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Core competencies for academic reference librarians in Croatia

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Abstract: The paper presents results of a survey of reference librarians in Croatian academic libraries. The survey is a part of an international study. Survey findings provide valuable data regarding skills and competencies needed in the reference departments today and in the future. Three groups of skills and competencies are analysed – general skills, technology skills and personal skills. Conclusions are made about the present competencies of Croatian reference librarians in academic libraries as well as about the importance of lifelong learning for improving their competencies in future.

Keywords: academic library, reference librarian, competencies, skills

1. Introduction

The first nationwide investigation into subject of LIS competency framework in Croatia was conducted in 2009 as presented by Machala and Horvat (2010). In 2009 the Training Centre for Continuing Education of Librarians obtained funds from the National Foundation for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development to carry out a one-year project "Lifelong learning for librarians: learning outcomes and flexibility" (2009). A comparative analysis of data gathered by librarians and library managers revealed key subject-specific and generic competencies in field of library and information science in Croatia. The findings of the research were used to create a model of LIS competency framework strongly valued by labour market. The model was used in creating some of the questions in the questionnaire for this survey.

Our survey findings will provide valuable data regarding the skills and competencies needed in the reference departments now and in the future. It will help us make some conclusions about the present formal education of Croatian reference librarians in academic libraries as well as about the importance of lifelong learning for improving their competencies in the future. Academic LIS

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education in Croatia has thirty-five year old tradition. From the very beginning reference has been core in the LIS curriculum. The Library Act (1997) stipulates that only graduate librarians may be employed in libraries. After a state examination graduate librarians have the opportunity to advance and become senior librarians and senior advisors. Continuing professional development for librarians in Croatia was institutionalized in 2002 through centrally established Training Centre for Continuing Education of Librarians. Croatian academic libraries were affected by three main factors at the beginning of 21st century: changes in the system of higher education, development of information technology and the processes in the overall social and political environment (Petрак and Aparac-Jelusic, 2005).

If we look outside of Croatia, in 2003 Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), a division of the American Library Association, approved Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians. The purpose of the guideline is to provide librarians, libraries, and information centres with a model statement of competencies essential for successful reference and user services librarians. These competencies are focused on the abilities, skills, and knowledge that makes reference and user services librarians unique from other professionals. Competencies are defined as behaviours that excellent performers exhibit more consistently and effectively than average performers. A behavioural basis is necessary because effective assessment of competencies depends on observed behaviour. Reference librarians are defined as librarians that assist, advice, and instruct users in accessing all forms of recorded knowledge. The assistance, advice, and instruction include both direct and indirect service to users. Competencies must be relevant to the particular job requirements, in this case to academe. Therefore, individuals and organizations applying these guidelines may wish to select those strategies for meeting the competency goals that are most appropriate to their situation. At the international level, IFLA Digital Reference Guidelines had not been developed further to a document explicitly on competencies.

In 2010 Bosanquet wrote about core skills and competencies, stressing the fact that usually wider environments in which people work fail to recognize complexities of reference work and the contribution that the information professional makes to keeping accessible relevant information available from the desk top. Library profession must determine its core business, create a value proposition and utilise its core competencies to deliver outcomes aligned to the strategic objectives of its funding body. Profession has to be a central player in the digitised information landscape (Bosanquet, 2010). Academic reference librarians are being asked to take on a wider range of roles on their campuses and they need a framework for their professional development (Cmor, 2010).

Our survey will try to put competencies of Croatian academic reference librarians in the context of new trends and developments.

2. Sample, methodology and hypothesis of research

The survey is a part of an international study which covers 14 countries (Australia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, France, Greece, Mexico, Netherlands,

New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Romania, Turkey and USA). A unique questionnaire was made and the teams from each country had to translate it, distribute it to reference librarians in academic libraries and analyse results. This paper presents the analysis of Croatian results. Questionnaire consisted of 23 questions that were organised in five groups. The first group consisted of 7 questions about the respondents' age, gender, working experience and education. The second group offered two questions about what the respondents do in a typical week. Those questions were followed by the third group with six questions about respondents' opinion of the most important general, technology and personal skills of today's reference librarian in academic libraries. In the fourth group of another six questions respondents were asked about the most important general, technology and personal skills that reference librarians have to develop to meet professional demands over the next decade. The last group posed two questions on what skills and knowledge requirements have changed for reference librarians over the last five to ten years.

In November 2011 the online questionnaire was sent to reference librarians in all the Croatian university and faculty libraries. The list of 83 libraries was extracted from the Ministry of Culture Library Database (2011) and from several other lists available at the Croatian National and University Library website (2011). Websites of all the libraries from our sample were searched for names and e-mail addresses of reference librarians. All of them were invited to answer our online questionnaire. When a reference librarian could not be identified, the invitation was sent to the library director or another librarian who was asked to forward it to the reference librarian in the library. One librarian from each library was expected to answer the questions. Each librarian received an e-mail message explaining the purpose of the study with a link to a web-based survey. The survey was anonymous. Three weeks after the initial invitation (November 2011), invitation was repeated, and two months after the initial invitation the survey was closed. During this period 61 librarians answered the survey (response rate 73.5%). Total number of respondents varies from question to question (from 36 to 58) as not all the respondents filled in the survey completely. Close-ended questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics including frequency counts and percentages, while open-ended questions were coded using content analysis.

We had three hypotheses for our survey. First of all, we presumed that formal education is of a great importance for being a good reference librarian. Secondly, we knew that there is a lack of library staff in Croatian academic libraries. That is the reason why sometimes one or two librarians in, e.g., faculty library, have to do all the work (acquisition, management, cataloguing, circulation, reference work etc.). The third hypothesis was that Croatian reference librarians in academic libraries think that the most important general skills are IT skills, search skills and foreign languages; that the most important technology skill is online searching and the most important personal skills are verbal and written communication.

3. Results

There are 91.5% female and 8.5% male reference librarians in our sample. Under 30 years of age are 11.7% of them, 28.3% are between 31 and 40 years of age, 26.7% are between 41 and 50 years of age, 28.3% between 51 and 60 years, and 5% are older than 60. All Croatian reference librarians in academic libraries have MA, 86.2% of them in LIS and at least one other scientific field. Another 13.8% have MA in other discipline(s).

Table 1. Typical activities of reference librarians in Croatian academic libraries

	Activity	%
1	Database search	76.2
2	Circulation	59.5
3	Answering reference questions	59.5
4	Cataloguing	54.8
5	Acquisition	42.9
6	User education	42.9
7	Giving information about library	40.5
8	Online reference services	40.5
9	Inter library loan	35.7
10	Inventory	35.7
11	Classification	35.7
12	Catalogue search	33.3

Asked about working experience in the library, 3.4% answered that they had less than one year of working experience in the library, 8.6% answered that they had one to three years of experience, 15.5% had four to seven years of experience, 32.8% had 8-15 years of working experience, 15.5% had worked for 16-20 years in the library, 6.9% for 21 to 25 years, 6.9% for 26-30 years, and 10.3% for more than 30 years.

What the most usual work reference librarians do in a typical week is database search (76.2%). Circulation is the second most usual activity (59.5%), as well as answering reference questions (59.5%). We can say that those three activities are the most important to reference librarians. But they are followed by some activities supporting reference service such as cataloguing and acquisition. Interlibrary loan is present in 35.7 libraries and followed by catalogue search (33.3%). Online reference services are expected to be on a higher place in future – today, only 40.5% mark them as typical activity. Table 1 shows the twelve respondents' most usual weekly activities. Some other activities (done weekly by less than 30% of respondents) are budgeting, promotion, marketing, collection development, exhibitions, statistics and preservation.

Asked about the most important general competencies and skills, librarians consider search skills as the most important skills (82.9%). All the other skills, except IT skills with 34.1%, are not so important. Table 2 shows general skills that were chosen by respondents as the most important skills for a reference

librarian in an academic library today. It is interesting that only 9.8% of respondents consider foreign languages as an important skill. Nevertheless, the skill is important while performing majority of other actions, such as searching (that is of a great importance for the respondents). We presume that there is no reference librarian in Croatian academic libraries who does not use English language on an everyday basis, so presumably they think that there is no doubt about the need of knowledge of the English language.

Table 2. Important general competencies and skills for reference librarians in Croatian academic libraries

	General skill	%
1	Search skills	82.9
2	IT skills	34.1
3	Traditional reference interview	14.6
4	Autonomy in work	9.8
5	Foreign languages	9.8
6	Managing new situations	4.9
7	Classification	2.4
8	Research	2.4
9	Collection management	2.4
10	Cataloguing	2.4

Another set of skills are technology skills. The most important technology skill for our respondents is online searching (97.8%), skill that is closely related to the highest ranked general skill. Surprisingly, the second most important technology skill is web maintenance. That shows the variety of activities that reference librarians in Croatian academic library have to do. Very important skill is communication through social media (64.4%). Social networking sites (SNS), as one of the most important Web 2.0 services, became very popular during the last six or seven years.

Libraries are aware of it, they try to be where their users are and that is the reason why reference librarians have to do some of their reference work on SNSs. Less important technology skills (5% or less) are Web design, software and hardware troubleshooting, chat and instant messaging (IM).

Table 3 shows which technology skills reference librarians in Croatian libraries consider the most important. Traditional reference interview (14.6%) seems not that important because academic librarians know their user profile well.

Table 3. Important technology skills for reference librarians in Croatian academic libraries

	Technology skills	%
1	Online searching	90.0
2	Web maintenance	50.0
3	Social media	25.0
4	Web design	5.0

5	Software troubleshooting	5.0
6	Chat/IM	5.0
7	Hardware troubleshooting	2.5

Table 4 shows personal skills and percentage of reference librarians in Croatian academic libraries that think those skills are the most important. For librarians in Croatian academic libraries the far most important personal skill is verbal communication (90.2%). That was expectable, because of the nature of reference work – reference librarians have to know how to communicate with their users in order to offer the best possible service. Some of the other important personal skills are closely related to verbal communication – working in teams (22%), approachability (22%), adaptability (22%), written communication (19.5%). It is interesting that the ratio of teaching skills and listening is 1:1 (14.6%) showing appropriate behaviour of information librarian. Other personal skills are self-motivation, organizational awareness, listening, stress management and others.

Table 4. Important personal skills for reference librarians in Croatian academic libraries

	Personal skill	%
1	Verbal communication	90.2
2	Working in teams	22.0
3	Approachability	22.0
4	Self-motivation	22.0
5	Adaptability/flexibility	22.0
6	Written communication	19.5
7	Organizational awareness	19.5
8	Listening	14.6
9	Teaching skills	14.6
10	Building relationships with co-workers	9.8
11	Stress management	4.9
12	Conflict management	4.9
13	Sense of humour	4.9

After choosing the most important skills for today's reference librarians, respondents were asked to mark general, technology and personal skills for the next decade (Table 5). The most important general skill for future is the same skill that is the most important today – search skill (93.9%). Respondents think that foreign languages will be more important in the future than they are today (they put the skill on the second place). Other general skills for the next decade are: managing new situations, self-reliance, IT skills, traditional reference interview, collection management and others.

Table 5. General skills for the next decade

	General skills	%
1	Search skills	93.9
2	Foreign language	15.2
3	Managing new situations	9.1
4	Self-reliance	9.1
5	IT skills	9.1
6	Traditional reference interview	9.1
7	Collection management	9.1
8	Research	6.1
9	Classification	6.1
10	Cataloguing	6.1
11	Ethics	3.0
12	Publishing	3.0

The analysis of technology skills for the next decade shows similar results to those for today – the most important is online searching (92.9%), followed by Web maintenance, social media, Web design and others (Table 6). Although the results show the same ranking as the results for today’s technology skills, we can see that percentages are different (except for online searching) - Web maintenance will be more important in the future (69% comparing to 50% in the Table 3), social media will also be more important (64.3% comparing to the 25% in the Table 3), Web design as well (38.1% comparing to 5%), software troubleshooting (31% vs. 5%) and chat (21.4% vs. 5%).

Table 6. Technology skills for the next decade

	Technology skill	%
1	Online searching	92.9
2	Web maintenance	69.0
3	Social media	64.3
4	Web design	38.1
5	Software troubleshooting	31.0
6	Chat/IM	21.4
7	Programming	9.5
8	Hardware troubleshooting	9.5

Important personal skills for the next decade are also similar to the important personal skills for today. The most important is again verbal communication (63.6%), followed by teaching skills (36.4%), self-motivation (24.2%)... List of the ten most important personal skills for the next decade, according to reference librarians in Croatian academic libraries, is in Table 7.

An open-ended question was – which skills and knowledge requirements have changed for reference librarians over the last five to ten years. The answers were that today we have more available information, higher need for information, better access to information, we have less printed sources, we have new library

services that evolved from new technologies, and we have SNSs. Foreign languages (especially English) are more important than in previous times. Also, comparing to the last decade, there is higher need for information literacy education, automated library systems are used and there is more stress at work. Those are the reasons why today, comparing to the past, more search skills, language skills, web design skills and educational skills are required.

Table 7. Personal skills for the next decade

	Personal skills	%
1	Verbal communication	63.6
2	Teaching skills	36.4
3	Self-motivation	24.2
4	Written communication	15.2
5	Listening	15.2
6	Working in teams	15.2
7	Approachability	15.2
8	Adaptability / flexibility	15.2
9	Organizational awareness	15.2
10	Conflict management	12.1

Asked what skills or knowledge had they noticed lacking in their new hires, 37% of respondents answered – nothing. That is encouraging percentage that proves that lots of young librarians have all the skills they need. Respondents think that their new colleagues should be better at working in teams (18.5%) and more self-motivated (18.5%). Answers to the question are shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Skills respondents have noticed lacking in their new hires

	Skills	%
1	Nothing	37.0
2	Working in teams	18.5
3	Self-motivation	18.5
4	Verbal communication	7.4
5	Search skills	7.4
6	Technology skills	7.4
7	Cataloguing	7.4
8	Empathy	7.4
9	Knowledge of e-sources (databases)	3.7
10	Current developments awareness (professional)	3.7
11	Listening	3.7
12	Organizational awareness	3.7

4. Conclusion

The analysis confirmed all our hypotheses. Firstly, all the reference librarians in Croatian academic libraries have at least MA degree, most of them in library and information science. Formal education is of a great importance for reference

librarians, as well as lifelong learning because new IT development requires new knowledge, skills and competencies. As we presumed, there is lack of library staff in Croatian academic libraries. Each academic library should have its reference librarian who should be only reference librarian and not do all the other work in the library.

Our investigation of academic reference librarians confirms that core competencies are predominantly user-oriented and technologically driven in 'bibliographical' perspective as stated by Machala and Horvat (2010).

There are no big differences between the present situation and respondents views concerning future general, technology and personal skills. The most important skills are search and IT skills, web maintenance and verbal communication. Foreign languages are considered to be of greater importance in the next decade than they are today. Respondents' views on reference librarian's qualification required in the future sound very promising for us as educators: graduated librarian (66 %), senior librarian (23.4 %) and library advisor (2.1 %).

The next step in our survey is comparison with the results of other 13 international teams as a part of international study.

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