

Workforce skills in the 21st century: Developing the new skills and competencies

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Libraries, archives and information services are working in an era of enormous and rapid change. They must develop and respond to these changes if they are to continue to have a vital role in the 21st century.

Developing the workforce, which can form more than half of the costs of running a library, is vital if the necessary changes are to be achieved. To assist with this, National Occupational Standards are being developed within the United Kingdom to define the competencies and skills libraries, archives and information services workers at all levels will need. These will help employers not only with training and development, but also other human resource issues to ensure that they have the right staff, in the right place, at the right time.

Today we are seeing enormous and rapid changes in technology which are having a real impact on society itself, and libraries of all types must reflect and respond to these changes if they are to continue to have a vital role in the 21st century. However, this is neither simple nor straight forward, and the scale of the challenge we face has not been seen in libraries since what was then a radical move from manuscript to the printed word.

That change must have seemed as challenging and transformational then as the impact of technology is regarded now. However, the change today is happening at a considerably faster rate – for example the National Library's digital library manager is fond of saying that the average life of a website now is that of an insect. And this speed of change is matched by the needs and demands of our customers, and indeed our potential customers.

Libraries are only products of their time, reflecting the needs and developments of the society they serve, and the technology of the era in which they exist. Whilst their principle function – to collect knowledge and learning, and make it

available to people in ways useful to them - has not altered, how this is successfully achieved is changing more and more rapidly.

And staff is a key to successfully changing libraries, and so this paper will focus this work being undertaken in the United Kingdom to support the development of all types of library staff to deliver these new services both effectively and efficiently.

Libraries of all types are remarkably labour intensive – perhaps usually more so than they need to be. And whilst many libraries are working to engineer staff out of service delivery, in most libraries they account for well over half of the run-

ning costs – often even more. Consequently it is vital that libraries make the most of these expensive resources.

If libraries are to achieve this they must ensure that they have the right staff in the right place, and at the right time. When considering how this can be achieved, it is worth remembering that this issue is not unique to libraries – in fact very little in Human Resources is! Most employers have the same challenges, regardless of the nature of their business. And libraries can learn from other employers because in reality, not only do different library sectors have more in common than we want to admit, but so do different industrial sectors

For example, the National Library of Scotland has much in common with warehousing, retail, marketing, tourism and leisure, as well as related cultural and learning organisations such as museums and community learning and computer industry. And as the library changes and develops it is likely that it will have more in common with an even wider range of employers.

Sector skills councils

In the United Kingdom central government has recognised the importance of workforce development and has declared its commitment to raise skills in every industry to improve economic competitiveness.

The government has set up a network of 25 Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) between them covering every employment sector. SSCs are employer led, and government and employer funded. They have strategic responsibility for:

- Labour market intelligence
- Workforce planning
- Workforce standards and qualifications
- Training and development
- Investment in skills, recruitment and retention

Lifelong Learning UK

Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) is the SSC which – as its name indicates – covers all aspects of lifelong learning covering the constituencies of higher and further education, work based learning, community learning and development – and libraries, archives and information services.

LLUK's priorities are aligned to these common responsibilities and specifically are:

- Labour market intelligence
- Workforce planning
- Training and development
- Investment in skills, recruitment and retention
- Workforce standards and qualifications

This last priority is of particular importance in ensuring that libraries can change and develop their service. Unless library employers clearly know what skills and competencies they need their staff to have, and to what standard, they will never have the workforce that they need. And as libraries do move ahead, those skills and competencies will need to be re-defined.

National Occupational Standards

To help employers, LLUK is developing a new set of National Occupational Standards for all its constituencies. Indeed, the new National Occupational Standards for libraries, archives and information service workers is due for completion during the autumn of 2007. And these have the potential to be a remarkable new tool for library managers in every type of library.

So, what are National Occupational Standards?

- They define the areas of competence which apply to job roles or occupations, in the form of statements of performance, knowledge and the evidence required to confirm competence

- And they cover the key activities undertaken within the occupation in question, under all the circumstances the job holder is likely to encounter

This means that – for the first time – libraries, archives and information service employers will have definitive and detailed descriptions of the behaviours, skills and knowledge they require in their workforce. And research in the United Kingdom has shown that employers really value the development of National Occupational Standards, so long as they are defined in a way that really meets the needs of the libraries, archives and information service employers now and into the future.

Developing the standards

This survey clearly indicated that the National Occupational Standards should be:

- Integrated standards for the whole workforce (although this provides a real challenge, and libraries, archives and information services often use significantly differing language and terminology, although they reflect common or widely accepted concepts)
- Described in terms of behaviours that employers would expect from their staff
- Set at a number of different levels that can be directly linked to qualifications but are not restricted by only being qualifications
- Focused on specific libraries, archives and information service skills

In addition, standards for “generic” skills should be drawn from other SSCs – for example customer care, marketing, leadership and management, computer skills. Here libraries really can learn from other employers in areas that they have skills and competencies in common.

And crucially, the National Occupational Standards should be developed to be forward looking and reviewed annually so that they main-

tain their relevance, regardless of the speed of the development of library services in the 21st century.

What will National Occupational Standards consist of?

The National Occupational Standards will consist of 4 elements:

- Areas of work
- In which appropriate behaviours are identified
- And supported by agreed good practice
- And knowledge and understanding

It is anticipated that the areas of work follow a Lifecycle structure and will be in 6 sections:

- Governance and ethics
- Strategy and planning
- Creating and acquiring resources
- Organising and managing resources
- Facilitating independent access to resources
- Providing mediated services

Within each of these sections there will be a number of standards. These are still under development. However, it is possible to include in this paper an example – Strategy and Planning – which will give a flavour of what is being planned.

In this section it is proposed that there will four areas of work:

- Understanding the organisation, its operational context and its external environment
- Developing a library, information, records and archive strategy
- Implementing a library, information, records and archive strategy
- Assessing delivery performance, value and impact

Within each of areas there will be individual standards which will be set at three different levels – operational, intermediate/specialist and strategic. These will define the remaining elements – the appropriate behaviours, together with the good practice, and knowledge and understanding that support the behaviours.

Considering a draft standard for developing an information strategy will demonstrate how this will work. This activity is defined as “developing a strategy which ensures that the information service for which you are responsible supports the parent organisation’s business goals that the strategy takes account of relevant policies, standards and practices, and that existing and planned information systems remain compatible.”

Consequently the appropriate behaviours to develop an information strategy could be defined as:

- Demonstrate leadership in creating a vision for the services you are responsible for
- Think strategically and creatively, focusing on business results
- Apply appropriate current information and knowledge management concepts and practices
- Seek out key stakeholders and listen to their business needs
- Build alliances with others who can help you deliver your goals
- Seek to embed knowledge and information as part of the strategic management of the organisation and the decision making process
- Identify and communicate the value of good information management to all levels of the organisation

These behaviours are supported by good practice, and so to demonstrate these behaviours staff must be able to:

- Identify and prioritise information requirements and information risk

- Develop a strategy aligned with business goals, legislative requirements, strategic planning and operational practices
- Relate the information strategy to other organisational strategies eg business strategy, skills development, IT systems strategy
- Propose options and evaluate their likely effectiveness
- Research, identify, monitor and assess resources and processes and products for their suitability and business benefit

And this good practice must be supported by knowledge and understanding of:

- The lifecycles of information and records
- Existing and emerging information management theories, concepts, processes and tools
- Information requirements of different communities and for specific tasks or objectives
- What legislation, organisational procedures and quality assurance procedures apply

This can appear rather complex, and indeed providing such detailed National Occupational Standards is a complex process. It is, however, a simple and powerful model.

Who will find the National Occupational of use?

It is planned that the National Occupational Standards will assist the Lifelong Learning Sector as a whole, as well as specifically libraries, archives and information service employers and individual staff. There are an enormous range of uses for National Occupational Standards – for example the Management Standards Centre, which is responsible for the management and leadership standards, has identified 100 potential uses for those standards!

For Lifelong Learning UK, the libraries, archives and information services National

Occupational Standards will form part of a suite of standards across the sector. Not only will they integrate libraries, archives and information work standards for the first time, they will also integrate with the National Occupational Standards developed for higher and further education, work based learning and community learning and development.

It is planned that this will help staff demonstrate where they have transferable skills and competencies that will help them move between the different constituencies, by gaining credits for appropriate competencies. This will enable Lifelong Learning UK to identify new routes for staff to transfer between the different employers and organisations.

For employers, the development of NOS will provide them with clear agreed standard definitions of the work carried out by their staff at a number of levels.

One of the primary purposes is use these to define and develop appropriate range of qualifications that can be offered by training providers. This should ensure that not only the most appropriate qualifications are provided, but that individual training elements can be designed to provide a modular credit based approach to allow staff alternative routes to gain qualifications.


However, as indicated earlier, the role of the standards is not limited to or defined by their role in qualifications. For the employer they can have a whole range of uses:

- Job descriptions and person specifications
- Performance management

- Identifying training needs
- Organisation development
- Management information

For staff, they will provide clear definitions of areas they need to look at when looking to develop their skills and careers, helping them develop in ways that they wish that will be widely recognised.

As employers expect, once developed the National Occupational Standards will be updated annually to maintain their relevance. As libraries develop in the 21st century the changing roles and tasks carried out by staff will be determined and included, together with defined competencies. This will be an invaluable support for libraries, archives and information services as they develop the skills and roles for their staff.

National Occupational Standards have the potential to develop into an invaluable tool for employers and staff. As indicated above it is anticipated that the first version for libraries, archives and information services workers will be completed during the autumn of 2007. The completed standards, and future revisions, can be accessed through the Lifelong Learning UK website: www.lluk.org.uk 

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