

# The Changing Role of the Subject Specialist

by MICHAEL COTTA-SCHØNBERG

## THE IDEAL MODEL

As we all know, libraries are these years rapidly undergoing change on unparalleled scale. Evidently, this applies to librarians, too, and not the least to that important category of library staff, the subject specialist. As recruiting and education of library workers differ from country to country it is difficult to give a detailed, generally valid description of the subject librarian in libraries, but I believe that you can describe an ideal model of subject librarianship as follows:

*Within each of the major subject disciplines covered by the library, the library should have a subject specialist preferably with a master degree or at least a bachelor degree in the particular subject discipline. The role of the subject specialist is to perform four basic functions where extensive subject knowledge is considered to be necessary: selecting and classifying books, assisting users with advanced subject inquiries, giving subject-specific courses in information retrieval, and maintaining liaison with relevant academic departments and centres.*

Personally, I know this system very well since I got employment in the Royal Library in Copenhagen as a subject specialist in psychology in the very month I finished my degree in psychology from the University of Copenhagen, back in 1973. The subject librarian system at the Royal Library in Copenhagen was patterned on the ideal model, as I just described it, and it was closely paralleled in the other academic libraries in Denmark, also the new university libraries which were founded in the seventies.

## PROBLEMS OF THE IDEAL MODEL

During my career I have seen a number of cases where the ideal model functioned very well, due to the dedication and skills of individual subject specialists. Today, however, the ideal model has a number of problems.

### The financial problem

The first and basic problem is - as usual - financial. The Copenhagen University Library together with the National Library comprises the Royal Library in Copenhagen. It covers all scholarly disciplines within the humanities, social science, theology, law, natural science, medicine and dentistry, agriculture and pharmaceutical science. The ideal model would require that we should employ at least fifty university graduates with master degrees in the various subject fields covered by the university. This is definitely not possible. That staff category is the best salaried in the library, and we simply cannot afford fifty or more staff members in that category.

The financial problem was always there, and in fact the library had to make many compromises with the ideal model in the sense that people were asked to function as subject specialists in areas in which they had no university education. Such arrangements have actually functioned very well, but because of the persistence of the ideal model as a mental norm, they are looked upon as improper arrangements, especially by proper subject specialists: "proper" subject specialists feel that their primary function as well as the quality of library services is devalued by library management, when it appoints subject specialists without university degrees in the particular subject. And such subject specialist may feel insecure, uncertain and inadequate in the exercise of their function.

### Relations with other staff

Secondly, the presence of a highly educated group with university degrees on master level tends to create an A-team and a B-team within the workforce of the library. The subject specialists are of course the A-team. When I was a young subject specialist at the Royal Library, we subject specialists were the barons of the system, each one in his own subject barony. The fact that the university-educated subject specialists monopolise the very important subject-related functions in the library is unavoidable in a library structure based on subject specialisation.

And there clearly is a lower limit to what other library tasks you can use those university graduates for, they tend to attract a disproportionate part of other, high-level non-subject related functions or projects of the library. This means that other staff groups, especially the library school educated librarians, tend to become less involved in development or other interesting projects, which means that the potential of that group is not used optimally. The situation is not a healthy one in terms of organizational climate and it does not promote the best use of staff resources.

### **Status vis-à-vis faculty**

Paradoxically, the high status of university-educated subject librarians in the library itself is not at all reflected in its status vis-à-vis faculty. Whereas the library's subject specialists should be - and admittedly in many cases are - the privileged medium of contact between library and faculty, quite often the subject specialists tend to remain within the library sphere and do not have those lively partnerships with faculty, which are essential to the development of library service to universities.

It does seem that subject library staff does not generally have high status with university faculty. To research and teaching staff, libraries are infrastructure and subjects specialists are part of that infrastructure, they are service personnel. This perception may be coloured by the fact that university graduates (outside the library discipline), who end up in libraries, generally do not belong to and are not perceived by faculty to belong to the cream of the academic crop, which will in stead - of course - try to obtain tenure at the university. If this is correct, it will of course tend to keep the two parties, faculty and subject specialists, apart and it will not favour the role of university-educated subject specialists as the vital link between library and faculty.

### **The cross-disciplinary university**

A fourth problem concerns subject specialisation in itself. In the modern university there is a trend towards cross-disciplinary research and development, and the traditional division of knowledge tends to give way to other, dynamic subject profiles. As the subject structure of the university library generally reflects the traditional divisions of knowledge, it increasingly gets out of sync with the dynamic subject profile and departmental structure of the university. This development tends to favour the development of another type of subject specialist with less emphasis on deep subject knowledge in individual subject specialists and more emphasis on varied, combinatorial and cross-disciplinary knowledge profiles.

### **New forms of book selection and subject classification**

In former days, book selection by subject specialists was to a large extent based on reviews in learned periodicals or on sources with little information on the books. Book selection therefore required intensive subject knowledge. The same applied to the subject data selected for each book by the subject specialist, often based on local classification systems.

Today, the book selector has access to a wide array of excellent digital sources for book selection: new records in national bibliographies or book dealers' online selection bases, often augmented with tables of contents and abstracts and with access reader's reviews and I know not what. Moreover, the move towards digital resources means that books will to a larger extent be bought not on a title-by-title basis but as general packages, for example from publishers or from aggregator systems like e-library.

As for subject classification or indexing more and more libraries are relying heavily on data imported from external sources, instead of producing them locally. The net result is that the need for staff with deep subject knowledge to select books and provide subject data has lessened considerably.

### **The changing nature of reference work and user instruction**

It seems to be a general phenomenon that work at libraries' reference desks is changing from the more complicated subject enquiries to practical, technical and ICT-related problems and to more general questions about searching procedures. One reason may be that users themselves are becoming more and more proficient in handling information searching on the web and less dependent on librarians to formulate particular subject search strategies.

The same applies to user instruction. Formerly, there was a strong emphasis on instruction in the use of subject-specific reference works and abstracting and indexing sources. Today, the emphasis is more on the development of general information competence.

## Conclusion

The combined effect of these various developments is that libraries' need for subject specialists with intensive subject knowledge is diminishing. University libraries will still have - and need - staff with university degrees in the subjects covered by the university. But their job profile will change, their traditional functions will arguably become less important and their place in the staff structure will be different.

## THE FUTURE: FROM SUBJECT SPECIALIST TO INFORMATION SPECIALIST

I believe that the general trends, I have described, will be felt much the same way in many traditional university libraries. As local conditions do vary greatly, there is no "ideal" solution to the problems. It may actually be an "evolutionary" advantage if different solutions are tried out so that all may eventually benefit from the best ones.

Now I'll turn to the solution we are implementing in the Copenhagen University Library, not as a course I recommend to all, but as an input to the discussion of an important organisational theme for university libraries today. For us, the two major issues to be addressed in this area are 1) service development and b) staffing structure and staff development. To know what kind of staff we need, we first have to know what kind of service we want to provide.

Our service will be based more and more on large packages of digital knowledge resources, comprising both databases, e-journals and e-books. To organise this service and deliver it to users will be the major task for our staff, and the traditional library functions based on print resources will no longer constitute the fundamental structuring principle for the organisation of our library.

Secondly, we have decided that direct personal service using all available channels will still be an important and integral part of our service. By all available channels I mean electronic, telephonic, postal, personal channels of every kind, but it is rapidly becoming quite clear that if we want to be where the users are, we have to develop a strong presence on the web.

We do have other strategic aims, but these two are the most important in terms of staffing structure and staff development.

What kind of staff do we need for our new university library?

1. Our staff will be specialists in the organisation and delivery of knowledge resources to the university.
2. They will have broad subject knowledge allowing them to apply their information skills to the rapidly changing research and teaching profile of the university. They must not each have deep subject knowledge in individual disciplines, I am more interested in staff who have a general grounding in broader areas like humanities, social sciences, natural sciences etc.
3. Our staff must have highly developed social skills allowing them to interact naturally and competently with users. The time of back office staff is over. Apart from reasonable exceptions - and I mean exceptions - all staff will have mixed job profiles but with a heavy element of direct user contact.

In our context, these demands point to the recruiting of staff with combinatory educations and skills. The preferred job applicant will be someone with an education combining library and information science or IT and web with some university subject, preferably a broad one. Moreover, applicants with job experience from the service sector and who ooze sociability will be highly valued in the recruiting process.

But recruiting staff is not enough, we must also have staff development. You are all familiar, of course, with modern methods of staff development, so I shall not go deeply into that. I shall only point to what for me is the most important instrument of staff development. That is job rotation. All new staff will change jobs in the library every third year or more often, even. During their career in our library they shall be moving across functions, subjects, departments. Not only will they acquire extensive knowledge of the whole library and the whole university, but moving along they will be developing their personal networks. This networking is very important in an organisation as large as ours and moreover scattered all over Copenhagen.

We have now established a new staff category of information specialists and have stopped recruiting staff into the categories of librarian (with a library education from the library school) and research librarian/subject specialist (with a degree in some university discipline). As of December 2006 all new staff apart from technical and administrative staff is recruited into this new category of information specialist. And all new staff (include clerical staff) rotate on a three year basis.

## *The Changing Role of the Subject Specialist*

I have been asked by one of my bright young people why we call the new staff category information specialists, when what we are really aiming at is information generalists. The term information specialist defines the job in relation to other jobs outside the profession, like teachers, artists etc. Within the library it delimits the group in relation to technical and clerical staff.

The important thing is to signalize that the university library is developing into a new type of institution with diminishing emphasis on printed books and increasing emphasis on information in the sense of mediation of knowledge resources in all forms and along all channels. The same applies to staff: the term information specialist indicates a shift away from particular functions or subjects to information as the defining task of library staff.

Only time will show, of course, whether this is a good move or not. I myself believe in it firmly and I am encouraged by the fact that applicants for jobs in the library seem to prefer the concept of information specialist to the concept of librarian, and moreover they heartily endorse our new system for job rotation.