

Qualification Management in Information Services: My Grand Design



by Guy St.Clair

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information outlook

... How Can We Hire and Retain Good Information Workers in Today's Marketplace?

WE INFORMATION WORKERS, & PARTICULARLY THOSE WHO HAVE MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES, have for some time been troubled by a seeming lack of quality in the employees who come to work with us. It's not that they are incapable of doing good work. In fact, these employees are often, under the right circumstances, mentored into positions of considerable accomplishment in their parent institutions and organizations. But not always, and when our interactions with these employees fail and we find ourselves left once again with a bored, uninterested information worker just biding time until a better job comes along (or, worse yet, with one who has decided that information work is a comfortable sinecure and the perfect place to just coast along), we find ourselves thinking about what we could have done differently, when we sought to fill that position.

In my opinion, there are two ideas at play here, and they both have to do with how we prepare people for work in the information industry and in the library/information science profession. The

first is that the academic education of these potential employees varies greatly. Some of them have been well educated and know as much (or more) about the organization and management of information as we do. But not all potential information workers are so well educated, and their qualifications come wrapped in a bundle of background experiences and educational/training programs that represent, at best, a hodge-podge of interests and, sadly, an equally variable conglomeration of skills and competencies that may, or may not match the needs of the employing organization.

Connected to this variety in academic education, of course, is the equally variable continuous education/professional learning that is available for people to undertake, once they get into the information

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industry and desire to move ahead, to better themselves as information workers. So much is on offer, and from so many different learning providers, that the average information worker is almost overwhelmed

when attempting to decide what to study, what training to undergo, or what path or track of learning would be most advantageous.

The disparities between and within in these two learning activities represent a major problem for the information industry, and one that is only going to get worse as time goes on, unless we do something about it. And we can do something.

As I see it, the solution to this problem is one that will be realized when we take a broader look at our work, and move ourselves beyond the specifics of any one branch of information services. It's a solution whose framework has been demonstrated during the past few years in my business, and it seems worthwhile to share some of the ideas that have come to us.

At our company, one of the things we do is to work with organizations (particularly in their information units) as they assess professional learning needs, after which, if required, we work with management to design and create entities within the organization for meeting those learning needs. In the course of this work, one theme has become very clear to me, that there really is a large world of information workers out there, and librarians, and even specialist librarians, are but one piece, if you will, of the larger information services industry.

Now this isn't a new theme, and people who know me have often heard me speak about the splendid information services continuum. It incorporates, as I fre-

As I thought about these things, it began to come to me that although we all have the same objective (if employing information workers capable of performance excellence is our objective, and I think most of us agree that it is), we are also, all of us, seriously hindered by barriers that are clearly rooted in the different values, required competencies, and service agendas of the different branches of the information industry. This, too, is not news, and in the December 1999, issue of this magazine, Marion Paris made this point clearly and specifically when she described, with absolute accuracy, how specialist librarianship is different from traditional librarianship and how they will never be the same.(2) Similar differences in values, required competencies, and service agendas

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quently say, any person and any activity that involves (or is even related to) the management and delivery of information. Or, as I describe it in a new book on professional learning, "In essence, information services can be thought of as any work that has anything to do with the identification, capture, organization, storage, retrieval, analysis, interpretation, packaging, and dissemination of information."(1)

So information work isn't just librarianship, or specialist librarianship, or records and information management, or archives management, or information brokerage, or publishing. It's anything that has to do with the management and delivery of information, and as my research and my work in professional learning developed, another theme began to emerge: that all of the branches of the information industry are struggling with these same learning issues, and all are attempting to provide the best learning they can for the people who will go into or who are already employed in their part of the industry.

also come between other branches of the information industry, and between librarianship and many of these other kinds of information work, and yet we are all trying to accomplish the same thing and are committed to the same goal: to provide for our identified information customers the best information management and information delivery that we can provide. If we have the same goal and the same commitment, why can we not figure out how to find, and retain the best employees? Where are those information workers whose performance standards will not only enhance our work in our parent organizations, but will satisfy the information needs of the clients for whom we provide information?

The answer to those questions and the solution to the problems we are having with learning issues in the information services management field have to do with qualifications, and with the management of qualifications. Several years ago, a group of library managers looked at these issues (but only with respect to

librarianship) and concluded that change was needed, and as far as I can tell, change is still needed. Susan K. Martin wrote about this group's experiences, and among the concepts suggested were an accreditation process (but one which would not be administered exclusively by a single professional association), established standards for education and learning for employment in the profession, and an academy or college with oversight responsibility for determining qualifications for practicing as a professional, and which academy or college would be the credentialing and certifying agency for the profession.(3)

Sadly, as far as I can determine, nothing came of this group's efforts, and seven years later we in the informa-

tion industry continue to struggle with these issues. But as I continued my research and my work in this area, I realized that it is in that phrase, the information industry, that perhaps the secret of our success in the future could be assured. We are, indeed, part of a larger information industry. We're not only librarians and records managers and such. We're information professionals, and what we need is a framework that draws us together, that matches us up as part of a single, new information management profession.

can look beyond ourselves, if we can concentrate on the information customer, we can get past the limitations and get on with getting the information that the customer needs to the customer when it's needed. (4) Now if we can get librarians, specialist librarians, archivists, and all others who work in information management to think like this, our industry will be well on its way to achieving that splendid information services objective we're all seeking to achieve.

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It's a subject that's been approached before, and Jerry King, at the National Institutes of Health (who is not a librarian) put it best when he was interviewed a couple of years ago. For King, that single new information services profession is already emerging, and it is a profession based on excellence in customer service, a customer service ethos that crosses all boundaries within the profession. Here's the way King put it: We can do what we do well anywhere in the organization it's required. If we

for the new profession, and the recognition that all of these various branches of information services are part of the same profession. In establishing qualifications, we must begin by developing industry-wide standards of quality and excellence, in both education for admission into the field, and in performance practices. The new information management profession, with its qualified practitioners (whom we will call information professionals) will be a composite construct, and it will include all of the many branches of the information industry that we know about now. It will also include, of course, those careers and disciplines that are not even a blip on our radar screens yet, since we can't even begin to anticipate or predict what the information workers ten years from now will be doing, or what the qualifications for their work will be. And each of these branches of information services, these careers and these disciplines, will contribute to the larger whole, the larger profession, the new information management profession.

The defining characteristic of this new profession of information management will be its leadership. There will be, as Martin and her group suggested, a specially authorized and legally incorporated entity, probably called something like The International Society of Information Professionals. It will have credentialing

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authority, and the society will serve as a supra-agency. It will exist for the sole purpose of identifying, testing, and providing credentials for those who would aspire to be Certified Information Professionals, regardless of which branch of information services industry they come from, or how their qualifications for practicing in that branch of the industry have been determined.

Significantly, the leadership of this supra-agency (perhaps on the model of something like the Conference Board) will be made up of leaders and representatives of those societal elements most affected by quality in information management and delivery: organizational management officers, information customers, researchers, and the like. And equally important, information professionals will have no higher leadership representation than any of these other societal groups, and it will be understood from the beginning that the International Society of Information Professionals does not exist as simply another professional association. Its purpose is specific, and will be clearly (and legally) defined: to determine qualifications for certification as an information professional, and to ensure that such qualification management is implemented in the best interests of the organizations that employ information professionals and the information customers who use the information supplied by information professionals. I submit that it is only through the creation of such a larger entity and the consequent empow-

ering of information workers (an empowerment, it should be noted, that will be based specifically on qualifications), that we who work in the information industry will be recognized for our expertise and our competencies, and will be positioned to move the industry, and our place in it forward.

Which is why I am putting this idea forward. I want the members of the Special Libraries Association to think about this, and having thought about it, to decide for themselves whether they are interested in being information professionals in word (as we are now), or in recognition of earned (and examined) qualifications. And that grand design referred to in the title? Well, perhaps it is more of a philosophy, really, than a grand plan (although in the book I've just written, as this subject is elaborated upon, it does assume the qualities of a plan, for it is advanced seriously and in great detail). Nevertheless, this idea does have certain characteristics and attributes that are, perhaps, grand in their conception and will be, hopefully, in their execution. Perhaps these ideas will, for all of us in the information management profession, result in tangible and measurable ways we can ensure the best service, the highest quality service, for our organizations and for our customers. And, at the same time, ensure that we are recognized for the qualifications that we have earned.



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