

## **Creating a Culture of Knowledge Sharing: The Role of Special Librarians in Organizational e-Learning**

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### **Introduction**

What makes a special librarian special? A focus on practical, utilitarian knowledge has always been the distinguishing characteristic of the special librarian. So, too, has been a commitment to meeting and even anticipating an organization's need for the information and data it needs to be more efficient, effective, successful and competitive.

Special librarianship is based on the premise that an informed organization is able to make better decisions and to use all of its resources, including its human capital, more wisely. Implicit in the evolution of special libraries and information centers is a special connection between the librarian and the client and a responsibility to support the client's professional development. This translates into an important role in facilitating and promoting organizational e-learning as the special librarian connects clients with all of an organization's information assets.

Many organizations no longer maintain brick-and-mortar libraries and information centers. The rapid development of electronic storage and retrieval has enabled them to move to an entirely digital model that overcomes many of the challenges posed by space, time, distance, and the need for multi-user access both to traditional information assets such as books and journals and to the multitude of new assets, from databases and e-books to virtual training.

In this environment, many information professionals go well beyond their traditional role in organizing information assets to taking a leadership role in ensuring that all players have the ability to effectively access them. Moreover, the expertise of information professionals in delivering organizational learning has led many to roles supporting organizational training in other areas such as regulatory matters and human resources.

The use of electronic tools to conduct training and to facilitate communication and collaboration is now ubiquitous, and for good reason. The traditional systems of organizational training required extensive time and travel, and with them, considerable cost. As organizations become truly global, and as worldwide economic challenges make every organization more cost-conscious, e-learning has become more and more attractive. From new product launches and regulatory compliance to the introduction of new technologies and processes, e-learning training offers organizations a robust alternative particularly well suited to certain scenarios. For example, e-learning can dramatically decrease the time it takes an organization to impart critical learning, and on-demand

forms of e-learning are especially useful for the ever-increasing number of organizations that operate in many different time zones around the world.

The significance of the special librarian in organizational learning in the electronic age is supported by research recently conducted by the Special Libraries Association (SLA) as part of its ambitious Alignment Project<sup>1</sup>. In an international survey that included both executives and information professionals in the corporate, government, academic and healthcare sectors, the ability to “create a culture of continuous learning and knowledge sharing” was the second most highly rated attribute of information professionals (Figure 1). Specifically, 45 percent of those surveyed cited this attribute. (The most highly rated, by 50 percent, was “make resources and information accessible in a timely, convenient secure manner.”) Not surprisingly, 57 percent of respondents felt that the most important attribute of SLA, as the global association of innovative information and knowledge professionals, is to “promote professional development through innovative resources/continuous learning.” (Figure 2)

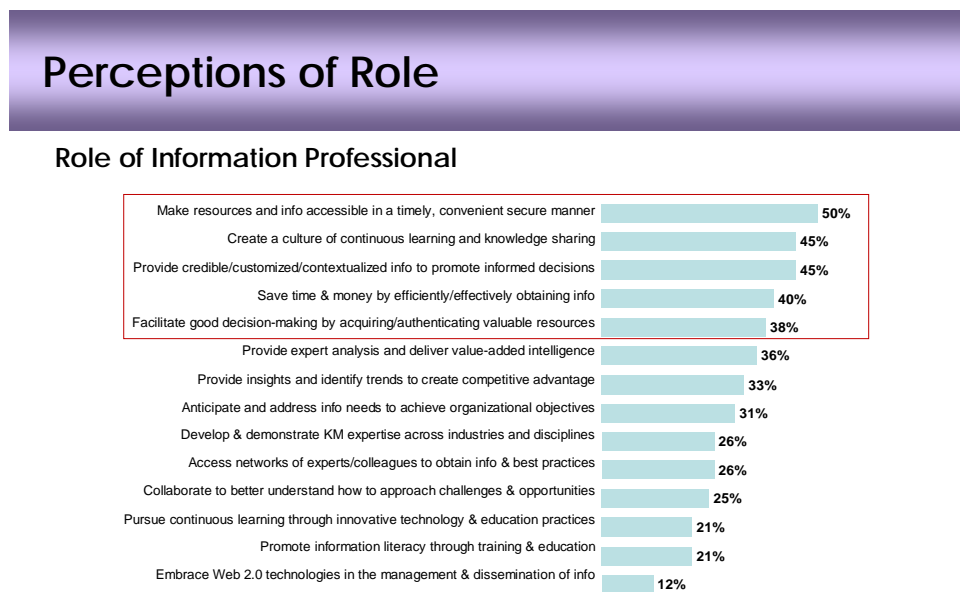
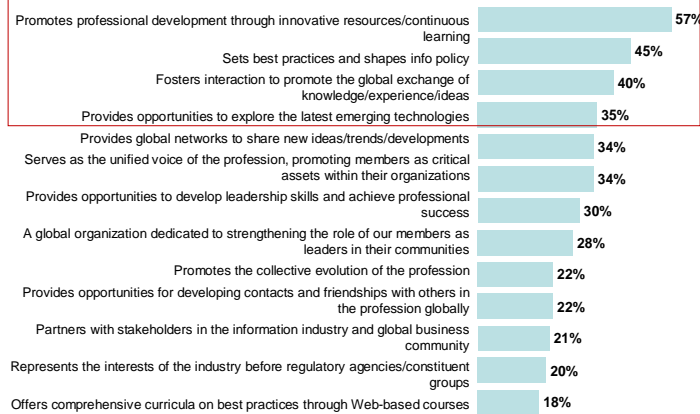


Figure 1

<sup>1</sup> Alignment Presentation, Special Libraries Association found at <http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/alignment/portal/define.html>

# Perceptions of Role

## Role of Association/Organization



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Figure 2

Today's information professional is active in three broad areas of facilitating e-learning in organizations:

- I. Special librarians and information professionals work to inform the organization about the information assets, especially those in electronic form, that are available to them.
- II. Special librarians and information professionals work to improve the information literacy and skills of the organization so that its electronic information assets can be fully utilized.
- III. Special librarians and information professionals work in partnership with other parts of the organization to develop and deliver training in technical and professional skills, to support sales, and in other areas.

We will discuss each of these areas, as well as the value that the information professionals engaged in them can bring to their organizations.

## Background

To understand the evolution of the role of the information professional into e-learning, it is useful to briefly look at the history of special librarianship.

The roots of special librarianship are firmly planted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a time sometimes referred to in the United States as the Second Industrial Revolution and which coincides with the Meiji period in Japan.

Tremendous and rapid progress in transportation and communication networks connected people and ideas, and made it possible to move goods and services at a pace never before imagined. New industrial processes, such as Henry Ford's assembly line, and new materials such as steel, aluminum, and early plastics moved people from agricultural work to manufacturing plants. Competition for new markets grew exponentially.

The new leaders of industry had an acute need to quickly learn about discoveries, innovations, inventions and competitors so they could harness the possibilities presented by the rapidly changing marketplace. Many of them turned to librarians for help.

The early partnerships between librarians and entrepreneurs were based on a revolutionary idea: information and knowledge could be practical and utilitarian, not just intellectual or recreational. Soon, libraries, corporations, museums, universities and more were assembling their own specialized collections with the help of a new breed of librarian . . . the specialized librarian. These librarians broadened their acquisitions beyond traditional books to include anything that could be useful, from pamphlets to product manuals. SLA's founder, John Cotton Dana, put it this way in "The New Library Creed":

Select the best books, list them elaborately, save them forever—was the sum of the librarians' creed of yesterday. Tomorrow it must be, select a few of the best books and keep them, as before, but also, select from the vast flood of print the things your constituency will find helpful, make them available with a minimum of expense, and discard them as soon as their usefulness is past.<sup>2</sup>

In 1909, a group of librarians engaged in this new form of librarianship formed the Special Libraries Association, which today includes some 11,000 members in 75 countries. Their goal, working within their organizations, is captured by SLA's first motto: "Putting Knowledge to Work." Their reasons for coming together are articulated in the June 1910 issue of *Special Libraries*, SLA's first publication: "We suffer from a lack of knowledge of what others are doing, and sometimes ignorantly do things which are already better done."<sup>3</sup>

During the last 101 years, the ways in which special librarians—whom we at SLA often refer to as information and knowledge professionals—acquire, organize, and disseminate information have changed radically. However, their goal in supporting practical organizational learning has remained the same.

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<sup>2</sup> *Librarian at Large: Select Writings of John Cotton Dana*, ed. Carl A. Hanson (Washington, D.C.: Special Libraries Association, 1991) 60.

<sup>3</sup> Lapp, John. "Public Affairs Index," *Special Libraries* 1, no. 6 (1910): 43 found at <http://www.sla.org/speciallibraries/ISSN00386723V1N6.PDF>

When information technology emerged on a large scale in the 1960s, librarians were, for the most part, not eager to embrace it.<sup>4</sup> However, special librarians working in scientific and technical organizations were early to recognize the need to gain computer skills and were instrumental in advocating that other librarians do the same, both through professional associations such as SLA and by influencing the development of curricula in library schools. As new technologies developed, continuous learning and professional development quickly emerged as essential activities for all librarians—and perhaps most acutely for special librarians. They began to view the education they receive in library school as a solid foundation upon which they could build their careers by staying constantly engaged in continuing education in order to remain current with emerging technologies and new approaches to sharing information.

This emphasis on constant professional development means that today's information professionals are eager to gain new technical skills and knowledge. In many of the organizations that employ them, they play a leadership role in harnessing the ability of technology to advance organizational goals. Involvement in, and in many cases leadership of, e-learning is a natural outgrowth. Some information professionals even work in “corporate universities.” These are not true degree-granting institutions but a new trend being used by several large multinational corporations to deliver company- and job-specific learning.

## **I. Informing the Organization**

Organizations invest substantial funds in the acquisition, organization, analysis and distribution of information. A key way for information professionals to demonstrate their value is to ensure the highest possible return on that investment. On its most basic level, that involves actively communicating with key personnel about the learning assets and services the organization has made available to support their work.

While working for Sun Microsystems, Cindy Hill was excited to learn about a new orientation program for new and recently promoted executives, so she was disappointed when her initial request to present at the program was turned down. Undeterred, she contacted each of the new executives individually to let them know how their company “had invested in their future” by providing an array of digital content, resources and a research team, and she offered to show these executives how to maximize them. The executives she briefed not only used the services but then invited her info pros to sit on their key initiative teams and expected those who reported to them do so as well. Six months later, when the next orientation was scheduled, she was invited to present, receiving high evaluations.<sup>5</sup>

Many libraries and information centers try to get themselves on the agenda to brief attendees about their services and assets during orientations for new employees. Time

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<sup>4</sup> St. Clair, Guy. *SLA at 100: From “Putting Knowledge to Work” to Building the Knowledge Culture* (Alexandria, Va.: Special Libraries Association, 2009), Chapter 8.

<sup>5</sup> Hill, Cindy. Interview by Maura Kennedy. By phone, 10 March 2010.

during these orientations is quite valuable, and information professionals interviewed repeatedly stressed the need to keep presentations extremely short and focused on the unique assets available to them, such as e-book collections, specialized databases and so-called “white label” training products<sup>6</sup>—in other words, information that employees cannot locate on their own through an Internet search engine.

They also stressed the importance of acknowledging and accepting that today’s employees will look for information on their own first, and they recommend that information professionals position themselves as the go-to people when self-discovery is not adequate. “My message was: Here’s information you can get when you need to learn more than your friends and Google can teach you,” says Hill.<sup>7</sup> This advice is consistent with another finding of SLA’s recent Alignment Study research, which found that positive messages about the services offered by information professionals are much better received than negative messages about the shortcomings of do-it-yourself research.<sup>8</sup>

Face-to-face presentations about the information and data resources available to employees can be extremely valuable, but these opportunities are not always available to information professionals, and they do not address the continuing need to inform potential users about new tools and services that are available to them. To communicate new information, information professionals take advantage of their organization’s existing communication channels—or, using Web 2.0 and social networking tools, create their own.

It should be noted that information professionals, as a group, are very enthusiastic social networkers. As members of a profession that places an exceptionally high value on the exchange of information through networking, information professionals realized early on that Web 2.0 tools such as listservs, wikis, and blogs, and then social networking tools like Twitter, Facebook, Friendster and LinkedIn, provided new opportunities to learn and collaborate. Within SLA, a formal group of volunteers and staff<sup>9</sup> is now exploring and exploiting the potential of virtual worlds as another tool that information professionals can use to facilitate learning in their organizations.

In many cases, because of their expertise in using these tools, information professionals have become their organizations’ leaders in using social networks to achieve business objectives. Scott Brown, who also worked for Sun Microsystems, was asked by the company’s global communications group to provide training in the use of social networking.

Brown stresses the importance of trying to integrate information about new e-assets into all of an organization’s communication channels. For example, he promoted new training and new e-book acquisitions to e-mail lists and included messages about them in

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<sup>6</sup> Commercial training products sold by third parties.

<sup>7</sup> Hill, interview.

<sup>8</sup> Alignment Presentation

<sup>9</sup>SLA Virtual World Advisory Council’s blog can be viewed at [http://sla-divisions.typepad.com/sla\\_in\\_second\\_life/](http://sla-divisions.typepad.com/sla_in_second_life/)

the signature line of his own e-mails. He posted information in the company's intranet site and converted his library's intranet space into a wiki to facilitate collaboration and input—a tactic that, he points out, requires constant attention and fresh information to be effective. He set up a Twitter feed that was open to anyone and blogged extensively, both internally and externally. Upon leaving Sun, Brown set up his own consulting company to advise companies and information professionals on the potentially unlimited use of social networking tools.<sup>10</sup>

Many of the information professionals interviewed pointed out that all efforts to market library and information services and products are most effective when they are tied closely to current organizational goals. This emphasis is also reflected in SLA's Alignment Project, whose goal is to help information professionals better align their efforts with their organization's strategic priorities.<sup>11</sup>

## **II. Improving Information Literacy and Skills**

In the electronic age, true information literacy demands an array of knowledge and skills, including:

1. The ability to recognize when information is needed.
2. The ability to find the information required.
3. The skills and permissions required to access the information.
4. The ability to determine whether information is reliable and relevant.
5. The ability to appropriately place the information in the required context.
6. In many organizations, the skills to effectively participate and/or collaborate using designated electronic platforms.

Stephen Abram, vice president for strategic partnerships and markets at Gale Cengage Learning and past president of SLA, says, “Corporations as social entities and contributors exist so that people can cooperate, collaborate and invent together. An important role for information professionals is to identify the most important knowledge behaviors -- research and development, consultative selling, market understanding, conducting performance reviews, hiring new talent, insight and ideation -- and then connect them to the enterprise's PD programs as contained in e-learning objects. Then the magic happens and people in organizations are empowered to apply and take responsibility for their own learning and impact on the organization's mission.”<sup>12</sup>

Barbie Keiser, who has worked as a consultant to a number of global organizations, writes, “With a U.K.-based insurance broker, I worked with their new employees in Hong Kong and Singapore. Basically, it was understood that these new graduates thought that they knew how to use tools, but they did not. While they had graduate degrees in insurance, they needed to know the basic tools—periodicals, databases, analysis.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Brown, Scott. Interview by Maura Kennedy. By phone, 30 March 2010. Brown's Website can be viewed at <http://www.socialinformationgroup.com/>

<sup>11</sup> Alignment Presentation

<sup>12</sup> Abram, Stephen. Interview by Maura Kennedy. Alexandria, Va., 14 April 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Keiser, Barbie. E-mail message to Maura Kennedy. 14 April 2010.

While some information literacy training takes place in person, it is increasingly moving to electronic platforms. “I provide in-person training for new employees,” says an information professional who works as a consultant to a U.S. government agency. However, he also uses teleconferences to introduce new databases and software training. “People telecommute; they work flextime; they travel. Some kind of virtual training is often the only option.”<sup>14</sup>

Cynthia Larson, a knowledge analyst with Eaton Corporation’s in-house Eaton University, fully embraces virtual training, but she points out, “It is really helpful to do live training occasionally. It helps me to gauge audience reaction and to focus on what interests or even confuses participants.”<sup>15</sup>

Information professionals use a variety of platforms, including live Web- and video-conferencing and on-demand Web-based training that is archived. While many utilize vendor-developed training in the use of software and databases, virtually all the information professionals interviewed add specific examples that are highly relevant to the participants, such as detailed searches on the subjects of greatest interest to the participants. Many also develop customized, downloadable written materials.

Many information professionals make their training available through their organization’s learning management systems. This enables them to promote the training to all employees who are looking at training opportunities. It also provides them with quantitative data they can use to demonstrate that they are working to capitalize on the organization’s investment in informational assets by equipping employees to use them effectively.

In many organizations, managers tap into learning management records to evaluate employee performance, providing an additional incentive for employees to participate in information literacy training.

*Computers in Libraries* recently published an excellent summary of one information group’s experience in providing e-learning and information literacy for its organization’s employees. In it, Marilyn Caporizzo of Eaton Corp. reviews the evolution of her company’s e-learning activities over four years, decision points along the way, and specifics of platforms and software used to provide training.<sup>16</sup>

### **III. Developing and Delivering Learning**

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<sup>14</sup> Anonymous. Interview by Maura Kennedy. By phone, 19 April 2010. Individual quoted prefers not to be named.

<sup>15</sup> Larson, Cynthia. Interview by Maura Kennedy. By phone, 23 April 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Caporizzo, Marilyn. “Leveraging Multimedia at Millipore,” *Computers in Libraries*, November/December 2009.

Because of the key role information professionals have long played in providing learning in information literacy skills, many play an active role in developing critical e-learning to support their organization's strategic goals.

Amgen is a biotechnology company that develops human therapeutics. To capitalize on the work of its researchers, it is critical that their work is documented and stored in a consistent, systematic way so that it can be readily accessed by others. This goal became more challenging when a series of mergers and acquisitions greatly expanded the scientific staff and the number of locations at which they worked. When Amgen's chief scientist mandated training in scientific notebook procedures, Richard Hulser, who was senior manager of information services, was chosen to design and deliver that training.

At Amgen, Hulser also became involved in developing the next version of his company's learning management system so that it would recommend new training to employees based on both their history and their managers' priorities. This approach, says Hulser, increased the number of course takers dramatically.<sup>17</sup>

Economic education, both for employees and for teachers and students of economics, is an important part of the mission of the Federal Reserve Bank in St. Louis. To accomplish this, library staff work closely with the economic education unit, research department economists, and the bank's Center for Online Learning. The library's role includes research and acquiring copyright permissions for elements of the learning products that include a unit on the Great Depression. They have also developed a tutorial on the use of the bank's in-house mapping tool, GeoFRED, which overlays detailed economic data onto maps.<sup>18</sup>

Jeffrey Aubuchon is the knowledge manager for library and research services at Management Sciences for Health (MSH), a nonprofit international health organization composed of more than 2,000 people from 73 nations. Integral to their mission is providing current health and leadership knowledge to its staff, who support ministries of health in developing countries in building their own technical and management capacities to deliver effective public health services. To accomplish this work, they rely largely upon their robust Intranet, which they have revamped to make it more mobile-accessible with fewer graphics.

With funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development, MSH developed and launched Internet-based distance learning programs, networks, and resources in 2002, including Web-based learning used by more than seven thousand health professionals in 140 countries. Aubuchon's group compiles four technical newsletters addressing the organizations areas of focus—HIV/AIDS, child and maternal health, malaria and family planning. Field staff and those who travel are constantly on the lookout for needed competencies that library and research services can address with targeted modules. One unplanned benefit of MSH staff's comfort with technology occurred after the devastating

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<sup>17</sup> Hulser, Richard. Interview by Maura Kennedy. By phone, 16 April 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Cosgrove, Kathy E. E-mail message to Maura Kennedy. 26 April 2010.

earthquake in Haiti, when the organization was quickly able to account for the safety of staff members by their use of social media and mobile technology.<sup>19</sup>

When Dow Jones-Reuters was preparing to launch Factiva, its business research tool, to its sales force in 2000, the company quickly realized that its conventional in-person training model would not work. There was an urgent need to train the sales force worldwide without the time and expense involved in traveling around the world, and without the need to create priorities around which markets would receive training first.

The information professionals in the newly-created virtual training group were chosen to undertake this massive effort. The staff received training in the use of Factiva and devised the virtual training that would launch the product internationally, relying primarily on an on-demand system that provides voice-over PowerPoint. They incorporated assessment tools so they could constantly improve the training as it progressed. And they accomplished all of this in six weeks.<sup>20</sup>

Anne Caputo, executive director of learning and information professional programs at Dow Jones and current president of SLA, was particularly pleased with the cultural acceptance and adaptations that surrounded the virtual training process. “Our Asian offices were particularly accepting and delighted. Their distance from our headquarters meant that they were often last to receive training, and that would no longer be the case. And they could adapt the training, getting together as teams to receive it.” The training saved so much time and money—360 percent—that, according to Caputo, Dow Jones “has never looked back.”<sup>21</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Active engagement in e-learning is a natural activity for special librarians and information professionals—one that can be especially useful in demonstrating their value to their organizations and in positioning them for leadership.

Through their commitment and contributions to continuous learning, many special librarians and information professionals model a behavior that is valued in highly competitive organizations. Their training provides them with foundational skills and knowledge that put them in a key position to support e-learning across the organization.

To build upon that foundation, special librarians and information professionals must continue to learn—not only about new information retrieval, distribution and collaboration tools and communication technologies, but also about subjects that they may not have encountered in the library training, including instructional design, adult learning, and marketing. Anne Caputo, who has taught library school courses for more than thirty years, says she always asks former students, “What didn’t we teach you?” She

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<sup>19</sup> Aubuchon, Jeffrey. Interview by Maura Kennedy. By phone, 22 April 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Caputo, Anne. Interview by Maura Kennedy. By phone, 5 April 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Caputo, interview

says the vast majority respond that they needed more knowledge about teaching, curriculum development, and strategic marketing.<sup>22</sup>

As organizations invest more and more in electronic learning assets—from e-books to specialized databases to off-the-shelf training—special librarians and information professionals can ensure that the organization receives a high rate of return on that investment. By identifying and using opportunities to communicate with potential users, working to improve information literacy, and collaborating with other parts of the organization on training initiatives, special librarians and information professionals are helping to build stronger, more knowledgeable organizations that are better positioned for success.

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<sup>22</sup> Caputo, interview