Biz of Acq -- Ten Years After: How Positions with a Serials Emphasis have Changed a Decade after the World Wide Web

Rob Withers

Miami University, rwithers@lib.muohio.edu
Biz of Acq — Ten Years After: How Positions with a Serials Emphasis have Changed a Decade after the World Wide Web

by Rob Withers (Assistant to the Dean, 219 King Library, Miami University, Oxford, OH 45056; Phone: 513-529-9556; Fax: 513-529-2136) <rwithers@lib.muc.edu>

Column Editor: Audrey Fenner (Head, Acquisition Department, Walter Clinton Jackson Library, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, P.O. Box 26170, Greensboro, NC 27402; Phone: (336) 256-1193; Fax: (336) 334-4731) <afenner@uncg.edu>

Introduction

External factors have changed and challenged the ways in which libraries process serials. In her 1997 article, Ann W. Copeland notes a number of factors that confronted serials librarianship from 1980 to 1995, including the implementation of AACR2 in 1981, proliferation of bibliographic utilities that provided MARC format data such as OCLC and RLIN, and respective conversions undertaken as a part of the transition from print to online catalogs.1 Still more changes have had an impact on the ways in which libraries process serials since the mid-1990s. Most notable is the proliferation of e-journals in the wake of the development of the World Wide Web in 1994. E-journals and databases that provide access to electronic versions of journal articles now account for a considerable and growing portion of library expenditures and subscriptions. At the author’s institution, over three quarters of the journal titles to which the Miami University Libraries provide access have at least some issues available electronically. A cursory review of journal literature or SERIALIST postings reveals challenges associated with these resources that include:

- Check-in and claiming — libraries must decide if and how they will check in e-journals and deal with failure to provide timely access. Availability of products with embargo dates that may last from a few months to several years complicates this process.

- Determining holdings — libraries are no longer in the driver’s seat for initiating and terminating subscriptions; aggregators may add or remove access to individual titles or entire collections of titles.

- Centralized access points — faculty and students used to be able to walk into libraries and see what titles were available, and in many cases browse through areas devoted to current issues. As the number of titles available electronically overtook the number of print titles, libraries are struggling with ways to present a similar sense of available titles, and current issues in particular. The use of markup languages and metadata offers one method of meeting this need.

Possible Approaches

In the past decade, as many of the changes noted in Copeland’s article have now become old hat and the proliferation of e-journals has accelerated, how have positions with a serials emphasis changed?

Any attempt to provide a snapshot of position responsibilities entails certain risks and benefits. Relying on self-reported surveys about duties and the amount of time devoted to them presents several difficulties. The age of info-glut, particularly in email, provides formidable obstacles to obtaining a reliable and balanced sample. In addition, while obtaining self-reported results may provide enlightening or provocative comments, self-reported information is by nature subjective and unreliable, since it is inherently difficult to specify what tasks we do and to quantify the time devoted to them—particularly if trying to make a comparison over an extended period of time.

Relying on a sample of position descriptions can be tricky as well. In addition to the challenge of gathering a representative sample, the accuracy of position descriptions is variable in quality. Position descriptions may not be updated frequently while the position is occupied. Moreover, significant re-writes are more likely to occur when the position is vacant, because vacant positions provide the opportunity to re-envision what the position does and what qualifications are needed for that position independent of the interests, strengths, and

continued on page 75

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
or qualifications of an incumbent candidate.

Relying on advertisements may surmount some of the difficulties associated with analyzing position descriptions. To be fair, this approach also presents challenges. The sample is necessarily small, and reflects whatever positions happen to be open at any one time. The major responsibilities and qualifications listed may or may not reflect accurately the day-to-day realities of the position. However, this approach does provide a limited pool from varied institutions, quantifiable criteria about duties and pre-requisites, and most importantly, an idea of how librarians envision and re-envision the role of serials specialists.

**About This Study**

This study will compare two sets of advertisements for serials positions that appeared in *College & Research Libraries News*, one from July 1993–June 1994, the period in which the World Wide Web first emerged, and one from a decade later, July 2003–June 2004. This study will include comparisons of the position duties, required qualifications, and desired qualifications listed in these advertisements.

As Copeland noted, numerous position titles with serials emphasis exist, such as serials cataloger, serials librarian, or administrator of a serials division within an acquisitions or cataloging department. The duties associated with these position titles are inconsistent. Position titles alone do not indicate if the position does or does not include duties such as cataloging, preservation/ binding, or public services responsibilities. For purposes of this study, all position descriptions that include some combination of serials cataloging and processing responsibilities are included. With one exception, these positions include “Periodicals” or “Serials” in the position title.

Some positions with a serials emphasis include duties in other areas such as documents, collection development, reference, and instruction. Although those positions were included, this study examined only those duties related to processing and providing access to serials. The sample of advertisements was roughly equal, with 15 from 1993-94 and 13 from 2003-04. These quantities are only slightly higher than the yearly average for that period. From 1993-94 to 2003-04, the number of positions with serials emphasis advertised ranged from 5 per year to 19 per year, with an average of 10.44 per year. Re-advertised positions or extended deadlines for applications were excluded, with only the original posting being analyzed.

The enrollment of the institutions at which these positions were offered was likely to be larger in 2003-04 than in the preceding decade. In 1993-94, the average size of institutions advertising positions with a serials focus was 11,844, with more than 40% of those institutions having between 10,000 and 20,000 students and 25% having more than 20,000. In 2003-04, the average size of institutions was 8,744, with only 16.6% of positions advertised at institutions with between 10,000 and 20,000 students. In both periods, institutions with fewer than 5,000 students were represented, although the number declined from 25% in 1993-94 to 17% in 2003-04. Thus, the possibility exists that the sample may be skewed slightly based on the size of institutions.

**Position Duties**

Several duties that appeared in advertisements from 1993-94 fail to appear at all in the 2003-04 sample. In some cases, this appears to reflect the decreased emphasis on print subscriptions, with neither binding duties (mentioned in 40% of 1993-94 advertisements) nor work with microforms (mentioned in 9.1% of 1993-94 advertisements) being included in positions advertised in 2003-04. Predictably, serials conversion (27% of 1993-94 advertisements) does not show up in 2003-04 advertisements as conversion projects have been completed in many or most libraries. Systems responsibilities (13.3% of 1993-94 advertisements) likewise disappear, presumably because specialized positions have emerged to deal with such responsibilities.

Slight declines appear for fiscal control/invoicing (from 47% in 1993-94 to 39% in 2003-04), and liaison with collection development (from 27% in 1993-94 to 18% in 2003-04). Check-in duties continue to be present (26.7% in 1993-94 and 27.3% in 2003-04).

Processing (from 6% in 1993-94 to 27% in 2003-04) appears much more frequently. The use of more general and overarching terms such as “overssee processing of periodicals” may explain the decline of some sub-sets of this process, such as invoicing/billing. With the transition to integrated library systems now largely complete, phrases such as “quality control of database” appear more frequently, up from 6% in 1993-94 to 27% in 2003-04.

Many position duties appearing for the first time in advertisements from the 2003-04 sample include the impact that the presence of e-journals has had on these positions. These include:

- promoting the use of e-journals or e-resources (9%)
- selection of public domain Web resources (9%)
- working with other departments to evaluate electronic products (9%)
- managing e-journals (18%)
- improving facilitating access to e-journals (27%)
- determining the future of the print and online balance of the collections in consultation with the faculty (18%)
- licensing access to e-journals (27.3%).

Other duties which appear only in the 2003-04 sample include strengthening relations with vendors (9.1%), budget management (27%) and statistical management reports (36%).

**Desired/Required Qualifications**

Qualifications listed in advertisements follow many of the trends noted above with position duties. Those qualifications related to physical processing in 1993-94 advertisements fall to appear a decade later, including experience with microform and bindery systems (7.1% each). In addition, some skills appear less frequently, including familiarity with MARC (required or desired in 64% of 1993-94 positions, but only 15% of 2003-04 openings), familiarity with LCSH (dropping from 29% to 8%), and experience with cataloging standards (required or desired in 64% of 1993-94 positions, but only 15% of 2003-04 positions). These decreases do not necessarily indicate that these skills are not needed; merely that they are assumed in applicants, or are more likely to be present than some newer technical skills that are specified.

The completion of conversion projects likely accounts for the disappearance of automation experience (required for 21% and desired for 22% of positions in 1993-94), knowledge of ANSI (required for 7% and desired for 21% in 1993-94), and experience with serials bibliographic control (desired for 14% in 1993-94).
positions in the 2003-04 sample tend not to mention phrases such as “contract negotiation,” they do often request some form of licensing experience (see below). “Licensing” may simply be the twenty-first century equivalent of “contract negotiation.”

In addition, need for good interpersonal skills is a constant. Oral/written communication skills are desired or required for 57% of 1993-94 positions and 46% of 2003-04 positions, and public service experience is desired or required for 21% of 1993-94 positions and 23% of 2003.04 positions. Supervisory experience increases (desired or required for 14% of 1993-94 positions and 31% of 2003-04 positions). This increase may reflect a trend toward assigning tasks to paraprofessionals that were once restricted to librarians, and relying on librarians to oversee some aspects of processing rather than performing all aspects of it. “Collegiality” is specifically mentioned in 16% of 2003-04 advertisements and “analytical skills” appears in 8%. Foreign language experience, mentioned in 9% of the 1993-94 sample, holds steady at 8% in 2003-04.

Other constants are the ALA-accredited MLS, required for all positions, and cataloging experience (7% in 1993-94, 8% in 2003-04). Advertisements for some professional positions with a technical emphasis have ceased to require an ALA-MLS; however, despite the increasing frequency with which some technical skills are required or desired (see below), this trend appears not to have affected serials positions.

Several new items appear as desired/required qualifications in the 2003-04 sample. The ubiquity of e-journals is responsible for the appearance of many of these, including knowledge/familiarity with managing e-resources (23%), managing e-journal holdings (8%), e-journal licensing (16%) and emerging technologies/standards (16%). In addition, experience with Web development, EDI and electronic ordering, SFX and Open URL each appear in 8% of positions. These findings mirror those of a recent study of cataloging positions, which noted that experience with emerging metadata and tools (38%) and Website development (4%) were required.

Experience with a specific integrated library system appears in 30% of 2003-04 advertisements. The emergence of this qualification likely explains the slight decline in experience with any ILS (down from 21% in 1993-94 to 13% in 2003-04). As increasing numbers of people have had the opportunity to gain experience with individual systems, it is now possible to screen successfully based on experience with the ILS currently in use. Experience with productivity software and/or spreadsheets appears in 23% of advertisements. This rate is consistent with Khurshid’s 2001 study, which noted that 29.13% of cataloging skills have this requirement. Other items present in the 2003-04 advertisements include experience with scholarly communication trends (8%), budget experience (8%), and experience with consortia (8%).

Position Titles
Changes in duties are reflected in position titles. The most frequently occurring type of title in 1993-94, “Serials Librarian or “Periodicals Librarian,” occurred in 38% of advertisements. By 2003-04, the most frequently used title, occurring in 46% of advertisements, was some permutation of “Serials/Electronic Resources Librarian.” Variants include “Serials/E-Resources Librarian,” “Serials/Electronic Resources Librarian,” “Serials/Web Resources Librarian,” “Serials/Electronic Resources Cataloger,” and “Serials Librarian.” One position, Business/Electronic Access Librarian, entailed experience with supervising staff, working with an integrated library system, and providing access to electronic resources. Use of other titles declined slightly, including Serials Catalog Librarian (13% in 1993-94, 8% in 2003-04), and Serials Department Head (19% in 1993-94, 8% in 2003-04). Combinations of serials with other functions (Access Services, Documents), present in 13% of 1993-94 ads, disappear completely in 2003-04. The decline in Department Head positions may be explained by consolidation of technical services departments. Positions described as “Unit Head” increase from 13% in 1993-94 to 18% in 2003-04.

Conclusion
Position descriptions for librarian positions with a serials emphasis reflect changes created by the proliferation of electronic journals over the past decade. While some duties and desired qualifications have remained roughly constant, many others reflect the transition from providing access to serials in a physical environment to providing access in an electronic one. Although not all position titles have changed, a significant number of titles have.

The most interesting changes are not necessarily the most wide-ranging ones. Although many new desired or required qualifications have emerged, there is not yet a clear consensus among advertisements on necessary technical skills. The current variety of skills listed in advertisements reflects attempts by libraries to figure out how serials work is changing and will change in the near future. It will be interesting to see over the coming years which of these desired/required qualifications become dominant. Likewise, a series of position titles has emerged, analogous to what Khurshid describes as “emerging position titles” in his review of cataloger positions. Most are related, but the specific wording varies. It will be interesting to see if these titles become standardized in coming years, or if working with electronic resources becomes so ingrained in serials processing that use of words like “electronic resources”
or “e-resources” becomes superfluous. Alternatively, as electronic equivalents of books, journals, and other collections proliferate and require subscriptions rather than one-time payments, will serials librarianship become distinguished not by work with journals and magazines, but with electronic resources? These resources require review and ongoing payments, link checking, and adding new contents, whether they are new journal issues, new book chapters, new editions, or new collections of resources added to a database.

Additional research would prove illuminating. One possibility for study would be to measure the magnitude of changes wrought by the proliferation of Web-based resources, either by looking at older advertisements to measure the rate of change over time, or by examining the impact these changes have had on several areas of librarianship, comparing the pace and extent to which they have changed. Another possibility would be to see how serials librarians and library administrators perceive changes in serials positions, how they want to change them, or would change them in the event of a vacancy.

Endnotes
4. Non-serials duties appeared with diminishing frequency: liaison duties with faculty dropped from 20% in 1993-94 to 9% in 2003-04, and government documents responsibilities completely disappeared by 2003-04. These changes could reflect a decrease in adding outside responsibilities or serials positions, or they may be typical only of the advertisements analyzed. Positions advertised in 2003-04 tended to be at larger institutions, which may have more specialized positions than the institutions represented in the 1993-94 sample.