

The New Information Professional

by José-Marie Griffiths

José-Marie Griffiths is University Chief Information Officer and Executive Director, Information Technology Division, at the University of Michigan. She can be reached at the university by mail at 5080 Fleming Administration Bldg., 503 Thompson Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1340; or by phone at 313/763-3528; by fax at 313/764-3988; or by e-mail at jmgriff@umich.edu. This article is adapted from her remarks at the 1997 ASIS Annual Meeting.

My comments today are made in the context of the prevailing trends for information professionals: what they do and how they go about their work. The base requirements today include acquiring problem solving and teaming skills, learning how to learn, and practicing continuous improvement. Professionals must also acquire interdisciplinary knowledge, interact with and process information (instead of simply receiving it), and recognize that, in today's environment, technology is integral to learning.

As a case in point, when Suzanne Thorin and Virginia Sorkin recently discussed the library of the future in *The Learning Revolution: The Challenge of Information Technology in the Academy*, they indicated that librarians are now being asked to make radical changes to the way they work. They mentioned

- Eliminating hierarchy
- Working in teams
- Considering and meeting client needs
- Learning to communicate with information technologists
- Implementing business practices such as long range and yearly planning and being accountable for implementing those plans
- Changing long instilled work practices and organizational structures
- Keeping one's eye on the big picture (p. 174)

We are all familiar with the kinds of transforming trends that I have cited and many of us are making changes within our organizations to address them. But what are the common characteristics of the new information professional who can meet these challenges? How can we promote and catalyze change through our organizations so that we can achieve the kinds of futures that we envision?

Critical Characteristics of the New Information Professional

In the environment I have described, I believe five characteristics are key to professional success: the ability to

- Guide in the face of an uncertain future
- Collaborate
- Prioritize and maintain agility and flexibility in the face of changing goals
- Empower
- Understand the core capabilities of one's organization, work group and colleagues.

Guide

It seems obvious now that we can never be certain about the future. Who could have predicted the massive changes that the Internet and the Web have brought about over the last three years? We need to move forward with the spirit of the pioneers. We need to be ready to take on whatever comes our way.

Some industry analysts say that long-range strategic planning is a waste of time. Even a five-year plan is inappropriate in our present environment. One or two years is about as far out as we can predict. In this new future, one in which we really do not know where we will end up, the information professional often takes on the role of expedition guide. We have to see ourselves pioneering new knowledge frontiers. We can be the physical guides, the procedural guides and the intellectual guides to knowledge resources in various formats.

However, as we guide, we cannot always lead. Sometimes we may need to follow while someone else steps up for a while and cuts down the forest in front of us, clearing a new path. The suc-

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cess of the expedition requires the information professional to be both leader and follower, consistently providing guidance from either role. This leads us to the next ability.

Collaborate

The second characteristic of the new information professional is the ability to collaborate. None of us have the capabilities to do it all, or even to know it all. No person is an island. Cooperation is a key theme for the future, and all information professionals are going to have to function as collaborators. We will have to collaborate with others – and not only with people we know or people who come to use our services over and over again. Increasingly we are going to deal with unfamiliar people, remote users, about whom we have no prior knowledge.

Moreover, we are going to have to learn how to collaborate with these new people in very short periods of time, in fact, in a transitory period of time. To do that we have to have a deep understanding of needs and capabilities, our own and our collaborators'. What do we bring to and expect of any collaboration in which we are involved? Collaboration is a two-way street. We cannot ignore our responsibilities for recognizing what we do or do not bring to the table.

This leads to a word of caution. I have been a proponent of collaborating activities for many years and have always made it a point in my own work to identify and establish relationships with others interested in working collaboratively. Nonetheless, I am concerned that we be careful that teamwork and collaboration do not become excuses to avoid decision-making and accountability by the individual. Teaming and collaboration are not appropriate for every activity or every decision that needs to be made. As with any ability, we must apply it to the right situation and ensure that the right components are in place for collaboration to create effective results.

Prioritize

A third characteristic, one that I believe has been key for me, is to be a juggler of priorities. Priorities change – though I know my staff does not like to hear it. They get very frustrated with me when I say we have to change our focus yet again, often on a very short timeline. But new priorities come along all the time, and we have to be able to recognize that as these new priorities “slot in,” they shift other priorities. Managers have to be flexible and so do the information professionals who work for us or whom we may recruit. Indeed

we all need to be increasingly flexible – in procedures, structures, directions, what we do, how long we do it for, with whom we work, and so forth. We also need to be agile and responsive to changing needs, strategies, architectures, technologies, leaderships and other factors in the environment.

It is the combination of agility and priority setting that will allow us to respond successfully to our institution, external influences and the needs of our user communities.

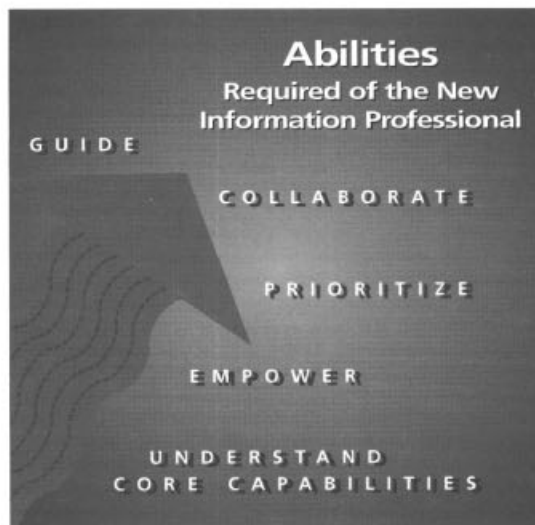
Empower

A fourth characteristic is the ability to empower people. Doing that involves recognizing what it takes to empower and what it

takes to be empowered. We have to recognize that some people, for one reason or another, do not want to be empowered. Some will simply not accept it. We must find appropriate roles for them within our organization while enabling those who are willing to take on added responsibility to do so.

Understand Core Capabilities

Finally, I think it is critical for information professionals to truly understand the core capabilities of their organization – from the capabilities of the entire organization or institution, to the units within which they work, to those of individual staff members, including themselves. We need to leverage our capabilities with complementary capabilities, which is often what team building and team work are all about.



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We do not have to be the only providers of service to our constituencies. Indeed, we probably are not. Therefore, we might as well face that fact and recognize that we should focus on what we are good at. We should focus on what we can do well, and let others come in and fill the gaps. That idea is sometimes threatening to individual staff members, but it seems to me essential if we are to optimize our resources. I have seen this process in inter-institutional activities, where institutions have started to collaborate. They bring complementary skills to the table – overlapping, but to a large extent complementary. By concentrating on their strengths, they collectively provide better products and services.

The Role of the New Information Professional: Sponsoring Change

Once we have these five key abilities – or are working on developing them – we need to turn our attention to our role as guide. Guiding an expedition means we are embarking into new territory. And new territory most often requires us to do things in new ways, to change. How do we sponsor change within our organizations? That question is the critical one for the new information professional.

I have already mentioned that we need to develop an understanding of core contributions to value – or perhaps more specifically, what constitutes core contributions to valued services and solutions. We have to understand what knowledge we have, what skills we have – as individuals and as organizational units. But we also have to understand how we generate and leverage economies of scale as central service providers. What can we do, how can we help people who are providing similar services, perhaps at the local level? What are the economies of scale, and how can we leverage them in the best interest of the institution? To answer these questions, we need an institutional perspective.

Change #1: A Commitment to the Success of Others

We held a retreat recently for the staff of the Information Technology Division at the University of Michigan (UM). One of the questions we asked on a questionnaire was “How important is it for us as a unit of UM to consider optimizing the return on investment in information technology for the institution as a whole?” We also asked, “How important is it to optimize the return on investment in technology within

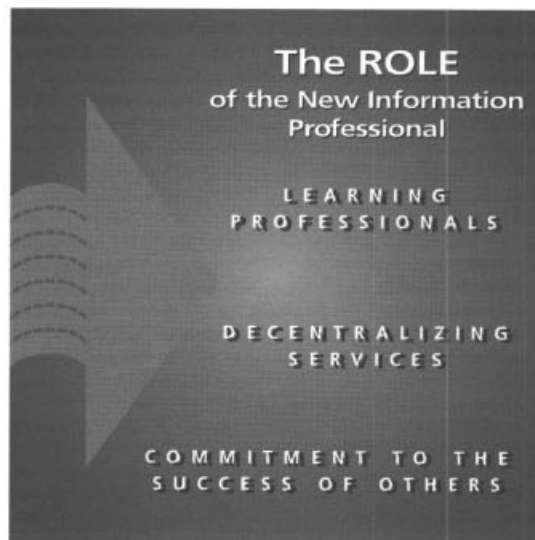
our division?” Only two people responded that the institutional return on investment was a high priority. I was one, and my chief financial officer was the other – nobody else saw that as important. To me that was really an eye-opener – one of the things that I have to do with my own staff is to help them understand and support a commitment to the success of our institution.

As I thought about that problem, I also reflected on other shifts in our perspectives. For instance, in the profession, we have moved from talking about managing technologies, collections or resources to managing access and personnel. I used to give a lot of workshops on managing technolo-

gies, but I was not really talking about managing technologies: I was really talking about managing organizations – people.

I recently heard it said that we had moved from managing personnel to managing human relations – staff satisfaction has become important; customer satisfaction has become important. But it seems to me that our real charge is managing the investments of our organizations – in people, technologies, collections, etc. And if we start thinking about managing investments, we start looking for outcomes, rather than just thinking about managing a resource at the resource level.

We also are in the business of managing expectations, and every one of us who touches one of our user communi-



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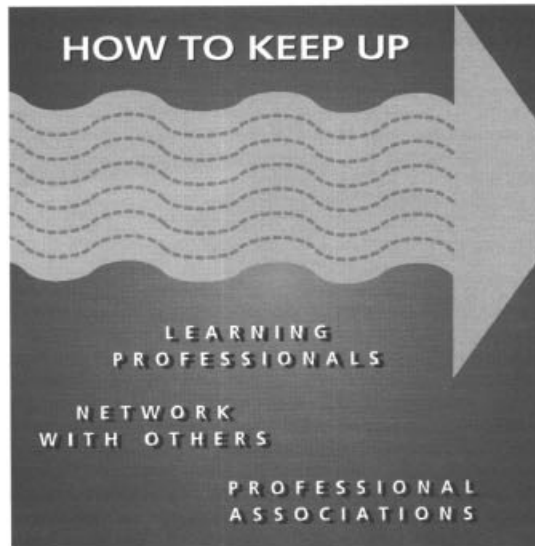
ties is in the business of managing expectations – of our customers, of our executives and of our staff. Yes, they all have expectations – stated or unstated.

All of this change in how we talk about our work is actually representative of a shift in focus. I have an example: LensCrafters, who make eyeglasses, used to have an advertising campaign that emphasized one hour turn-around time – responding to people not wanting to hang around waiting for hours on end, to people wanting to take care of an errand on their lunch hour. The message focused on efficiency and productivity. It was a very effective campaign. But one day, I caught the end of the latest LensCrafters' ad, which said, "We help you see better." Then they added "One hour at a time," which referred back to their earlier campaign. That shift in emphasis from "We provide your glasses in an hour" to "We help you see better" is fundamental. It is an insight I have been able to use quite effectively. We are not simply providers of services – whether they are library services or information technology services – we actually are helping people do what they do better. We help improve teaching, learning, research, administration, commerce. That is the goal we must keep in mind. If we start thinking that way, promoting our services that way, and reassessing our performance that way, we can make the business case to our senior executives much more appropriately than by saying that we served so many people with these kinds of services over this period of time.

Now what becomes important is that our staff understand this difference. They have to understand what we are really in the business of doing. Getting our staff at the lower levels to understand that what we do is help other people do their jobs better will give them a different perspective on their own work. They will better understand their own contributions to the value of the services and products we provide – value as the client perceives it.

Change #2: Decentralizing Services

The second key means for change in our organizations is to recognize that we should not necessarily hold all our own resources centrally. Some of you may already be responsible for decentralized organizations, and many of you are probably in organizations that are heavily decentralized. I hold a centralized resource. I believe that for me to be more effective in delivering the kinds of services that people are expecting – to help them do what they do – I need to take some of my resource, not all of it, and deploy it to the user groups that I serve. If I actually place staff in other organizations, they can better understand the needs of these constituencies, they can begin to anticipate the kinds of outcomes that the clients expect. We can actually increase our influence by moving people out and having them involved directly in user organizations. I believe that my staff, by virtue of this decentralization, will become more anticipatory and participatory in the user processes. My measure of success is for every user organization that I serve to consider my services to be a seamless extension of their own organization.



Change #3: Learning Professionals

The last change issue I want to mention today is how we allow our staff to keep up. That is a major problem. We are juggling things in the air, we are balancing at the same time, and we could tip one way or the other at any moment. We talk about learning organizations, and it seems to me we need to develop learning teams, but increasingly we need to be learning professionals. We need to recognize our own role in the ongoing professional development and continuing education arena.

We need to understand, also, the value of prior invest-

[I]t is critical for information professionals to understand the core capabilities of their organization – from the capabilities of the entire organization or institution, to the units with which they work, to those of individual staff members, including themselves.

ment in human resources. For example, it has been suggested by some people that my mainframers have obsolete skills and knowledge – that they are not outfitted for the new world we are in. While they need to upgrade their knowledge and skills, there is a certain amount of learning from their experience working with mainframes – what it means to keep the machines running – that is transferable to the new environment. Their knowledge is not necessarily in how they do it, but in knowing what characteristics of the mainframe environment work well, and why. How do we take these learnings and translate them? We should not devalue the knowledge that people have that may not seem appropriate in the environment that we are creating – we just have to extract the appropriate components of it and assist them in applying it to new situations.

Learning also involves having our people interacting with others – within our organization and across organizations. Perhaps this is where we can truly use the technology to address the kinds of problems the technology has created – through increasing collaboration within and beyond our own boundaries. Also, we need to use the professional associations that bring different kinds of people together, for instance, ASIS or CNI (Coalition for Networked Information).

The Future

Information professionals of the future need to have the spirit of the pioneer. They need to be willing to accept that we cannot predict what people are going to be doing, how they are going to be doing it, or with whom. Information professionals need to be both flexible and agile – just being flexible is not enough. They need to be empowered to decide and to act. They need to be able to translate planning and decision-making into actions. Certainly, not everyone yet understands how to take this step. Translation and implementation skills are really needed – to get people to under-

stand how, when you have made a decision or developed a plan, you take it and actually make it work.

Staff need to be empowered to learn. At Michigan we not only have work plans for our staff, but also professional development agreements. A part of our compensation program assesses demonstrated competencies in applying new skills and new knowledge to our organization's endeavors.

If we do create the kind of workforce that I have defined, we will be able to assume leadership roles within our institution and within our communities at the national and inter-

national levels. This is our time. This is the information professional's time, more than any other. The role of the information professional is at the heart of all of these critical activities – technology development, technology applications, content development, new ways of thinking about things, new ways of doing work, new ways of collaborating. We have to be there, and we have to be prepared to stake a claim to our leadership roles within our institutions and beyond.

How organizations are run continues to evolve. They used to be run by their inventors. Next, the business and financial people came in. We now have lawyers getting involved due to legal issues and regulatory issues. But the time has come for the information professional to take a role as leader and guide. Information management is a vital part of everything our organizations do. I see a future that increasingly brings people together with knowledge resources of various kinds and in various formats, breaking down all barriers of space and time. They will come together to collaborate on short- or long-term projects, moving in and out of this collaboration space over time. These activities take place under the umbrella of the "Knowledge Community." Information professionals, with our abilities and understandings, will be critical to the development and results of these knowledge communities. Our institutions need us as guides on this exciting expedition into an information-centric 21st century.

