

HAMILTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

Meeting User Needs

A Model for the delivery of information/reference services

November 2001

Purpose

This document is intended to set out the conditions that have led to a review of the qualifications required of Hamilton Public Library staff members. It is also intended to justify the expenditure of significant funds on upgrading the educational levels of existing staff members. This is a companion document to the approved Education Policy and is intended for internal use, recording decisions.

The “New” Hamilton Public Library

The Hamilton Public Library is a new library system serving 470,000 people. Provincial legislation unified the former Dundas Public Library, Hamilton Public Library, and Wentworth Libraries, effective January 1, 2001. The new Hamilton Public Library Board was created in accordance with both provincial legislation and municipal by-law. While the new Hamilton Public Library shares the same name as one predecessor library system and assumes liability for the obligations of each former system, the new library system is not a legal continuation of any single predecessor.

Background

The former Hamilton Public Library restructured as the result of a large budget cut in 1994, using the existing hierarchical model for the delivery of information services. The Library Board and Administration assumed that branch staff had access to limited resources and would refer many questions to the Central Library. Branch staff knew what was inside the reference books they housed and knew what needed to be referred.

We are moving from an Industrial Age built on gears and sweat to an Information Age demanding skills and learning and flexibility.”

President Bill Clinton, January 24, 1995, State of the Union Address.

The 1996 *Central Library Services Review*, a staff participative inspection of the Central Library, showed that the 1994 model was unraveling. Branch staff could not easily reach Central Library staff members by phone and branch managers increasingly commented on increasing expectations that branches would have “answers,” not referrals. The review team suggested that resources be placed in branch libraries to answer common reference questions.

Electronic products were licensed and networked so that branch staff could search for information such as phone numbers in other cities. The solution was effective, although few branches had public workstations and there was a limited choice of available electronic resources. We purchased “core” print reference collections for each branch.

Amalgamation required us to review library trends and re-visit the hierarchical service model. The review was timely. The world of electronic information has changed dramatically since 1996. All library branches in the new system have easy access to thousands of electronic periodicals, encyclopedias, medical databases, Internet resources, etc. It is no longer possible for branch staff to know the content of all resources available within their walls. The way patrons use their branches has also

been changing the model. Patrons no longer accept that branch staff are there to assist “primarily with readers aid.” Like many libraries, we are naturally shifting to a more diffuse service model.

There is still a need to refer patrons to our Central Library. The most dramatic changes in patron expectations and in our ability to deliver service is, however, at the branch level.

The role of Central Library staff is also changing. Central Library professional staff still act as resource experts to whom questions are asked, but they are increasingly asked to act as resource staff who organize system resources and who train staff throughout the system. The Hamilton Public Library provides training that concentrates on the use of “tools.” This training is not intended to replace courses offered by colleges and universities. The Central Library does less direct business but, through training and the electronic catalogue, its resources still play an important system role.

“Basic ICT [information communication technology] abilities have evolved into a new category of general skills which individuals will need to master...This is reflected in the fact that employers are moving their institutions to those that employ people with increased education.”

*Industry Canada
October, 2001 presentation to LibraryNet*

Why Change Now?

Why must the Hamilton Public Library review and change its educational policies and qualifications now, in the Fall of 2001?

*** Amalgamation**

This is a new Hamilton Public Library system. Each of our predecessor library systems used a different distinction between the qualifications and responsibilities for various positions.

Amalgamation requires that the practices of each former system be reviewed and merged. The only large amalgamated Canadian library system to have completed this process is the Halifax Regional Library. We checked with Halifax. Halifax unified its educational qualifications and grandfathered incumbents into existing positions, allowing lateral transfers to positions with similar job characteristics. After initial disruption, the change has worked well.

*** Rapid increase in electronic resources**

The impact of the Internet and electronic resources is just being understood in most public libraries. We know that electronic use will increase, that electronic content will continue to grow exponentially and that seeking relevant information (electronic or print) will become even more complex for members of the public. We know that the public has identified “information navigator” as a role they expect public library staff to perform in the “Information Age.” The Benton Report makes this expectation clear.

*** Patron Expectations/Staff Skills**

Managers report that there is an increase in patron belief that complex questions can be answered by resources and staff within all branches. Increasingly, all staff need to understand how the entire library system works, how electronic information can be used effectively, how to support formal education needs and how to provide readers aid and programming support. Many of our branches will have only one unionized staff members at a time working with the public; we cannot guarantee mentoring or on-the-job “training.”

*** Funding opportunity**

The library’s provincial pension program (OMERS) is running an operating surplus. Staff and the employer are each enjoying a “holiday” from paying into the pension plan. The library has permission from the city (our primary funder) to apply the employer portion of our pension surplus to issues such as the educational policy. This allows us to introduce changes in a humane fashion. It also allows us to provide staff who do not have the listed qualifications with notice that the library of the future may employ fewer staff with clerical qualifications and more staff with Library Technician, general degree, and Master’s of Library Science qualifications.

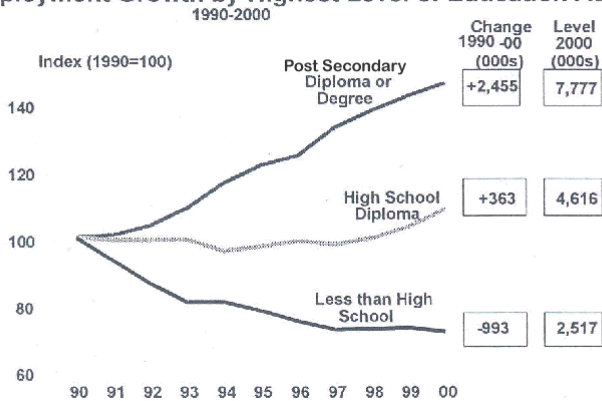
*** Notification to staff**

We reviewed industry trends. Jobs that are repetitive are disappearing. There is a greater for positions that require more skills, education, and training. Positions that require post secondary diplomas

and degrees accounted for the vast majority of all new jobs created in Canada during the past decade. This trend will continue. The attached graph (below) shows a steady increase in positions for those with post secondary education. Libraries are in the business of providing the public with direction and guidance as they seek relevant information. It is important that our staff carry the relevant educational qualifications to meet this expectation.

Public libraries across North America are preparing for self-check out technologies. One public library branch in Richmond, British Columbia (Ironwood) has no circulation desk and no circulation staff. More than 80% of all Ironwood circulations are conducted by patrons themselves at self-check out machines. Another large Canadian library is currently preparing an RFI for a “contactless” self-check-out system. The radio wave technology this system uses allows people to simply walk out of the library with their material in handbags, briefcases and strollers. The system checks out all material and stops people with blocks on their cards. These trends will affect future Hamilton Public Library employment opportunities.

Employment Growth by Highest Level of Education Attained



Source: Compilations based on Statistics Canada (LFS) data

The chart at the left shows figures presented to Industry Canada’s LibraryNet Board in October 2001. The chart was part of a section on “Digital Literacy Critical to Success in The network Age.” LibraryNet is composed of the provincial and territorial library directors, the Chair of the Council of Administrators of Large Urban Public Libraries, and representatives from the National Library and the Canadian Library Association. LibraryNet monitors trends and tries to devise national solutions.

Comments on Specific Qualifications

Children's positions

So far, this paper has emphasized the library worker as "information navigator" in the "Information Age." In many respects, the same arguments made from these workers holds true for those working with young people. The Benton report as well as the Market Probe study done for Ontario public libraries indicate that there is a significant shift in the attitudes of young people toward libraries. While older generations are starting to accept a role for electronic resources in their lives, young people tend to prefer electronic resources and, because of this preference, wonder if public libraries will be relevant to them as adults.

It is important for library workers to understand this trend and to assume a role that helps young people use resources wisely and well. We have to serve young people who have their own opinions about the types of resources they wish to use. We have to present the library and its capabilities using the latest in presentation software and skills. We have to ensure that library staff can move outside the walls of our branches and into community locations where young people can be reached. We need a technical skill set that includes a knowledge of electronic resources combined with communication skills to deliver the library message effectively. We have to package these skills in a way that informs and entertains.

In addition, those who work with young people are expected to introduce young people to the art of reading as a joyful activity. Almost half of the business of most public libraries comes from the loan of fiction for adults and fiction for preschool and school age young people. The Hamilton Public Library Board is establishing the delivery of quality children's services as a priority service for this library system. We cannot assume that work with young people is less demanding or complex. Children's services will be staffed by a combination of professional librarians, Library Technicians, and Library Assistant

" . . . The skills valued most highly by employers across the board are those fostered and cultivated in liberal arts and social science programs . . . Interpersonal, analytical, written and oral communication skills are of the utmost importance to them"

Donald Graham

Library Assistant positions

The Canadian Library Association has identified succession planning as a concern. Large numbers of professional library staff will retire in the next few years. In the past, many new librarians came from the ranks of degreed library workers who became attracted to the profession.

The value of a general degree for many of the information/reference positions in public library systems is clear. Staff with general degrees are valued in many library systems for the basic knowledge and research skills they have obtained. The former Wentworth Libraries (and to an extent, the former Hamilton system) tried to emphasize a need for both degree and Library Technician education. We have changed this to express a value for the research, problem solving, writing and adaptability skills that degrees have come to represent. This is amply supported by the literature.

Specialty positions

All large organizations need staff with specialized skills. The Hamilton Public Library requires staff with expertise in network, software, and hardware maintenance. We also require staff with expertise in cataloguing and other aspects of Technical Services work.

The Hamilton Public Library will meet any reasonable expectation to train staff internally for positions when they become available but will not assume a responsibility to train staff in situations where we do not have internal expertise to train (or where the internal expertise cannot train and perform responsibilities at the same time), where there are common standards requiring formal qualification, where there are grant requirements or where it will take longer than three months of on-the-job training for a person to gain and to demonstrate job-level use of the skills required of a permanent position. This is a guideline. In some instances, such as temporary positions, the guideline may not be appropriate.

The Model

- * The Hamilton Public Library is adopting a more diffuse model of service delivery, one that retains a Central Library as well as the expertise of its staff and collections, but one which emphasizes the ability of the public to enter any library location and to receive staff assistance on a wide range of informational concerns, placing an emphasis on electronic resources.
- * The Hamilton Public Library has adopted an education policy that sets out qualifications for library positions, alerts staff about these qualifications, grandfathers existing staff who are performing under former sets of qualifications, and provides staff with the means of obtaining qualifications, should they wish.
- * The Hamilton Public Library is acting as a responsible employer by alerting staff that future technological changes are likely to change the nature of union work.
- * The Hamilton Public Library will use its pension surplus to finance the education policy.

Select Bibliography

There is no shortage of general and library specific information on changing qualifications, changing skill sets, succession planning, increased public expectations, and concerns that our core users are aging as young users ask us to deliver different services. This short bibliography is intended only to reference those

“ . . . The possible need to effectively position the library as a successful information provider in a competitive environment might be an important consideration for future staff requirements”

The Ontario Public Libraries Strategic Plan, Fall, 2001.

statements presented as “fact” within this paper. Many of the articles, and others, are attached to this document, including a number of articles on the benefits of the generalist degree. These articles are illustrative of the entire literature.

“Buildings, Books, and Bytes,” The Benton Foundation, 1996 (<http://benton.org>)

Note: The two Benton Reports are viewed by virtually everyone as milestone research. The reports comment about the “Information Navigator” role for public library staff. The research also highlights the fact that young people are less enthusiastic about the ability of public library systems to meet their future needs.

The Benton Foundation did follow-up research on this point and this research can also be found on the Benton web site.

Corcoran, Cate "Are We Ready for the Library of the Future?" Salon, Dec. 1997. (<http://salonmag.com/21st/feature/1997/12/02feature.html>).

Graham, Donald, "Arts graduates valued in workplaces," The Toronto Star, April 3, 1999.

Griffiths, Jose-Marie "The New Information Professional," ASIS Bulletin, Feb/Mar, 1998. (<http://www.asis.org/Bulletin/Feb-98/griffiths.html>).

Gurstelle, Carol, compiler "Libraries of the Future Bibliography," <http://www.metronet.lib.mn.us/lib/libfut.cfm>., October, 1999

Boisjoly, Elise "Industry Canada Presentation to the LibraryNet Board, October, 2001.

"Introduction to the Library Foresight System," Library Futures Quarterly, <http://www.libraryfutures.com/lfs.htm>).

"Market Probe Survey: Analysis of Urban and Rural Responses," Ontario Public Libraries Strategic Directions Council, October, 2001. (<http://www.strategicplan2000.com>)

Note: The Strategic Directions Council hired Market Probe to conduct province-wide research on public attitudes. The survey was an attempt to see if the Benton results were valid in Canada. The results mirror those of the Benton survey, with the exception that the attitude of young people toward public libraries is even more pronounced.

Melton, Marissa, "The Modern M.L.S. degree," U.S. News and World Report, <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/beyond/grad/gbmls.htm>).

Oberg, Larry, "Library Support Staff in an Age of Change: Utilization, Role Definition, and Status," ERIC EDO-IR-95-4. (<http://ericit.org/digests/support.shtml>)

"An overview of technologies and libraries," The Benton Foundation, June, 1997. (<http://benton.org>)