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21st-Century Info Experts
Librarians head into the digital age

By Chris Hayhurst

The Trend: Libraries are changing rapidly; jobs are more technical than ever.

The Job: Librarian/information professional

Work and play: For Casey Schacher, life would be boring if she didn’t have both. By night, she’s a rough-and-tumble member of the Palmetto State Rollergirls competitive rollerskating team in Myrtle Beach, S.C. By day, she has a very different job—she works as a librarian at nearby Coastal Carolina University.

To prepare for her evening bouts, says Schacher, she practices scowling and glaring in the mirror. To prepare for her days in the library—well, first she takes out her mouth guard. “My job is service-oriented,” she says. “The wider my smile, the better.”

Schacher’s official title is “emerging technologies librarian.” Librarians these days are pretty high-tech. The ability to use computer programs such as Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Dreamweaver, and Adobe Flash is nearly as important as the ability to do research. “A lot of what I do is Web development,” says Schacher, a Missouri native who earned a master’s degree in library science from the University of Missouri in Columbia in 2007. “I just finished designing our online newsletter, and I’m working with a committee to redesign our home page.” Schacher is also working on new services for the library, such as providing library assistance through online chats or texting.

Of course, Schacher’s job doesn’t end there. She also helps patrons in person at the reference desk, teaches research skills, and helps students research an array of topics. She has located sources on topics ranging from the effect of the TV show CSI: Crime Scene Investigation on police recruitment to how a person’s astrological sign can be used to choose a career. At one point, she scoured the Internet for information on online dating, which a student needed for a presentation. “To the casual observer, it appeared as though I was looking for a hot date.”

As fun as it sounds, says Schacher, her work is “extremely challenging. It’s not sitting around reading books. It’s not going around and shushing people. I’ve had to utilize every single skill I have, everything I’ve worked so hard to learn, and then I’ve had to learn more.”

Meet the 21st-century librarian. Schacher is just the type of person the American Library Association hopes will enter the field in the coming years: technologically savvy, energetic, great at communicating with others, and passionate about serving the pub-lic. Schacher brings to librarianship everything required of a modern-day “information professional,” as librarians are known. Comfortable in what she describes as a “high-tech, interactive, multimedia environment,” she sees no downside to the fact that in her job, there’s no such thing as a typical day. “It keeps me on my toes,” says Schacher, “which I love.”

Librarianship 2.0

Librarianship, says Richard Huffine, national library coordinator for the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), “used to be all about putting books on the shelf and helping people find things.” Today, he says, it’s a lot more complicated. “It’s more about managing the enormous flow of information that comes in every day, interpreting it, and assisting people in getting and using the information” that they need, he says.

Huffine, who has a master’s degree in library and information studies from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, often works with scientific topics. He’s not a scientist, though. In fact, he took only one semester of geology in college. His office, based in Reston, Va., supports thousands of USGS researchers—including geologists and biologists—working all over the country, often in remote areas. “If you’re studying black bears in Montana,” explains Huffine, “you have to know all the work that’s already been done on black bears and a lot about the environment in Montana.”

Many of those scientists don’t have access to a USGS library, says Huffine. “So we’ve developed an internal desktop library where staff can go to access different databases and over a thousand online journals.” Huffine and his staff set up RSS feeds (online tools that compile frequently updated information) mat scientists can use to monitor news on their subjects and alerts from journals and databases about information that’s just come in.

Huffine, a third-generation librarian, is naturally drawn to the work. “I really have an affinity for information and the way people share it,” he says. “But I also love to solve puzzles—I do jigsaw puzzles at home—and when someone comes through the door and says I need X, it’s a lot like working on a puzzle. You have to figure out how the things you have fit into what they need to know.” USGS researchers, says Huffine, seem to appreciate his work. “They really understand the benefit of having a librarian on their team.”

A Path to a Calling

Where in the world—or, rather, on campus—is librarian Cate Parish? You might find her behind the reference desk. Or perhaps she’s leading a staff meeting. She might be updating the library’s Web site to make it more interactive. Or perhaps she’s bouncing among the three libraries at Illinois Central College in East Peoria, where she leads a four-librarian team. Wherever she is, she’s busy.
Parish's career began eight years ago with a job she landed as an undergraduate at Millikin University in Decatur, Ill. "I got a campus job in the school library," she says, "and I worked there part time for two years. Before that, I thought I wanted to be a pastor—I majored in religion."

As graduation approached in 2003, Parish was still unsure about her future. "I spent a couple months searching for jobs, and I happened to walk back into the library one day and they offered me a position," she says. "And so I became their archives and research assistant, working with all the historical materials of the university and also working the reference desk. One semester I was a student worker; the next I was supervising the student workers."

That job, recalls Parish, was a turning point. "I loved it. I decided this was really a career I was interested in."

When a position became available in the public library in her hometown of Beardstown, Ill., she jumped at it. "I became director of the library. It was a large pay cut, but I knew the experience would be worth it." While most librarian positions require a master's degree in library science, that wasn't the case at the Beardstown Houston Memorial Library. "A lot of small rural libraries can't afford to pay someone with a master's, so they'll take someone with experience instead," Parish says. "The person I replaced only had a high school diploma. They get by with what they can get."

Now, Parish is getting her master's degree, which is required for her current position at Illinois Central College. Meanwhile, she's making sure every patron gets everything he or she needs. "When I know that I've made a difference for someone whether it's as simple as printing a Word document or as complex as helping them find 20 different sources on an obscure topic—those are the times when I'm really happy to be a librarian."

Launch Your Career

By Richard Hufnig

Want to be a librarian? Opportunities abound in schools, colleges, and public libraries, as well as in libraries devoted to specialized topics, such as law, chemistry, or a corporation's private documents. Here's how to prepare.

Now: Because libraries are rapidly becoming more high-tech, master interactive Web technologies such as Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, and Second Life and learn how to create RSS feeds.

Soon: Study Web design and learn how to use programs such as Adobe Photoshop and Dreamweaver to create cool, easy-to-navigate online content. Those skills are important to know because most libraries lack their own Web design teams.

Later: Get a four-year degree. Any will do, but graphic design, computer science, and English are particularly helpful. Consider an internship while in school.

Finally: Go to grad school. Most major libraries require a master's degree in library science or library and information studies. The American Library Association maintains a full list of accredited programs at www.ala.org. Casey Schacher earned a Digital Media Certificate in conjunction with her degree. "It was the best decision I could have made," says Schacher. "It introduced me to a lot of the technologies that I use on the job every day."

For More Info: www.librarycareers.org

Not Keen on Grad School?

If college and graduate school sound daunting right now, consider a career as a library technician. Library technicians assist librarians in day-to-day operations. Many have associate degrees, while some hold only high school diplomas. The Council on Library/Media Technicians offers a list of educational programs at coltucr.edu/ltprograms.html. Working as a library technician is a good way to try out the field.

Where to Work

Librarians are most visible in schools, universities, and public libraries. Most librarian jobs over the next decade will be in nontraditional settings such as private corporations, nonprofit agencies, and consulting firms, where librarians will analyze and organize information, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The work is expected to be so high-tech that some of those jobs will be classified as systems analysts, database specialists and trainers. Webmasters, or Web developers.

Think About It

What other careers are changing in the digital age? How are they changing?

Key Points

1. In addition to their traditional duties, such as helping people find information, librarians today are using many new technologies on the job.

2. Librarians work in a variety of settings, such as public libraries, schools, universities, government agencies, nonprofit agencies, and corporations.

3. Librarians are generally required to have master's degrees, while library technician jobs require high school diplomas.

Critical Thinking
Richard Huffine compares his work as a librarian to doing a puzzle. Why is that an apt comparison?

Extension Activity

Have students research and find articles or Web sites that show what working as a librarian is like today. They can even ask a librarian to help them locate that information! Ask them to share their findings in class.

Resources

- American Library Association: Library Careers www.librarycareers.org
- Librarian in Black (blog) www.librarianinblack.typepad.com

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