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Editorial: On Information Literacy in the Library Workforce

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Recent industry reports express growing concerns of employers about the preparation of employees for the demands of 21st century jobs^{1,2,3 4,5,6,7,8,9}. Those concerns include competence in information literacy. Related abilities needed are engagement in lifelong learning and the ability to think critically and solve problems. A common definition of an information literate person is one who knows when s/he needs information; can identify the information that will best answer a question or resolve a problem; can find, evaluate, and organize the information; and can communicate the information effectively¹⁰. Information literacy in the workplace includes those competencies as well as the ability to: summarize the information that was gathered; place the information in the context of the work task; apply the information to the work situation; evaluate the actions that were taken based on this information; and revise these steps as appropriate¹¹.

The library profession has led the development and promotion of information literacy in K-16 educational settings. But have libraries fostered information literacy in their employees, as they do in the clientele they serve? There is little published evidence to indicate that this is the case. The literature in our field describes the need for those who work in libraries to be flexible in assuming new roles and responsibilities and to adapt readily to change. There seems to be a disconnect between the competencies that those who work in libraries need to have and the means to achieve those competencies. Were libraries to have the expectation that those who work there demonstrate competence in information literacy, they could serve as exemplars of the transformative impact that an information literate workforce might have on an organization.

What are the characteristics of an information literate library worker? There is no formal consensus statement on this from library organizations. But it seems that such a worker would understand the internal and external context in which the library exists, especially including the stressors that are causing ongoing changes. That person would understand the impact of these changes

on the world of information. S/he would have the ability to identify and articulate problems or questions related to his/her job. S/he would identify the best resources to resolve those issues, find relevant information in them, and develop solutions based on evidence. That person could communicate those solutions effectively to the appropriate person or group. S/he would understand information literacy in relation to non-work related questions and problems, as well. S/he would be adept at understanding when s/he had a need for information for personal use, such as health or finance, and could competently find quality information to make personal decisions based on credible sources. Ideally, information literacy empowers people to make well-informed decisions in all areas of their lives. Such a library worker would be a resource for colleagues and the library's constituency because of his/her knowledge in these areas and the confidence it inspires. This person would be a positive and effective member of the library's staff.

Since employers in the business community expect this of employees, why isn't it pervasive in libraries, which are recognized advocates for the need for information literacy? The hierarchical structure of many library organizations poses challenges for accomplishing this. Boundaries in job classifications prescribe what workers may and may not do, and what learning may occur during working hours. Many libraries do not have promotional tracks that encourage learning or acknowledge competence and initiative by placing people in positions that use their newly acquired knowledge. Lastly, library leaders do not commonly incorporate the development of information literacy in staff into planning processes.

There is much more in the library literature about the difficulties of change in libraries than the dynamism of an information literate library staff. So how do library workers continuously learn and develop the skills they will need for the jobs we will need them to do next year or in five years? How do we make our libraries examples of the power of information literacy as well as teaching it to others?

Libraries continue to undergo paradigmatic changes, including a shift from a focus on collections to a focus on services. In such organizations, the people who work there become the institution's most valuable asset. Those who lead libraries can promote and expect information literacy, lifelong learning, thinking critically, and solving problems in library workers in all classifications, from support staff to librarians to professionals from non-library fields. They may include this expectation in job descriptions and performance goals. Continuous learning can be institutionalized in the mission and vision of the organization and operationalized in goals, objectives, and performance standards. The leaders and supervisors in the organization can serve as examples of information literate persons and expect that competency of their staff. If library organizations support an information literacy workforce, the library can become a model, showing parent organizations the power of information literacy in the work environment.

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