

The Role of Information Professionals in the Digital Age: Improving the Visibility of Information Professionals

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Thank you, Sommers Pierce, and Professor Donkai for that kind introduction. I am very happy to be with you today and thank each of you for honoring me with your time and your attention.

I would also like to thank the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programs and the Information Resource Center of the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo for the kind invitation that made it possible for me to return to Japan. In February 2008, I was fortunate to speak before a joint meeting of SLA and the Japanese Special Libraries Association, and I had no idea that I would be able to return so soon.

Additional thanks to the Japan Special Libraries Association for cosponsoring this event. I would like to recognize our interpreters: Ms. Masumi Mori of the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, and Ms. Tomoko Hotta of NHK Jojo Network.

Finally, special greetings to the librarians here from the Japan Special Libraries Association . . . Japan Libraries Association . . . and National Diet Library . . . as well as our other distinguished guests.

I was asked to speak to you about the role of information professionals in the digital age. Specifically, I was asked to share my thoughts about improving the visibility of information professionals in an era where information is perceived to be free and available to anyone, anywhere, any time.

I speak to you as CEO of the Special Libraries Association, or SLA. SLA is the largest worldwide organization representing information professionals--about 11,000 of them in 75 countries around the world

There may be a few people here who are not familiar with the terms "information professional" and "special librarian." An information professional is a person who finds, shares, analyzes and manages information that is critical to the success of his or her organization. Most information professionals have specialized education and training in their field, or in library science, or both.

Today, information professionals may be found in corporate information centers . . . in research departments . . . in government offices--almost anywhere that there are people who rely on information to do their work. Many just need their computer, a laptop, or a smart phone. Information professionals are not defined by the spaces they occupy, but by the professional competencies they demonstrate and the expertise they provide. I will address those competencies in a moment, but first, a little background.

One hundred years ago, when my association, SLA, was founded, a big part of the job of the information professional was seeking out hard-to-find information about specialized topics. SLA was founded so that information professionals could share scarce information and learning with each other.

Today, information is everywhere. The number of books, magazines, and newspapers published worldwide is so huge that there is no longer a reliable way of counting them. In more recent years, with the digitizing of information and the arrival of the Internet, almost one-quarter of the world's population can get access to a wealth of information from their own computers and now from their phones.

With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, user-generated content is dramatically increasing the volume of information every second. A tremendous amount of useful content now bypasses the publishing process and goes straight online by blog or wiki. Business and education are using social networking and virtual worlds to exchange information and encourage innovation.

As the Internet has grown, so has the perception that all the information an organization requires is available for free through generally available search engines. Another common perception is that finding the information you need on the Internet is fast, convenient and easy. So why do organizations need information professionals?

With all of the information now available, it is becoming harder and more time consuming to find good, reliable information--the kind of information we can trust when making decisions about how to invest our organizations' human or capital resources.

One study found that middle managers spend up to 25 percent of their time searching for information required to do their jobs. And more than half of the respondents said the information they found was completely useless to them.

High-ranking executives are also using a great deal of your organization's time in the hunt for information. My association, SLA, recently completed a major research project and found that corporate executives spend an astonishing 21.2 hours a week looking for information. While two-thirds of these executives agree

that information is imperative in making strategic decisions, only 59 percent say that it is easy to find the information they need.

We rely on search engines like Yahoo and Google [top 2 in Japan] to help us locate the information we are looking for on the Internet. They work very well in our private lives, but they are not always the most effective way to get the high-quality information we need at work. For example, one recent study found that about half of us ignore the first ten results of any given search because we think they are more closely related to advertising dollars than to the search terms we used. We are looking for reliable information, which is getting harder to find, and the time we spend looking is costing organizations money.

Information professionals help organizations address these challenges. They provide context to information and authenticate its value. They know what good information looks like. And they can save your organization money.

In one survey, respondents reported saving nine hours every time they asked their corporate library or information center to find information instead of doing the work themselves.

But there is something even larger at stake. If we cannot rely on information, how can we rely on each other in a global economy? An annual study conducted by Edelman, covering 20 countries, recently found that 62 percent of us worldwide trust companies even less than we did a year ago. And trust is the cornerstone of most economic activity.

It takes people to separate reliable information from unreliable information. It takes people to determine what information is worth paying for. It takes people who know how to use technology and get the best results. Those people are information professionals.

The U.S. and much of the world was captivated in January when all 155 people onboard survived the emergency landing of a US Airways flight in the Hudson River in New York. Even before the investigation began, people were sure that the experience and expertise of the veteran pilot were the factors that made this miracle possible. It was another important reminder of the extraordinary value that humans add to technology.

In this digital age, successful organizations cannot put their trust on autopilot. They must have information professionals who demonstrate specific skills and competencies--and who are deeply committed to gaining new skills and competencies throughout their careers.

The foundation for SLA's philosophy of professional success is outlined in a statement of competencies we are very proud of titled "Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century." This document, which is based

upon ongoing social...technological...and workplace trends...as well as competency documents in peer industries...is no less than a strategic roadmap for professional growth and personal development in today's rapidly changing information industry. And it is available in English and in Japanese on our Web site, sla.org.

Specifically...the competencies document addresses four areas of expertise...each augmented with specific skills we believe info pros will require to succeed in the future.

These professional competencies include:

- First...the ability to excel at managing information organizations ranging in size from one to several hundred employees whose offerings are intangible...whose markets are always changing and in which both high-tech and high-touch are vitally important in achieving organizational success.
- Second...expertise in total management of information resources...including the identification... selection...evaluation... and the provision of access to pertinent information resources in any media or format. Our own research shows that information professionals spend as much time analyzing information as gathering it.
- Third...unquestionable expertise in providing information in ways that enable clients to immediately integrate and apply the information in their work or learning processes.
- And finally....the ability to harness current and appropriate technology tools to deliver the best services...provide the most relevant and accessible resources...develop and deliver teaching tools to maximize clients' use of information...and capitalize on the library and information environment of the 21st century.

With these competencies, information professionals can and do guide their organization to the best, most reliable information. They effectively use technology to organize the organization's information assets--and to deliver information to employees who will use it to make the organization more successful. By doing so, they increase the organization's productivity, and that translates into less time spent finding higher quality information.

The successful information professional of the future must be flexible and well-grounded in everything from financial business practices ...to information technology...and from supervisory management... to marketing.

Above all, information professionals must become experts in communicating the value of information within the organization. And the first step in effective

communication is listening, seeking out the expertise of others in order to develop a deep and thorough understanding of the organizations.

In fact, the most important research performed by any information professional is about his or her own organization. This is not a one-time effort. Just like people, organizations are constantly growing and changing. In this time of global financial turmoil, the pace of change can be dizzying.

It begins with the basics, such as a firm grasp of the organization's business position and related financial statements. It extends to an understanding of the various business units and the priorities of the people who work within them.

Info pros must follow changes throughout the organization and adjust their own products and services to reflect shifting priorities. Then they must develop metrics and methods to measure how well they are meeting their organization's information needs.

The metrics chosen will be different for every organization. There are quantitative measures that can determine how much time--and therefore, how much money--employees saved by using the services of the information professional. There are qualitative measures that can help determine whether employees could have found the same information without the information professional. There are also metrics that can be used to demonstrate the impact information provided through the informational professional has had on the organization's decision-making process.

Communicating measurable data about performance is an effective way to demonstrate the value of the information professional. Just as important, it is an opportunity to open a dialogue on how they can tie their work even more closely to the organization's goals and strategies.

The ability of info pros to succeed may well depend in large measure on their ability to define and redefine their roles as often as necessary to meet the rapidly changing needs of their enterprises. It will require ability and commitment, and it will require a change in the way info pros think about themselves.

However, just at the time when organizations need information the most, too many of them are trying to save money by cutting jobs in libraries and information centers. This is a false economy.

For example, the University of Illinois, one of the largest and most prestigious research universities in the U.S., also has one of the largest library systems. They recently did a very thorough analysis and found that for every dollar they spent on the library, they received \$4.38 in grants.

SLA has recently completed an exhaustive series of research studies about the information profession. First, we looked at how information professionals and special librarians view their jobs and their contributions to their organizations. Then we looked at how employers view information professionals and what they value about the work they do. The two groups agreed on five areas where information professionals can make important contributions to their organizations' future success.

If you are an information professional who wants to demonstrate what you do to make your organization successful, this is important information. It is up to you to ensure your organization connects its success with yours. You know that the information you so carefully turn into actionable knowledge creates a competitive advantage for your organization. You know that this advantage has a positive effect on your organization's bottom line.

Your organization, however, is unlikely to understand this without your help. In connecting your work to your organization's success, here are the top five areas to stress.

The first area is knowledge sharing. Information professionals and specialized librarians promote continuous learning and knowledge sharing through innovative technology and education practices. To do your job, you have to stay up-to-date on the latest developments in communications and technology. Everyone agrees that organizations must have the knowledge they need to make strategic decisions--but they have to be taught that information professionals create this culture of knowledge in their organizations.

Second: In information as in other matters, quality counts. It may require investment, but in the long run, it saves money. Information professionals know the available tools and how to most economically access the most relevant information in a timely, convenient, and secure manner. That saves your organization time and money--but you have to be able to measure those savings and communicate them.

Smart organizations use their employees' skills wisely. If they have a great salesperson, that person's skills are not well used research on a potential client. A great salesperson should be out there talking to people, networking, and selling your products and services.

And where does a great salesperson get the knowledge that will result in the best sales? From somebody who knows your business, someone who knows where to mine that special nugget of information that will give your organization the advantage and help your great salesperson close the deal. That person is an information professional.

Third: Expert information leads to good decisions. Information professionals and specialized librarians facilitate good decision-making by providing expert analysis and identifying insights and trends that create a competitive advantage.

Organizations must have accurate, reliable, customized information if they are going to make informed decisions. If you are an information professional, you can demonstrate the role you play in facilitating good decision making by not only measuring your performance by appropriate metrics but also by proactively sharing relevant information targeted to the needs of various parts of your organization.

Fourth, the commitment of information professionals to continuous learning and professional development makes you an important organizational asset. Most of the executives we surveyed recognize that information professionals must constantly learn new skills and technologies. They value continuous learning, and they recognize that information professionals help other employees stay on top of current skills as well as trends affecting their industry. The savvy information professional uses every opportunity to share learning.

Because SLA represents about 11,000 information professionals in 75 countries, we take very seriously our responsibility to help our members gain the skills they need. That is why we are creating more and more online educational opportunities for information professionals.

In fact, SLA has an entire online learning community called Click University. Most of the professional development opportunities on Click U are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year--and are free to our members. They include twice-monthly Webinars that are also available by replay, the SLA Online Libraries, a collection of books on management and leadership, and recorded continuing education courses from our annual conference. We also have an Innovation Lab where our members can experiment with new technologies. One of its features is 23 Things, a self-paced program that provides hands-on learning about new Web tools that information professionals can use to share information, both inside and outside their organizations.

That brings me to the fifth point, and it is especially relevant to us today. In this global economy, every professional must have a global network to be successful. SLA is that network for people in the information profession.

SLA fosters global networking, knowledge sharing and collaboration to promote the exchange of new ideas, trends and cutting-edge developments.

We are doing most of our communications by blogs, wikis, etc., so that information professionals around the world can be part of our global network, even if they cannot attend our conferences every year.

However, information professionals from every part of the world do come to SLA's annual conference, and find the experience invaluable. Information professionals from 30 countries attended our conference last year, including 16 who came from Japan. This year, we will meet in Washington, D.C., 14-17 June,

and we have more than 200 informational sessions as well as an array of networking opportunities for those who attend.

As part of SLA's efforts to increase the number of international members, we have even revised our dues structure to make membership affordable for most information professionals, no matter where they live, no matter what their income.

Perhaps most important in this digital age, we are using our recent research to create tools our members can use to promote the value of their services to their executives.

At SLA, we believe that information builds strong, resilient organizations that can confidently move forward in today's economy.

We believe that creating a culture that values reliable information is the best way to build the trust that the global marketplace needs so much right now.

We believe that information professionals are key to helping organizations of all kinds and sizes become more successful and more worthy of the trust placed in them.

Thank you for your kind attention today.