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Review of Core Technology Competencies for Librarians and Library Staff: A Guide

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David Lodwick

CORE TECHNOLOGY COMPETENCIES FOR LIBRARIANS AND LIBRARY STAFF: A LITA GUIDE

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CORE TECHNOLOGY COMPETENCIES FOR LIBRARIANS AND LIBRARY STAFF: A LITA GUIDE. Susan M. Thompson, editor. *New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2009, 248 pp., 978-1-55570-660-9 (pbk.).*

No one can pinpoint the exact date when library work became a race to keep up with technology, but most would now agree with Susan Thompson that “[t]he rapid pace of change in technology and library services has made it difficult for libraries to determine just what technology skills various types of library personnel *should* know, much less actually ensure that they *do* know them.” At least since the mid-1990s, libraries have struggled to define and achieve a basic level of “computer literacy” for staff and librarians. With *Core Technology Competencies for Librarians and Library Staff*, Thompson has assembled a trove of lists, tables, and case studies to assist in that struggle. In addition, Thompson’s book addresses related questions: Who is responsible for evaluating staff skill levels? Who should be the trainer? What competencies should systems librarians possess? Is there more to this process than just a list of technical skills?

The book is a series of essays arranged in three sections. Thompson starts out with an overview of technology competencies in libraries. From the early days of mainframe computers, library technology has expanded inexorably through MARC, OCLC, the ILS, OPACs, LANs, PCs, web browsers, online databases, office productivity and media editing software, Dublin Core, XML, and Web 2.0 technologies. And more, much more. Thompson observes, “Many librarians are finding that their systems departments are no longer able to handle all the demands from the many different types of technology now available in the library. Library staff are increasingly expected to provide some level of technology support for themselves.”

One strategy for coping with the pace of technological change, according to Thompson, is to abandon the concept of “mastery” and focus instead on understanding the basic, underlying theory of the technology; when it morphs into something new – as it soon will – that basic understanding will ease the transition to the new application. The main thing is to be comfortable

with constant change and constant learning. Consequently, some librarians maintain that a core competencies program should not focus on individual software products that soon will be obsolete, but should instead concentrate on higher level traits, such as the willingness to learn, the ability to evaluate emerging technologies, and the wisdom to assess and abandon old technologies that have had their day.

Diane Neal follows up with a chapter on the role of library schools in preparing new librarians to work with technology. Neal posits that “it is undeniable that the need for basic technology competencies will pervade *all* twenty-first-century LIS jobs” Many recent graduates of library school already have more advanced technology skills than veteran librarians, and library schools seem to be moving toward the recognition that “technology competency is not just a *preferred* skill set for new librarians to possess; it is a *required* skill set.”

Much study has been directed at technology competencies for librarians and library staff, but part II of Thompson’s book focuses on the systems librarian, who tends to be a jack of all trades who oft-times wandered into a career for which there is not yet a set of recognized standards. The scope of technologies within the systems librarian’s bailiwick continues to expand. Thompson asks, “[W]hat should she learn? The position originated to handle the ILS, but is that still the major duty of the systems librarian? What about the basics of other major library systems, such as bibliographic utilities, interlibrary loan systems, electronic reserves, and course management systems? Should she understand the basic theories of information science? Should she know computer science basics, such as programming and data structures? Should she know relational databases and query languages? Web editing and design? Should she be able to repair and maintain microcomputer and peripherals equipment?” And that’s not all. Thompson notes that “[t]he biggest change over time is the greatly increased role of management and

planning responsibilities of the systems librarian,” where communication, project management, and interpersonal skills are valued as highly as technical ability. Thompson quotes a 2002 study which found that, in research libraries, “the sizes of systems departments are growing and can have from 4 to 30 employees.”

The book wraps up with case studies from three libraries that undertook core competency programs. The Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County eliminated its “dump and run” support model, the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Library rolled out a series of in-house technology classes for library staff, and the University of Iowa overcame a five-year bureaucratic nightmare of shifting committees and budget constraints to upgrade its staff technology training program. Extensive appendices document each effort.

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