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Attention New Librarians and Career Changers: Identifying and Conveying Transferable Skills (v2n4, April 2005)

By Julie Todaro, Dean of Library Services, Austin Community College, Austin, TX

All too often professionals are both educated for and continue to "train" for and develop competencies (knowledge, skills/abilities, attitudes) specific to one *type* of library or information environment or one *size* of library or information environment. The reality is that library and information professionals should be aware of, and familiar with, all types of libraries and library issues. In addition, in today's workforce, professionals are more often moving among different types of library and information environments to find positions that meet their short term and long-term career needs as well as their personal needs.

Why should all library staff be familiar with issues from all types of libraries? Knowledge of issues and operations in all types of libraries is critical as library and information environments:

- Establish collaborations and partnerships for services and facilities;
- Form consortiums for providing services and resources to patrons;
- Design technology and service systems for diverse types of libraries; and,
- Collaborate for grant design and delivery.

These issues illustrate a greater need for professionals to be able to lead *across* different library and information environments as well as beyond libraries to for-profit and community entities, structures and infrastructures. Therefore librarians, support staff and library managers need to:

- Be knowledgeable about different *types* of libraries;
- Be knowledgeable about different *sizes* of libraries;
- Be familiar with political issues and implications that affect all types and sizes of libraries;
- Be familiar with the leadership similarities and differences inherent in leading different types of libraries; and,
- Be knowledgeable about the specific transferable skills needed to lead in and/or move successfully among these different work environments.

Why bother discussing transferable skills?

As librarians prepare for their first profession position or as they and other library workers prepare for moving up or changing to other environments, they need to assess their competencies (knowledge, skills/abilities and attitudes) and specifically skills *sets* (types and levels of skills and abilities) to articulate in their resume or job interviews and, most importantly, to match to position advertisements and organizations. Clearly, while some competencies are specific to certain types and sizes of libraries, some competencies and skills sets are **transferable** and are valuable to a wide

variety of types and sizes of library and information environments.

The concept of identifying and mastering transferable skills is one of the most critical issues for today's professionals in all work environments and career paths. Once primarily an area of concentration and concern for fresh-out-of-school and/or first professional position job seekers, transferable skills are one of the most important elements for today's workplace and job market overall. Why?

- Recent research indicates that professionals, who once typically changed jobs 5 to 7 times in their careers, now may change positions as many as 10 to 13 times during their career. Odds are professionals will move between and/or among work environments.
- The library and information profession—try as it might to establish management and leadership training and pathways—finds itself repeatedly in the position of advertising high level positions and not receiving enough qualified applicants or any applicants at all.
- Library and information professionals may now have a position in one type of library, but due to consortia, partnerships, and collaborations (service, resource, technology and facility) may find that they are working with, managing and/or leading librarians and other library workers in a variety of types and sizes of environments.
- Library and information professionals may now have a position in one type of library, but due to consortia, partnerships, and collaborations (service, resource, technology and facility)—as well as community and political relationships - may find that they are working with, managing and/or leading professionals in for-profit and community environments.

What are transferable skills?

Transferable skills—better named transferable *competencies* as they incorporate not only skills and abilities but knowledge, attitudes and/or personal attributes—can be both general and specific competencies you have acquired during education, experience or other activities that are typically applicable and thus transferable to a different work or career environment. They may cover general work environment competencies as well as specific type or size of library or work environment competencies.

The University of Exeter's (UK) Department for Education and Skills defines transferable skills as

"Those cognitive and personal skills (application of number, communication, information technology, problem-solving, personal skills, working with others and improving own learning and performance) which are central to occupational competence in all sectors and at all levels." (DEE definition of core skills, <http://newton.ex.ac.uk/handbook/TransferableSkills.html>)

These competencies are seen as those most attractive to employers in future jobs or future job responsibilities you are seeking when you may not—on the surface—be the perfect match for the position or area. Transferable skills are those skills that work—no matter what you are reaching for—because no matter the job or the work environment—these skills are necessary and critical to the success of the operation. The need for the competency to be present in an employee employed by the organization transcends the need for the employee to know *exactly* about all aspects of the organization or work environment.

Besides "transferable skills," these competency areas are also explained as "key skills," "core skills," "soft skills," "generic skills," "overarching skills and qualities," "winning characteristics," "critical success factors" and "qualities of ideal candidates."

General categories of transferable skills typically include:

- *Solving problems*

- *Satisfying customers*
- *Communication (oral and written)*
- *Teamwork*
- *Leaderships*
- *Work-ethic traits, such as drive, stamina, effort, self-motivation, diligence, ambition, initiative, reliability, positive attitude toward work*
- *Logic, intelligence, proficiency in field of study*

The four most common areas included in the transferable skills discussion, however, include:

- Communication and presentation skills (oral, written and graphic);
- Teamwork or interpersonal skills (e.g. negotiating, listening, sharing, empathizing);
- Management or organizing and planning skills (including self management skills such as integrity, honesty and ethical behavior); and
- Intellectual and creative skills (such as problem solving and 'thinking outside the box/beyond the square').

No matter what lists are included as critical, employers tend to group transferable skills into the following three categories:

Working With People	Working With Things	Working With Data/Information
Selling	Repairing	Calculating
Training	Assembling parts	Developing databases
Teaching	Designing Operating machinery	Working with spreadsheets
Supervising		Accounting
Organizing	Driving Maintaining equipment	Writing
Soliciting		Researching
Motivating	Constructing	
Mediating	Building Sketching	Computing
Advising		Testing
Delegating	Working with Computer-Aided Design (CAD)	Filing
Entertaining	Keyboarding	Sorting
Representing	Drafting Surveying Troubleshooting	Editing
Negotiating		Gathering data
Translating		Analyzing
		Budgeting

What are the specific elements of a general list of transferable skills' categories? What might someone indicate is evidence of ability for a transferable skill category?

Communication: the skillful expression, transmission and interpretation of knowledge and ideas.

Speaking effectively

- Presentation skills
- Writing concisely
- Listening attentively
- Expressing ideas
- Facilitating group discussion
- Providing appropriate feedback
- Negotiating
- Perceiving nonverbal messages

Persuading

- Reporting information
- Describing feelings
- Interviewing
- Editing

Research and Planning: the search for specific knowledge and the ability to conceptualize future needs and solutions for meeting those needs.

- Forecasting, predicting
- Creating ideas
- Identifying problems
- Imagining alternatives
- Identifying resources
- Gathering information
- Solving problems
- Setting goals
- Achieving goals
- Extracting important information
- Defining needs
- Analyzing
- Developing and achieving measurable outcomes
- Developing evaluation strategies
- Human Relations: the use of interpersonal skills for resolving conflict, relating to and helping people.
- Developing rapport
- Being Sensitive
- Listening
- Conveying feelings
- Providing support for others
- Motivating
- Sharing credit
- Counseling
- Cooperating

Delegating with respect

- Representing others
- Perceiving feelings, situations

Asserting

- Conflict resolution

- Organization, Management and Leadership: the ability to supervise, direct and guide individuals and groups in the completion of tasks and fulfillment of goals.
- Initiating new ideas
- Handling details
- Coordinating and handling multiple tasks
- Managing groups
- Project Management
- Delegating responsibility
- Teaching
- Coaching
- Counseling
- Promoting change
- Selling ideas or products
- Decision making with others
- Managing conflict
- Work Survival: the day-to-day skills that assist in promoting effective production and work satisfaction.
- Implementing decisions
- Cooperating
- Enforcing policies
- Being punctual
- Managing time

Attending to detail

- Meeting goals
- Enlisting help

Accepting responsibility

- Setting and meeting deadlines
- Organizing
- Making decisions
- Adaptability
- Flexibility

Can transferable skills specific to academic credentials translate to non-academic positions or non-academic careers?

When moving from non-technical educational preparation or experience to technical or non-academic positions, the following transferable skills have been listed as highly sought after and the ones for applicants to illustrate on resumes and in application or promotion packages.

- Learning quickly
- Synthesizing information
- Problem solving
- Dealing with complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty
- Leadership and managerial skills
- Administrative, planning and budgeting skills
- People skills, including persuasion, tact, political savvy, and the ability to motivate and counsel
- Evaluation skills
- Personal qualities such as self-motivation, self-discipline, initiative, creativity, focus, meticulousness, stamina, independence, and humor

What are the "classic" transferable skills?

For decades, Howard Figler has maintained his transferable skills list. Figler skills are considered classic because they typically be found in every position of responsibility or in jobs requiring good judgment and decision-making. Figler's approach to these skills is the competency identification of job responsibilities and organizational functions that are found in most job environments.

Figler's Transferable Skills

- **Supervising**
Direct responsibility for the work of others in a situation in which some accountability is required.
- **Organizing/Managing/Coordinating**
In charge of activities and/or event or function of work environments. Responsibility for bringing together people, resources, and events. Delegating tasks to others.
- **Coping With Deadline Pressure**
Producing quality work required by either internal or external deadlines. Functioning on others' schedules, with standard and accelerated time frames.
- **Speaking**
Formal and informal, prepared and extemporaneous communication, public speaking and presentation, motivation.
- **Writing**
Formal and informal written communication and data design and presentation, technical writing, narrative, descriptive, research.
- **Budget Management**
Responsibility for directly managing or coordinating a budget, financial accountability, fiscal control.
- **Public Relations**
Public relations, publicity, marketing, customer contact/customer service.
- **Negotiating/Arbitrating/Conflict resolution/Conflict Management**
Resolving conflict, solving problems between groups or individuals, representing individuals or group demands on behalf of one constituency to those in positions of power.
- **Interviewing**
Human resources interviewing, investigation/documentation.
- **Instructing/Teaching**
Teaching and learning, training, professional development, instructional design, curriculum & content design

What should be done with information on transferable skills?

Institutions should:

- Assess organizational terms that are most acceptable for competencies in question
- Identify position elements that are transferable skills areas
- Design job ads to match position elements/job descriptions
- Assess and redesign organizational job descriptions to isolate skills areas critical to success
- Design interview questions and applicant assessment to assess evidence of accomplishment
- Determine level of knowledge/experience needed in competency areas in question

Individuals should:

- Use the job description to assess what skills the organization needs that you have which might lead to promotion, position or fulfillment of organizational competencies
- Identify position elements that are transferable skills areas
- Determine level of knowledge/experience you have in competency areas in question
- Write resume position descriptions using these terms consistently under job titles
- Indicate evidence of accomplishment in skills areas in resume entries
- Provide evidence of accomplishment in portfolio, advancement, promotion or application package
- Use skills statements in cover letter
- Discuss skills in response to interview questions

Bibliography

Figler, Howard. *The Complete Job-Search Handbook*, 3rd ed. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1999.

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References Are Key to Job Search Success (v3n5, May 2006)

By **Elisa F. Topper**

Editor's Note: We welcome Elisa as one of newest regular feature writers.

A mistake that job seekers make unknowingly is not selecting the best people to serve as their references. Countless articles have been written on resume writing, interviewing and the entire job search process, but few on how to use references to your best advantage. Once candidates have been narrowed down in the search process, often the references may be the deciding factor when candidates are equal in their qualifications.

I can personally remember screening resumes for a position only to discover that the candidate had listed their mother as a reference! No, it was not an intentional strategy to get my attention. The person just did not know that this was not acceptable in the job search process.

The following guidelines will assist you in using references appropriately.

Selecting your references

Be careful to select people that will speak positively about you in work related terms. Past employers and in some cases current employers (depends on your relationship with supervisors and staff members) are appropriate references. They will be able to talk about your work performance and ability to work with others in a positive manner. Other people to consider for references are faculty members from your academic institutions especially if you are just starting your first job search. For seasoned professionals, consider asking a professional colleague to serve as a reference. Stay away from people that only know you in a social setting. Try to select references that have titles of authority and be sure to list their relationship to you when you list them. **Be sure at this time to verify their name, title, company, phone number and email address.**

Questions often asked of references

Questions asked of references usually are about promptness, work ethic, ability to work with others,

attitude, strengths, weaknesses and competencies. They will probably be asked the ultimate question; "If given the opportunity, would you hire this person again?" According to the 2004 Reference and Background Checking Survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), nearly 40% of HR professionals report that the time spent on reference checking has increased over previous years. Almost all organizations (96%) conduct some type of check on potential employees, with 50% reporting inaccuracies in information provided.

Legal issues

Know that some employers have strict rules as to what can be said about former employees. They may confirm the position and dates of employment but can not say anything more. This stems from lawsuits that have occurred due to negative statements by employers. The way to get around this is to have your reference serve as an informal reference and not speak as a company representative.

Obtaining permission

When I was the Assistant Dean of a graduate library program, I served as a reference for a number of students and continue to do so for them to this day. What really irritates me is to receive a call for a reference and have no idea an individual has listed me as such, nor am I aware what position for which they are under consideration. I will provide a reference but it won't be as comprehensive as it could be if I had the person's resume and job description before me so that I could be prepared. In the long run, this hurts the candidate rather than helps them. **Do not forget to ask permission to use a person as a reference.**

Where to list references

Do not list them on the actual resume or list "references furnished upon request." This is no longer necessary. If the employer requests references then they should be listed on a separate page.

When to give references to employers

Give references to employers when they ask for them. Usually this is well into the interviewing process. I do recall, however, one situation when the applicant's references were called before being brought in for the interview. **Always proof the materials that you give to an employer.**

Preparing your references

Even before an employer has asked you for references, you should have your references prepared for a call. Make sure the reference has an updated resume, job description of position applied for, or a list if you are applying for several positions. They will be asked to tell the employer how long they have known you and in what job capacity. Employers are always looking for employees that will work well as part of a team and are flexible. Keep in touch with your references to inform them of your progress. Email is always a quick method of communicating. As soon as you know the name of the person that may be calling, inform your reference **immediately**. Also ask them to contact you once they have been called to give you feedback on the call.

Thanking them

Always thank your references when they have provided information to an employer and do so in writing. Should you get the job as a result of a person's reference, a gift certificate to their favorite store or restaurant is an acceptable token of appreciation.

Elisa F. Topper is Director, Dundee Township Public Library District, and the creator of the American Libraries column, "Working Knowledge." She is a frequent speaker on career and workplace issues. See her panel presentation at the ALA Conference in New Orleans at the NMRT

program on Saturday, June 24, 2006.

The Abilene Paradox: Does Everyone Really Agree? Or Are They Just Being Nice? (v3n7, July 2006)

By Christine Martin

Do you ever wish that someone in your organization would speak up against an impossible situation or a project that is doomed to fail? Do you suspect that co-workers share your opinion? If so, your organization may be in the grip of the Abilene Paradox, a group phenomenon first identified in 1974 by management consultant Jerry Harvey. Harvey, now a professor emeritus of management science at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., writes that groups “blunder” into the paradox when “they take actions in contradiction to what they really want to do and therefore defeat the very purposes they are trying to achieve.”¹ Harvey first encountered the paradox more than thirty years ago when he, his wife and her parents agreed to take a four-hour trip though 100-degree Texas heat in an un-air-conditioned 1958 Buick just to eat dinner in Abilene. It was only after returning home to Coleman, Texas—hot, tired, and cranky—that the group discovered that no one had wanted to go. But each had assumed the others did, and so had acted against his or her better judgment.

“I just went along because the three of you were so enthusiastic about going,” Jerry's mother-in-law said after they got home. Jerry's wife told him much the same thing. “You and Daddy and Momma were the ones who wanted to go. I just went along to keep you happy.” Jerry's father-in-law said, “I never wanted to go to Abilene. I just thought you might be bored.” And Jerry himself said, “I didn't want to go. I only went to satisfy the rest of you. You're the culprits.”²

Why would four reasonable people agree to take a trip that appealed to none of them? Why do workplaces or other organizations embark on ill-advised “trips to Abilene” when group members, if polled individually, would agree that the endeavor is foolish, expensive, dangerous, illegal, or any combination of the above?

Beware of false consensus, the heart of the Abilene Paradox

The answer, Harvey says in his 1988 book, *The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management*, is that organizations, and the people who work in them, make false assumptions about consensus. In the original paradox, all four people agreed about the problem (it was hot) and the solution (stay home). But each made an incorrect assumption about the desires of the others. The result was a collective decision to do the exact opposite of what everyone wanted, followed by anger, frustration, and finger pointing. Harvey says that because his family became conscious of the paradox, they avoided the division into warring groups it sometimes causes.

According to Harvey, workers caught in the paradox avoid speaking up because they fear separation from the group. They fear loss of face, being called disloyal or even being fired. Yet it is part of the absurdity of the paradox that going along with the group almost always produces exactly the separation that workers fear. Certainly, the unfortunate individual who is fired because of a doomed project is separated from the group. Yet even workers who hold onto their jobs may experience separation in terms of alienation, low morale or division into warring camps.

Skip the trip: Take the group where it really wants to go

The answer, it appears, is to take the group where it really wants to go, not necessarily to Abilene. How to do this? Harvey suggests using a group meeting to “own up” to any misgivings about a project or policy. Emphasize that you are speaking out of concern for the organization. For example, according to Harvey, a brave group member might say something like,

“I want to talk to you about the research project. Although I have previously said things to the contrary, I frankly don't think it will work, and I am very anxious about it. I suspect others may feel the same, but I don't know. Anyway, I am concerned that I may end up misleading you and that we may end up misleading one another, and if we aren't careful, we may continue to work on a project that none of us wants and that might even bankrupt us. That's why I need to know where the rest of you stand. I would appreciate any of your thoughts about the project. Do you think it can succeed?”³

Harvey reminds us that this inquiry may indeed reveal true conflict. The Abilene Paradox, after all, occurs only when group members privately agree on an alternative. It does not apply when false consensus merely papers over an underlying lack of agreement. For every instance in which members of an organization sigh in relief that someone has finally voiced their secret reservations, there may be many more in which additional attention to conflict is not welcome. In these instances, a worker thinking of speaking up must decide if it's worth the risk. Some apparently have found it so. For example, one interviewee told Harvey, “I said I don't think the research project can succeed and the others looked shocked and quickly agreed. The upshot of the whole deal is that I got a promotion and am now known as a ‘rising star.’ It was the high point of my career.”⁴

In other cases, Harvey writes, the individual speaking up was not rewarded and in fact was punished. But, Harvey writes, the person decided it was for the best, saying, “I was told we had enough boat rockers in the organization, and I got fired. It hurt at first, but in retrospect it was the greatest day of my life. I've got another job and I'm delighted.”⁵ In this case, apparently, clearing the air was worth a change in jobs.

Not acting against the Abilene Paradox also can be a failure

Harvey also writes that not confronting the paradox can lead to feelings of failure, especially if one's silence causes friends or co-workers to suffer. For example, he writes that one individual told him, “I didn't say anything, and we rocked along until the whole thing exploded and Joe got fired. There is still a lot of tension in the organization, and we are still in trouble, but I got a good performance review last time. I still feel lousy about the whole thing, though.”⁶

According to Harvey, “the act of confrontation apparently provides intrinsic psychological satisfaction, regardless of the technological outcomes for those who attempt it.”⁷ In other words, doing something to head off a crisis ultimately feels better than letting it happen to you, or your organization. You can always say you did your best to skip the trip to Abilene.

For more information on training materials on the Abilene Paradox, including a 27-minute training video, see www.abileneparadox.com.

Christine Martin is a freelance writer and 1997 graduate of the [University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science](#).

Jerry B. Harvey, *The Abilene Paradox and other meditations on management*, Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1988, p. 15.

1. Ibid., p. 14.
2. Ibid., p. 33.
3. Ibid., p. 34.
4. Ibid., p. 34.
5. Ibid., p. 35.
6. Ibid., p. 35.

Do Library Science Degrees Matter for Library Directors? (v3n10, October 2006)

By Alexander Hawley and Jenifer Grady

We've heard whispers of dread concerning whether the MLS is becoming moot, particularly as a defining criteria for large academic and public library directors. A search of the LibraryLit database revealed only a handful of articles on changing degree requirements and those were primarily about functional specialists or directors of special and law libraries, which by nature benefit from specific types of subject expertise. The library job advertisements don't seem to support the fear of the MLS losing its significance.

By perusing the classifieds advertisements in *Library Journal* for the year of 2006, *American Libraries* for the year of 2006, and the *College and Research Libraries News* for the years of 2005 and 2006, there were 105 advanced librarian positions (read: Deans, Heads of Libraries, Directors of Libraries) listed. Of those 105 positions listed, seven (7 percent) required that qualified candidates should have more than an ALA-Accredited MLS Degree. Of those seven, two said that a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) or Master's Degree in Public Administration (MPA) was preferred, but not required for the position. In the other five, the positions required a doctorate or a second master's degree for the position because they were in academic facilities.

There was no clear evidence that the basic requirement of the MLS is declining in need or esteem for dean or director applicants. It's still required and needed, based on the job ads. What we don't know is whether the deans and directors who hold alternative or additional degrees are actually being given preference in hiring. We also don't know whether MBA/MPA holders are making a difference in library administration—or do we?

If you have anecdotal or statistical information about library management effectiveness by MLS-holders, non-MLS holders or those who are dual-degreed, please contact the ALA-APA at 800-545-2433, x2424 or jgrady@ala.org.

We would love to have your **feedback** on these articles!

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