Session 2: Staffing and Skills

Notes from Helen Bailey, MIT Libraries

Andy Ashton, Director of Digital Technologies at Brown University Library, moderated this session. He is responsible for a broad umbrella of technology services. As we think about how to do digital preservation, those roles and responsibilities fall in between current spaces for staffing.

We went around the room and each said why we’re interested in this topic.

*Questions:*

* Are these new roles or the development of existing roles?
* What do digital preservation skills and staffing look like?
* What skills should recent graduates be working on?
* When developing a program and writing a program statement, what staff roles do we need?
* What are the next transitional skills that we need to develop in staff?

*General Discussion:*

* The people will *change* or the *people* will change.
* Curriculum programs have and continue to look at skills. Good idea to look at sources, there’s a lot of literature to refer to (CLIR report, DigCCurr matrix were given as examples).
* Maybe it’s just recasting the conversation. Are we writing new job descriptions or do we need to manage the projects better? Maybe the skills exist, we just need to get the right people in the room.
* There’s an assumption that if you have someone with “repository” in their job title then you’re doing digital preservation.
* What pieces of whose roles are involved in digital preservation work? This is often just a piece of your job, which makes it hard to find time.
* Don’t forget about faculty involvement. One example of a group of faculty who are concerned about preservation but they don’t call it that, they’re concerned about losing access to intellectual property.
* Within the library, there’s a legacy tension between boundaries of professional librarians and support staff. Non-degree librarians end up doing a lot of the technical jobs in libraries. This is a culture clash that we need to deal with. Think more holistically about library’s resources and staff.
* It’s a challenge of the profession to keep up with what the needs are.
* UMass just re-wrote their union contract so a librarian doesn’t have to have an MLS. Note that there are people without MLS degrees in certain roles (digital humanities, data) but there are also MIS/MLS programs now pushing out people with the background for this.
* Archival skills are a distinct skill set and important part of the picture.
* Example from UMass: Digital preservation committee includes major collections areas, metadata, preservation. They’re organized but only have one programmer, so it’s not clear how to leap forward into implementation. People on this committee are all librarians, so they’re all speaking the same language (this is not the case everywhere).
* Another example of someone establishing a records management program, in a one-person operation also doing other things in the archive. How to do all these other jobs and create digital preservation capacity and develop new skills?

*IT/Technology Skills and Staffing Discussion:*

* Skill sets are split into two categories: archivist/librarian vs. technology. Roles need to be redefined in terms of these two skill sets. And the two need to learn how to work better together. Not just technical skills but also people skills.
* Note that no staff from IT helpdesk departments are here, maybe we need to share each other’s conference agendas.
* An example from Smith College: they have a data security officer in IT, and a casual coffee meeting with library staff made it clear that they need to talk more. Storage and security folks are far apart from library folks.
* Finding common language for these different groups to talk to each other is a challenge. Are we just talking about backup? No.
* Certain skills like just being able to write a script to solve a quick problem aren’t universal.
* For IT folks, it’s hard to get pulled into every meeting where IT representation is needed, because then those staff are losing time they need to get the actual technical development work done.
* One example of someone who came out of a library background and needed to develop IT skills s learned them on the go, ended up migrating into IT because those are the skills she developed as her roles evolved. More and more IT-like abilities are important for librarians. “Complicating the idea that a librarian is not a technologist.” The idea of what a librarian’s required skills are is a challenge in librarianship.
* It’s important to have room to grow within a position. And it’s also very helpful to have an IT person who will let you shoulder-surf and explain what she’s doing.
* Relationships with IT vary widely.
* Think in terms of durable skills. When a tool is new, you have to be a programmer to use it, but that’s not the end goal. Think in terms of competencies and traits. Digital preservation is not an ideal role for someone who needs a lot of structure and a rulebook. Need someone flexible and ok with open-ended work. Note that these are typical traits of technologists: curiosity, learning, problem-solving, picking up enough skills to solve a problem and moving on. This is an area of overlap for librarianship and IT.
* IT departments aren’t focused on how to work with libraries. They’re not sitting around having this conversation (we think).
* Technology is not one thing: desktop services, network, security, hardware, etc.
* Cultural shift in the other direction: content people (librarians, archivists) get rid of the notion that because a problem involves technology it must be a technology problem. This shift has not happened, there are folks who still see it this way. Even issues like digital preservation, not primarily a technology problem (it’s an institutional planning problem).
* But the technology is different, IT skills needed for this are different than traditional IT skills. Challenge for IT is to translate preservation needs into accessible technology. Challenge for librarians and archivists is to not see the technology as a wall.