



Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century

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Prepared for the Special Libraries Association Board of Directors by the
Special Committee on Competencies for Special Librarians

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What is an *Information Professional*?

An Information Professional (“IP”) strategically uses information in his/her job to advance the mission of the organization. The IP accomplishes this through the development, deployment, and management of information resources and services. The IP harnesses technology as a critical tool to accomplish goals. IPs include, but are not limited to librarians, knowledge managers, chief information officers, web developers, information brokers, and consultants.

What are *Information Organizations*?

Information organizations are defined as those entities that deliver information-based solutions to a given market. Some commonly used names for these organizations include libraries, information centers, competitive intelligence units, intranet departments, knowledge resource centers, content management organizations, and others.

Background

The Special Libraries Association (SLA), an organization of dynamic and change-oriented IPs, has long been interested in the knowledge requirements of the field. The Association’s members have explored and shared their vision of the competencies and skills required for specialized information management in many forums over the years. The first edition of the competencies document published in 1997 attempted to synthesize and build on earlier work in the light of ongoing social, technological and workplace change. This document has been widely used by IPs, as well as educators, employers, and current and prospective students. The 1997 edition may be found at:

www.sla.org/competencies1997/

In preparation for the 2003 revision, the committee discussed the latest trends and reviewed other competency documents in peer industries. SLA's revised research statement, **Putting OUR Knowledge to Work**, with its emphasis on evidence-based practice, was also found to be highly relevant. Evidence-based practice involves consciously and consistently making professional-level decisions that are based on the strongest evidence from research and best practice about what would work best for our clients. The research statement is recommended as a companion document to the competencies. The SLA research statement may be found at www.sla.org/researchstatement/

In the information and knowledge age, specialists in information management are essential – they provide the competitive edge for the knowledge-based organization by responding with a sense of urgency to critical information needs. Information, both internally and externally produced, is the lifeblood of the knowledge-based organization and essential for innovation and continuing learning. Information sharing is also essential for any organization that is attempting to understand and manage its intellectual capital, often in a global context. IPs play a unique role in gathering, organizing and coordinating access to the best available information sources for the organization as a whole. They are also leaders in devising and implementing standards for the ethical and appropriate use of information.

If IPs did not exist they would be reinvented as organizations struggle to gain control over ever-increasing amounts of information in multiple storage formats. The astounding growth of the Internet and the rise of electronic communications and storage media generally have transformed our work and personal lives. Information overload is a growing problem and IPs are needed more than ever to quality filter and provide needed information in an actionable form. In order to fulfil their purpose, IPs require two types of competencies:

Professional Competencies relate to the practitioner's knowledge of information resources, access, technology and management, and the ability to use this knowledge as a basis for providing the highest quality information services. There are four major competencies, each augmented with specific skills:

- A. Managing Information Organizations
- B. Managing Information Resources
- C. Managing Information Services
- D. Applying Information Tools and Technologies

Applied scenarios illustrate many of the myriad roles and responsibilities that IPs perform in organizations of all types.

Personal Competencies represent a set of attitudes, skills and values that enable practitioners to work effectively and contribute positively to their organizations, clients and profession. These competencies range from being

strong communicators, to demonstrating the value-add of their contributions, to remaining flexible and positive in an ever-changing environment.

Core Competencies anchor the professional and personal competencies. These two core competencies are absolutely essential for every information professional. As educated professionals, IPs understand the value of developing and sharing their knowledge; this is accomplished through association networks and by conducting and sharing research at conferences, in publications and in collaborative arrangements of all kinds. IPs also acknowledge and adhere to the ethics of the profession. The importance of these two cardinal core competencies cannot be emphasized enough; these are paramount to the value and viability of the profession.

The competencies outlined in this document are a set of tools for professional growth, recruitment, and assessment. Specific jobs will require specific sets of competencies at various skill levels. We encourage you to use these competencies to create roadmaps of growth and development for yourself, your colleagues and your organizations.

Core Competencies

- I. Information professionals contribute to the knowledge base of the profession by sharing best practices and experiences, and continue to learn about information products, services, and management practices throughout the life of his/her career.
- II. Information professionals commit to professional excellence and ethics, and to the values and principles of the profession.

Professional Competencies

A. Managing Information Organizations

Information professionals manage information organizations ranging in size from one employee to several hundred employees. These organizations may be in any environment from corporate, education, public, government, to non-profit. Information professionals excel at managing these organizations whose offerings are intangible, whose markets are constantly changing and in which both high-tech and high-touch are vitally important in achieving organizational success.

A.1 Aligns the information organization with, and is supportive of, the strategic directions of the parent organization or of key client groups through partnerships with key stakeholders and suppliers.

A.2 Assesses and communicates the value of the information organization, including information services, products and policies to senior management, key stakeholders and client groups.

A.3 Establishes effective management, operational and financial management processes and exercises sound business and financial judgments in making decisions that balance operational and strategic considerations.

A.4 Contributes effectively to senior management strategies and decisions regarding information applications, tools and technologies, and policies for the organization.

A.5 Builds and leads an effective information services team and champions the professional and personal development of people working within the information organization.

A.6 Markets information services and products, both formally and informally, through web and physical communication collateral, presentations, publications and conversations.

A.7 Gathers the best available evidence to support decisions about the development of new service and products, the modification of current services or the elimination of services to continually improve the array of information services offered.

A.8 Advises the organization on copyright and intellectual property issues and compliance.

Applied Scenarios

- Develops strategic and business plans that support the host organization's goals and that establish long-term stretch targets and near-term priorities for the information organization.
- Inspires a shared vision and creates a compelling mission for the organization that energizes people to work towards achieving its strategies and delighting its clients and key stakeholders.
- Conducts market research of the information behaviors and problems of current and potential client groups to identify concepts for new or enhanced information solutions for these groups. Transforms these concepts into specialized information products and services.
- Sets clear performance expectations linked to organizational strategies and priorities.
- Provides professional development opportunities for staff members.
- Calculates a return on investment for information services and products or develops other measurable contributions of the information organization.
- Clearly demonstrates the value-add of the information organization to clients and key stakeholders through communications with top management.

B. Managing Information Resources

Information professionals have expertise in total management of information resources, including identifying, selecting, evaluating, securing and providing access to pertinent information resources. These resources may be in any media or format. Information professionals recognize the importance of people as a key information resource.

B.1 Manages the full life cycle of information from its creation or acquisition through its destruction. This includes organizing, categorizing, cataloguing, classifying, disseminating; creating and managing taxonomies, intranet and extranet content, thesauri etc.

B.2 Builds a dynamic collection of information resources based on a deep understanding of clients' information needs and their learning, work and/or business processes.

B.3 Demonstrates expert knowledge of the content and format of information resources, including the ability to critically evaluate, select and filter them.

B.4 Provides access to the best available externally published and internally created information resources and deploys content throughout the organization using a suite of information access tools.

B.5 Negotiates the purchase and licensing of needed information products and services.

B.6 Develops information policies for the organization regarding externally published and internally created information resources and advises on the implementation of these policies.

Applied Scenarios

- IPs are experts in identifying the best information resources, comparing free versus fee resources to determine if value-added features warrant the cost, examining features of resources available from multiple vendors, and providing access to those resources for the organization by negotiating cost-effective contracts with vendors.
- IPs select and secure information resources that are appropriate in terms of format, language, content, coverage and that provide special features that tailor the content and retrieval capabilities to specific needs of the user group;
- IPs may work together to provide group pricing or other cooperative arrangements both inside and outside the organization that provide the maximum value for the investment made.

- IPs integrate externally published and internally created information resources as well as knowledge resources to create new client-specific information collections and sources.
- IPs may use off-the-shelf information products recognizing that these products could require modifications to meet the needs of specific user groups; IPs then select or design and implement the required modifications.
- IPs select, preserve and make accessible technical reports, standards, best practices guidelines and other internal documents for ongoing use.
- IPs establish document retention schedules and access procedures to meet regulatory requirements.

C. Managing Information Services

Information professionals manage the entire life cycle of information services, from the concept stage through the design, development, testing, marketing, packaging, delivery and divestment of these offerings. Information professionals may oversee this entire process or may concentrate on specific stages, but their expertise is unquestionable in providing offerings that enable clients to immediately integrate and apply information in their work or learning processes.

C.1 Develops and maintains a portfolio of cost-effective, client-valued information services that are aligned with the strategic directions of the organization and client groups.

C.2 Conducts market research of the information behaviors and problems of current and potential client groups to identify concepts for new or enhanced information solutions for these groups. Transforms these concepts into customized information products and services.

C.3 Researches, analyzes and synthesizes information into accurate answers or actionable information for clients, and ensures that clients have the tools or capabilities to immediately apply these.

C.4 Develops and applies appropriate metrics to continually measure the quality and value of information offerings, and to take appropriate action to ensure each offering's relevancy within the portfolio.

C.5 Employs evidence-based management to demonstrate the value of and continually improve information sources and services.

Applied Scenarios

- Seeks opportunities to work with clients on projects or within their environments or operations to fully understand their processes, information behaviors and how information services can most effectively be utilized.
- Analyzes and synthesizes information into accurate answers or actionable information for clients, and ensures that clients have the tools or capabilities to immediately apply these.
- Customizes information services to better meet the specific needs and usage patterns of clients.
- Develops and delivers specific information packages or alerting services for clients such as competitive intelligence, business intelligence, industry monitors, topic or issue indicators.

- Develops, delivers and manages curricula educating clients in information literacy, Internet usage, and locating and interpreting information sources.
- Uses evidence-based management to present reasoned evidence of a service's value and an organization's abilities. Develops and applies measures of service/product usage, client satisfaction and the organizational or client impact of services and products. Regularly assesses clients' information wants and gaps using market research tools including questionnaires, surveys, interviews, focus groups and observation.

D. Applying Information Tools & Technologies

Information professionals harness the current and appropriate technology tools to deliver the best services, provide the most relevant and accessible resources, develop and deliver teaching tools to maximize clients' use of information, and capitalize on the library and information environment of the 21st century.

D.1 Assesses, selects and applies current and emerging information tools and creates information access and delivery solutions

D.2 Applies expertise in databases, indexing, metadata, and information analysis and synthesis to improve information retrieval and use in the organization

D.3 Protects the information privacy of clients and maintains awareness of, and responds to, new challenges to privacy

D.4 Maintains current awareness of emerging technologies that may not be currently relevant but may become relevant tools of future information resources, services or applications

Applied Scenarios

- IPs are active partners with technology vendors, providing feedback, suggesting improvements, and keeping the needs of the clients in the forefront.
- IPs maintain awareness of emerging technologies through reading professional and popular documents, participating in peer dialogs, and attending courses, workshops, and conferences. IPs are prepared to advise all levels of the organization on how technology trends will affect the organization and the clients.
- IPs lead technology initiatives in their organizations by forming partnerships, obtaining buy-in of upper management, overseeing the project management life-cycle, and communicating to all critical levels of the organization.
- IPs test, select and use new technology tools as they are developed.
- IPs maintain awareness of the latest policy and legislative initiatives that will impact privacy, accessibility, and openness of information use and transfer, and of technology deployment.
- IPs educate others in the use of information tools and technologies in a variety of ways, from training people in finding the information they want on the Internet or in proprietary databases to integrating information tools into their clients' workflow or curriculum.

Personal Competencies

Every information professional:

- *Seeks out challenges and capitalizes on new opportunities*
- *Sees the big picture*
- *Communicates effectively*
- *Presents ideas clearly; negotiates confidently and persuasively*
- *Creates partnerships and alliances*
- *Builds an environment of mutual respect and trust; respects and values diversity*
- *Employs a team approach; recognizes the balance of collaborating, leading and following*
- *Takes calculated risks; shows courage and tenacity when faced with opposition*
- *Plans, prioritises and focuses on what is critical*
- *Demonstrates personal career planning*
- *Thinks creatively and innovatively; seeks new or 'reinventing' opportunities*
- *Recognizes the value of professional networking and personal career planning*
- *Balances work, family and community obligations*
- *Remains flexible and positive in a time of continuing change*
- *Celebrates achievements for self and others*

Applied Scenarios as prepared by the Competencies Development Committee, January 2004:

Seeks out challenges and capitalizes on new opportunities

- Actively pursues new roles in the organization that require an information leader.
- Demonstrates that their professional knowledge and skills solve a variety of information problems in a wide range of settings.
- Foresees changes impacting clients or patrons and aggressively explores services and programs options and offerings.
- Helps others develop their new ideas.
- Views and uses technology as an enabler of new information ideas, products and services.

Sees the big picture

- Understands the environment in which her/his parent organization is operating and how the library or information services contribute towards those operations.
- Views the library and its information services as part of the bigger process of making informed decisions; gives the highest priority to

demands and projects critical to the organization's competitive advantage.

- Monitors major trends and world events that may impact the parent organization and/or the library profession; considers the impacts of these trends and pro-actively realigns library and information services to take advantage of them.

Communicates effectively

- Presents ideas clearly, succinctly and enthusiastically, either verbally or in writing, always in the 'language' of the audience, and with an understanding of their perceptions and perspectives.
- Demonstrates a professional, approachable presentation style with all audiences.
- Actively listens, considers and then responds.
- Requests feedback on communications skills and uses it for self-improvement.

Presents ideas clearly; negotiates confidently and persuasively

- Conveys effective, clear and assertive messages and coaches others to do the same.
- Believes in his/her ability to provide the best possible information service and relays that message to staff, management and clients alike.
- Demonstrates well-honed negotiation skills and the ability to secure the terms most beneficial for all concerned.

Creates partnerships and alliances

- Seeks alliances with other functions in the organization, such as information technology or human resources, to optimize complementary knowledge and skills.
- Forms partnerships with other libraries or information services inside or outside the organization to optimize resource sharing.
- Seeks alliances with content and technology suppliers and other information providers to improve products, services and operations.
- Seeks alliances with researchers in faculties of library and information studies to conduct relevant and practical studies.

Builds an environment of mutual respect and trust; respects and values diversity

- Treats others with respect and values diversity.
- Knows own strengths and the complementary strengths of others.
- Delivers on time and on target and expects others to do the same.

- Creates a problem-solving environment in which everyone's contribution is valued and acknowledged, and helps others optimize their contribution.
- Advocates for a work environment that encourages and supports ongoing knowledge development and that values the contribution of people.

Employs a team approach; recognizes the balance of collaborating, leading and following

- Works as part of the team regardless of his/her position or level.
- Develops and uses leadership and collaboration skills.
- Keeps abreast of trends in leadership skills and styles, using this knowledge to help self and others develop the most effective and appropriate approaches in different contexts. Willing to share leadership or to follow when this is in the best interests of all involved.
- Mentors other team members and asks for mentoring from others when it is needed.

Takes calculated risks; shows courage and tenacity when faced with opposition

- Shows courage when faced with opposition.
- Works closely with those in power who may say 'no' to clearly understand what's required to arrive at 'yes.'
- Asks "what's the worst that can happen?" and, if they can live with the answer, goes for it.

Plans, prioritizes and focuses on what is critical

- Recognizes that in order to use resources (including human resources, content and financial resources) most effectively, ongoing, careful planning is required.
- Refuses to let the 'cry of the urgent' drown out the 'drone of the critical' if the urgent is not aligned with where the library or service organization is strategically headed.
- Incorporates strategic imperatives into the individual goals and objectives of self and others to ensure long-term plans drive daily decisions and operations.
- Regularly reviews plans to ensure the organization is still on track or is responsive to unforeseen developments.

Demonstrates personal career planning

- Is committed to a career that involves ongoing learning and personal growth. Takes personal responsibility for finding these opportunities for

learning and enrichment as well as for long-term career planning. Maintains a strong sense of self-worth based on the achievement of a balanced set of evolving personal and professional goals.

- Seeks out performance feedback from management, clients and/or mentors and uses it for continuous improvement.
- Envisions his/her individual 'preferred' future and maps a path to arrive there successfully.

Thinks creatively and innovatively; seeks new or 'reinventing' opportunities

- Pursues positions or projects outside the information service department or library to gain a better understanding of how other functions apply information in their work; uses this understanding to create inventive services and programs that are indispensable to patrons and clients.
- Regularly scans for new ideas both within and beyond the library field to anticipate the future, "guesstimate" the implications and carve out new opportunities.
- Looks at existing operations, processes and services and asks "why?" Examines changes to these operations, processes and services and asks "why not?"

Recognizes the value of professional networking

- Actively contributes to and participates in SLA and other professional associations, sharing insight, knowledge and skills; bench marks against other information service providers and to form partnerships and alliances.
- Recognizes the need for a forum where information professionals can communicate with each other and speak with one voice on important information policy issues, such as copyright and the global information infrastructure.
- Contributes towards the building and maintenance of a strong profession, thereby enhancing its value in the eyes of colleagues, clients and the broader community.

Balances work, family and community obligations

- Supports self and others in the continual search for a balanced lifestyle. Optimises opportunities for all those involved to lead healthy and satisfying professional and personal lives.

Remains flexible and positive in a time of continuing change

- Willingly assumes different responsibilities at different points in time that respond to changing needs.
- Maintains a positive attitude and helps others to do the same.
- Seeks solutions and initiates problem-solving processes.

Celebrates achievements for self and others

- Nominates employees and colleagues for awards in the organization, association or community.
- Creates and contributes towards an environment where achievements, large and small, are acknowledged, celebrated and rewarded.
- Knows that “little things count” and encourages mutual support and sharing in the organization and within the profession.
- Celebrates own success and that of others; takes pride in a job well done.

CONCLUSION

These are the competencies of Information Professionals for the 21st century. They have their roots in the past and reach far into the future. These competencies form the basis for growth in the information age. IPs recognize and embrace the expanding nature of the field and the challenges facing them.

Although the core of the profession remains the same, the methods and tools for information delivery and the scope of the enterprise continue to grow and change dramatically. While maintaining their client and content-centered approach, practitioners increasingly require advanced knowledge of information technology to realize their full potential. Continually emerging opportunities will propel the prepared professional into as yet unseen realms of advanced information retrieval, interpretation, synthesis, product development and virtual services on a global scale.

The Special Committee on Competencies hopes that this document will evolve and grow through continuing discussion of our expanding knowledge and practice base. We encourage SLA members to provide examples of their activities in relation to these competencies. Mutual support in the form of building a shared culture of evidence-based practice will be a key to meeting the challenges ahead. The Committee recommends that members consult the association's research statement **Putting OUR Knowledge to Work** cited earlier for additional information on this concept.

A regularly updated Career Planning and Competencies Portal can be found at www.sla.org/competenciesportal.