the means for that to happen.” (Mackenzie, 2007, p. 120). This statement reflects the complex and ever-changing nature of the library and information science fields that constantly requires LIS professionals to expand the boundaries of their professional skills and personal competencies (Cox & Corral, 2013; Partridge, Lee & Munro, 2010; Singh & Pinki, 2009; ur Rehman, 2010). A skill is a practical ability, a facility in carrying out an action, whereas competency is defined as an attribute that influences how an individual uses skills and interacts with the world (Singh & Pinki, 2009).

## 2. Problem statement

The dramatic changes that the LIS profession has experienced in the last three decades have been the result of rapidly evolving information and communication technologies that have affected the knowledge and skills required of LIS professionals working in libraries and

information centers. In a changing and unpredictable information environment in which LIS professionals need to constantly update and develop their professional skills, LIS academic departments must strive to meet the requirements of their graduates' job settings. Wagner (2000) argued that the future of the LIS profession will be determined by examining “what skills will be required by library information professionals to enable them to adapt to new and changing demands in society” (p. 154). Hence, mapping and understanding these skills and competencies are important because they help define future requirements of the LIS professional job market (Mathews & Pardue, 2009). However, even though several attempts have been made to categorize the LIS skills and competencies in the past, these studies have presented a limited scope by focusing on a set of skills for a specific role such as knowledge managers (Harper, 2013), digital librarians (Choi & Rasmussen, 2009), technical services (Fessler, 2007), information literacy instruction (Austin & Bhandol, 2013), and reference services (Gottfried, 2013); or have analyzed only one type of data such as job advertisements (Orme, 2008; Saunders, 2012; Trembach, Deng, & Thomas, 2012) or LIS curricula (Edegbo, 2010; Hider, Kennan, Hay, McCausland, & Qayyum, 2011; Robati & Singh, 2013). The current study addresses this gap by providing a more comprehensive view of the subject and developing an updated typology of LIS skills and competencies from three different sets of data: job advertisements, course descriptions, and survey responses of directors of libraries and information centers in Israel.

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The combination of these three sets of empirical data represents an innovative approach that presents an updated view of the personal competencies and professional skills required of LIS professionals in Israel.

The research questions to be examined refer to the four clusters that comprise the typology developed (i.e., information provision, organization of information, technological skills, and personal competencies) and to the three samples examined in the study (job advertisements, course descriptions, and survey responses from library directors). The number of occurrences in the following questions refers to the number of times that a skill or competency appears in the data examined:

1. Which cluster has the highest number of occurrences of skills or competencies in each of the three samples?
2. Which skill or competency is the most salient in each of the three samples?
3. Which cluster has the highest number of occurrences of skills or competencies in the job advertisements sample per type of library?
4. Which cluster has the highest number of occurrences of skills or competencies in the directors' survey sample per type of library?
5. Which cluster has the highest number of occurrences of skills or competencies in the course descriptions sample?

### 3. Literature review

#### 3.1. Changing job descriptions

Content analysis of job advertisements is one of the most common methods used to examine the LIS job market since advertisements are an easily available indicator of the short and mid-term direction of workplace demands for particular knowledge, skills, and competencies (Cullen, 2004; Myburgh, 2003; Wise, Henninger, & Kennan, 2011). Harper (2012) stated that studies that examine job ads are particularly relevant for positions in areas outside the traditional LIS roles, like knowledge management (KM). Two earlier studies found that the majority of positions advertised required an ALA accredited master degree (Wright, 1988) and that public service positions required more advanced degrees while technical positions required more computer skills (Reser & Schuneman, 1992). Xu (1996) analyzed job advertisements in the United States over a period of almost 20 years, from 1971 to 1990, to investigate the impact of technology on reference and cataloging positions. His study revealed that computer skill requirements increased for both categories of librarians. He also noted that a demand for communication skills first appeared in his data in 1976. In a second longitudinal study, Heimer (2002) tried to define “electronic librarianship” by looking at job listings from 1989 to 1998. She found that this position combined reference and technological skills with training, liaison abilities, and knowledge of collection development. Collection liaison was also revealed as a desired skill in another American study that analyzed job advertisements for electronic or digital positions for the period 1990–2000 and found that a large percentage of the positions included supervisory responsibilities (Croneis & Henderson, 2002). Westbrook and Fabian (2010) investigated the ways by which librarians acquire training/instruction skills and concluded that there is still a gap between professional education and professional requirements and that most librarians are still most likely to acquire pedagogical proficiencies mainly outside their library school education. In a more recent longitudinal study that investigated the development of reference positions in academic libraries in the USA, Wang, Tang, and Knight (2010) reported a strong growth in reference services in comparison to other library positions that require higher educational backgrounds. They also found that reference librarians have had new duties and responsibilities added to their reference positions.

According to Lynch and Smith (2001), personal competencies began to appear in job advertisements for reference librarians in the early 1990s, emphasizing oral and written communication skills because librarians need to be able to communicate effectively with patrons

about new information formats and new ways of accessing information. Goulding, Bromham, Hannabuss, and Cramer (1999) examined job listings to identify the personal characteristics required of LIS professionals and found four essential qualities: communication skills, flexibility, and the ability to work under pressure and deal with a range of users. In their study of position announcements in American academic libraries, Lynch and Smith (2001) showed that together with communication skills, leadership, and creativity, computer skills were regularly mentioned in ads. Choi and Rasmussen (2009) reported that for libraries in the US, the most frequently mentioned qualifications were technological knowledge and management followed by expertise on current trends in the digital library environment. Their examination also found that communication and interpersonal skills appeared most frequently in the ads examined. Bychowski et al. (2010) posited that besides a basic grounding in library science, the majority of job ads ask for good people skills. That is, “all of the science knowledge in the world will not help a librarian if she cannot effectively help others find information or clearly communicate with them”. In a recent analysis of knowledge management (KM) job ads in the UK, Harper (2013) revealed that there was an emphasis on a candidate's ability to build and maintain relationships and be a “confident and proactive person with excellent interpersonal and communication skills.” (p. 724).

Other international studies have presented similar pictures of the job market. Cullen's (2000) analysis of LIS job announcements appearing in two Irish newspapers revealed the importance of information technology and communication skills. Kennan, Willard, and Wilson (2006) published a longitudinal study that analyzed job ads in an Australian newspaper for a period of four weeks in four different decades. They found that the data reflected a lack of uniformity in LIS qualifications and an increasing lack of reference to specific professional positions that have become more specialized and focused on personal competencies such as interpersonal skills. Myburgh (2003, 2005) undertook a five year longitudinal study of job ads from newspapers and listservs in Australia that showed that employers expected LIS professionals to understand the effect of information technologies on scientific research and the principles of records management, and to be able to assess, implement, and monitor new information technologies. Gerolimos and Konsta (2008) collected job advertisements from the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States and found that communications skills were one of the highest ranking skills, followed by experience working in libraries. In a study that analyzed job advertisements from British newspapers, Orme (2008) categorized her results into three categories of skills: generic, personal, and professional. Her findings indicated that generic skills such as communication, general computing, and teamwork were most normally required, followed by professional skills such as cataloging and classification. In another study that investigated UK job ads in the area of knowledge management, Harper (2013) showed that KM jobs required a wide variety of technological skills, such as development of databases and Web 2.0 tools, as well as personal competencies such as strategic and relationship management. In a recent study Raju (2014) analyzed job ads appearing in a South African newspaper and conducted a series of semi-structured interviews. He reported that traditional skills of information management followed by supervisory skills and initiative were the three elements that received the highest rankings.

#### 3.2. Expectations from LIS educators: course descriptions

The formal education of LIS professionals has to take into account the diversity of information work in the 21st century. Logan and Hsieh-Yee (2001) argue that the LIS curricula have changed as a response to the development of the information economy that brought with it technological innovations, diversification in delivery formats, and continued awareness of global issues. Liu (2004) analyzed course syllabi related to education for digital libraries in North America, Europe, and Asia and found that courses offered on this subject have dramatically increased over the past years. In 2003, Audunson, Nordlie, and Spangen

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