The Future of the Information Science
Profession: A Delphi Study / Jenny Bronstein

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the transformations that have occurred in the information science profession as a result of the advent of the Information Society. It will look at the solutions being proposed today, while adding new ideas how to cope with the challenges being faced by the information professional. The rapid pace of developments in the field of Information Technology as well as the advents of networked information services, have prompted a comprehensive review of the information professionals' roles and responsibilities. As a result, we need to rethink the whole nature of the profession to give it a central role in the Information Society. The growth and acceptance of the internet has exposed the breath of information available by electronic access far beyond the traditional information professional environment. Anyone with appropriate hardware and software can now access data virtually any topic instantaneously and relatively inexpensively. This change in the nature an din the way people access information have force the information professionals to realize that they must organize their libraries for the user not for the librarian. They must organize services to meet the actual information needs, habits, and preferences of patrons – not what the librarian think is wanted. This effort cannot take place without a paradigm shift in the library profession, with librarians re-imaging themselves in the context of the information society. This study investigates, through a panel of experts, how the library and information science profession should be transformed in order to cope with the challenges of the Information Society.

The research is based on the Delphi technique that was developed at the Rand Corporation in the early 1950s. The Delphi technique has been called the 'cornerstone of futures research,' as a means by which a panel of experts can explore complex topics and hopefully develop a consensus of opinion regarding future developments. It was designed to elicit systematically judgments from experts in their selected area of

expertise. Feedback of results accompanies each iteration of the questionnaire, which continues until convergence of opinion, or a point of diminishing returns, is reached. The end of the product is the consensus of experts, including their commentary.

A website was build for the present study containing an online questionnaire with 47 statements. The statements had to be scored by desirability and probability (1 being very improbable/undesirable and 5 being very probable/desirable). Hundred and twenty experts from the USA, Canada, Western and Central Europe, and Israel were contacted by electronic mail, 40 experts in total participated in the study. The panel of experts included directors of large public and academic libraries, heads of library & information science departments and managers of large corporate information centers.

The first email contained a brief description of the research and the URL for the site. A consensus was reached in the first round for most statements, however some participants' answers fell out of the group consensus. The second round was limited to asking the participants, by electronic mail, to explain these answers. Twenty-six participants received an email containing those statements in which their responses fell out of the group consensus. They were asked to provide reasoning for their choice of value. Both the first and second round responses are presented in this study with the author's interpretation of the results.

All of the initial assumptions made by his study were verify by its findings. Seventy five percent of the experts who participated in this study believe that it is highly probable the traditional library model will not be replaced by the virtual model in our lifetime. Furthermore, Eighty seven percent of the experts believe that is highly desirable that libraries will remain "society's memory" by amazing and preserving valuable information for future generations. This does not mean, however, that the traditional model will not be, as it actually is, going through some serious transformations. Libraries/information centers have realized that in order to survive they have to abandon their traditional approach to information in favor of a more user-centered approach. Eighty five percent of the participants believe that it is highly desirable that library and information science professionals devote themselves to understand how people seek and consume information and 73.8% see this transformation as highly probable. According to the panel, the library and information science professionals are beginning to believe in the uniqueness of their skills and how these skills can be utilized outside the libraries/ information centers walls in

several non-library jobs. Now more than ever the traditional library and information science professionals' skills of devising search strategies, database design, and system analysis will be extremely needed to cope with the ever increasing demands of the information revolution. As a result of all these transformations, 87.5% of the participants believe that not only the LIP profession will not disappear but it will have a central place in the Information Society.

The present study did not try to 'predict' the future of the Information Science profession, but rather it tries to formulate goals and objectives that will help the information professional find his place in the Information Society.

System No.

468087