Developing A Framework for Educating and Training Mid-Career LIS Professionals

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses selected results of a survey of the continuing professional development (CPD) needs of mid-career librarians. While there are many studies of the CPD needs of librarians at an early stage in their library careers, information about the needs and practices of those who have been in the profession for some years is lacking. The online survey was designed to identify the areas in which these mid-career librarians felt that they needed development, and their preferences for delivery methods and mechanisms. The results are used to develop a framework for the education and training of this group of library professionals.

TOPICS:

Education of information professionals; Continuing education; Education programs/schools

INTRODUCTION

The rapid pace of change in the information environment has led to many discussions in library and information science (LIS) publications about the skills, knowledge and competences library professionals need to operate effectively and meet their users' needs (Audunson, 2007; Broady-Preston, 2009; Wilson & Halpin, 2006). The majority of studies focus on the formal education of those new to the profession, however, with few specifically considering the qualifications, skills, and knowledge LIS professionals need when moving into mid- and late-career positions (Lyon et al, 2011; Rafiq & Arif, 2017). This paper aims to address the lack of information on mid-career librarians' continuing professional development (CPD) practices, needs, and preferences through the presentation of selected results of an online survey of this group of professionals. In the paper, we use the term 'formal education' when referring to traditional LIS education involving direct interaction between teachers and learners. 'Informal education' includes flexible learning opportunities often offered through the Internet in the form of self-paced courses. In addition to formal and informal education, 'training', taken here to mean the development of new and improved skills, also plays a part in professional development.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS

Mid-career library professionals currently have few structured or formal education options for professional development, although some LIS tertiary education programs have developed short courses and/or offer current courses to graduates for upskilling (Broady-Preston & Bell, 2001; Corral, 2010). Professional organizations also offer courses for ongoing professional

development but these are often intended for new professionals, rather than those at higher levels. Specialized training courses, content offered by non-traditional educators like Library Juice, or vendor training are also options for developing an LIS professional's skills and knowledge, but the short course format may not provide enough detail for true specialization. In addition, many informal education options, such as self-paced tutorials on the internet, cover a variety of technological and communication skills, although their quality and currency varies considerably. Despite this variety of professional development opportunities, their current ad-hoc nature means that LIS professionals need to take individual action to keep their knowledge up to date, and there are no widely-accepted frameworks allowing them and their employers to assess their progress. The problem that this research addresses is that while CPD is vital for mid-career library professionals to keep current with developments in the field and to prepare them for senior management positions, the extant body of knowledge suggests that they are not receiving the relevant support and training they require to do so. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical research evidence relating to this group's CPD needs, practices and preferred modes of delivery which can be used to design CPD opportunities relevant to their position and requirements.

The objectives of the study are:

- To identify the skills required by LIS professionals at different career stages
- To propose a framework for educating and training mid-career professionals that incorporates both ongoing professional development and formal qualifications

To that end, this paper discusses the preliminary results of a survey of the professional development needs of mid-career librarians in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This paper gives an overview of key results and discusses the similarities and differences in the mid-career development needs of librarians within national contexts. The paper concludes by presenting a basic framework for LIS educators and mid-career professionals to support ongoing career development.

BACKGROUND

Research and literature about the skills, knowledge and competency needs of librarians often focus on the content of initial professional qualifications and programs (e.g. Robinson and Bawden, 2017). In the LIS field, post-graduate education has become the norm in most Western countries, making a Master's degree following a Bachelor's degree in any subject the standard entry-level professional qualification, particularly in North America (Swigger, 2010). In a recent article, Chawner and Oliver (2016) identified alternative models to this type of qualification, in part to meet the challenges and changing demands of the field. They also identify the lack of advanced qualifications that build on an entry-level qualification as one of the major differences distinguishing LIS from other professions. For those looking for new positions or new challenges, a lack of formal continuing study options can present an obstacle when they are asked to present evidence of their development and skills (La Chapelle & Wark, 2014; Peet, 2017). This situation presents an opportunity for LIS programs to work with professional organizations and other stakeholders to expand LIS education opportunities using a more formalized approach. Before this can be achieved, however, there needs to be a clear understanding of the development requirements of this group of library professionals.

While there have been studies of development needs in specific areas of professional practice (e.g. competencies for bibliometrics (Cox et al., 2017)) there has been less discussion specifically focused on the qualifications, skills, and knowledge an LIS professional needs when moving into mid- and late-career positions (Lyon et al, 2011; Rafiq & Arif, 2017). Currently, LIS professionals interested in expanding their knowledge and skills following their initial qualification have access to a range of formal and informal educational experiences that offer varying levels of learning opportunities. Studies have found, however, that many of these experiences lack formality and certification requirements and that engagement in CPD for mid-career information professionals relies primarily on the personal motivation of the individual (Burton & Lyon, 2017; Corcoran, & McGuinness, 2014). Despite this patchy picture of ongoing CPD opportunities for those who have been in the profession for some years, the need for librarians to be interested in, and willing to engage in, lifelong learning is highlighted in many studies (e.g. Partridge, Lee & Munro, 2010). The results of the 8Rs studies in Canada present a comprehensive picture of the changing nature of academic library work, and support those emphasizing the need for librarians to continue to develop their skills and knowledge (DeLong, Sorenson and Williamson, 2015). Of particular relevance to the study reported here is their data on training participation rates which often showed a gap between interest and participation. The authors question the extent to which librarians' development interests and needs align with those of their institutions, and whether current training and development programs meet both staff and institutional needs. The study reported here will explore these issues from the perspective of mid-career librarians.

METHODS

The study employed the descriptive survey method (Pickard, 2013). This is appropriate because the research aims to develop knowledge about a particular issue, enabling us to describe the situation more completely than previously. An online questionnaire using the Qualtrics online survey software was designed, and a link to the survey was distributed via LIS email lists in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The link was also distributed via social media. The email message sent to the lists invited mid-career professionals to take the survey so the sample is self-defining and self-selecting. The sampling method is a combination of convenience and purposeful/judgement sampling as it targeted those within easy reach (convenience sampling) while also seeking responses from those with the characteristics required (purposeful/judgement sampling) (Etikan & Musa, 2016). Because of the nature of the sample, the results cannot be generalized to the wider population but the results do provide a more informed understanding of the situation with regard to the CPD of mid-career professionals.

The questionnaire gathered data on the background of respondents (age, position, sector etc.) and then asked questions relating to their current CPD practices, needs and preferences. Participants were asked about their career goals, the skills they believe are essential for meeting those goals, and the extent to which their current CPD activity is helping them achieve them. They were also asked about formal and informal ongoing professional development activities, and their interest in undertaking further study. Most of the questions were closed-end but some free text boxes were included. The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS to identify the demographic characteristics of respondents, their educational background, which types of CDP they have used, their preferred topics for further development, and their preferences for CPD delivery. The

qualitative data from the free text boxes were coded into categories or broad themes using an emergent coding process, where codes emerged from a close reading of responses.

The survey had over 600 responses and participants were from all five countries targeted and from further afield.

FINDINGS

Preliminary data analysis indicates that 40% of participants worked in academic libraries and 40% worked in public libraries. Around 90% were between the ages of 31 and 60, suggesting that participants were mid-career professionals as intended. Over 75% of respondents had a Masters degree and more than 40% self-identified as a Librarian or Assistant Librarian. The vast majority (over 75%) were members of professional associations.

A majority (55%) noted that they were likely to be looking for a new job in the short or medium term, and over 90% were planning to pursue professional development. Turning to the areas that respondents felt were a priority for their development, management and leadership was selected by the highest number of respondents followed by the management of technology and then teaching and learning. Respondents also noted a large range of specific topics within the broad categories in which they thought they required development. While a small proportion of participants were undertaking formal study leading to a qualification, there seemed to be a preference for CPD activities which used more formal methods, e.g. presentations followed by discussions and activities, and over 60% said it was important to some extent that they gained recognition for their involvement in CPD. A majority of respondents said that their CPD needs were being met although many of the free-text comments at the end of the survey noted the difficulty of funding and resourcing development activities.

CONCLUSION

The evidence suggests that the mid-career professionals participating in this research were interested in undertaking CPD and that management and leadership is the area in which the highest number feel that they require development. The results of the research have informed a mapping of skills of mid-career professionals and the types of CPD opportunities appropriate to develop those skills. The mapping forms the basis of a framework for LIS educators, employers and mid-career professionals to support ongoing career development to be presented in the full paper.

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