

Why Technical Services is Good Preparation for Being a Library Director

Professional Perspectives — Tools and Techniques of the Trade. The Professional Development Committee encourages members to continue to explore topics after presentations at the local, regional and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Susan Siebers at 312/902-5675 or susan.siebers@kmz.com.

“As transformational leaders, [library directors] can be expected to move libraries from their current situations to a new future, create visions of potential opportunities, instill new cultures and strategies, and mobilize the energy and resources of the staff.” — Rebecca R. Martin, “Recruiting a Library Leader for the 21st Century,” 24 *Journal of Library Administration*, 47 (no. 3, 1997).

Wanted: Law Library Director. Must be enthusiastic, scholarly, innovative, creative, skilled, technologically sophisticated. Progressively more responsible experience required ... J.D. and M.L.S. required.

So you feel you're ready to meet Rebecca R. Martin's challenge and the job advertisement seems right on target ... until you hit the work "experience." Now you're not so sure. All your progressively more responsible library management experience has been in technical services and you wonder if you have the experience required. Or you're on the search committee for the law library director and the candidate whose folder you're considering is from "tech services." You're not sure whether the experience is relevant to the job.

In 1988, Michael Slinger surveyed the career paths of the then-current academic law library directors. His *Law Library Journal* article, "The Career Paths and Education of Current Academic Law Library Directors," reported that of the 160 directors surveyed, only 17 percent had any experience that could be characterized as technical service experience and only 9 percent had experience that would be characterized as exclusively in technical services. Although I suspect percentages may have increased somewhat since 1988, the perception that most academic law library directors come from backgrounds that are predominantly in public services is probably still correct.

Why is this true? There are probably two underlying reasons why technical services

librarians with significant management experience have not become academic law library directors. The first is the requirement that a director have both a J.D. and an M.L.S. The second is a concern about the relevance of technical service experience to the role of the director.

An unscientific review of job postings over the past three years for directorships at academic law libraries shows that both the J.D. and M.L.S. degrees are invariably a basic requirement for the position. While most, if not all, midcareer technical services librarians will hold M.L.S.s, many, if not most, do not have J.D. degrees. It might be argued that significant law library management experience should be considered a substitute for the J.D.; the reality is most institutions will not consider this to be the case. If you don't have a J.D. and want to be a director, you need to get the degree.

While pursuing a J.D. is a challenge when working, it is not impossible. Qualified librarians should enlist the support of their library directors in pursuing this goal. Most law schools now have part-time programs. One of the advantages of working in technical services is that flexible scheduling is often possible. If you're still a step or two away from being ready for a directorship, the opportunity to pursue a J.D. should be one of the top considerations when choosing your next position. If you're a director seeking to hire or retain a promising technical services manager, offer support for attending law school. Good technical services librarians are difficult to recruit; make this one of the bargaining chips. It will work to both parties' advantage.

The second reason for the lack of directors from technical services is that many law librarians, including those in technical services, often assume the skills gained in technical services do not provide the necessary experience to be considered for a directorship. Just the opposite is true. The leadership skills and management experience possessed by successful

technical services midlevel managers are directly relevant to the skills necessary to be a successful director. (While the focus of this article is on pursuing academic directorships, most of the skills mentioned can be translated to pursuing any law library directorship.)

Whenever I look at the job postings seeking directors, each seems to provide a unique insight into the employing institution. However, there are certain skills and abilities that appear almost across the board. For example, the following excerpt is from the job announcement placed by Ed Edmonds on the listserv for academic law library directors seeking his replacement at the Loyola University New Orleans School of Law:

“Supervisory experience and leadership skills essential. Ability to work and communicate effectively with a diverse group of faculty, staff, administrators, students and other library patrons, ensuring that their teaching and scholarship needs are met. Proven knowledge of traditional and computerized legal research techniques, including experience with LEXIS and WESTLAW, CD-ROM products, and Internet resources. Demonstrated commitment to the use of technology in library services. Familiarity with integrated library systems.”

Most experienced technical services managers possess almost all of these skills.

Successful technical services managers possess significant leadership skills that have been honed by the challenges engendered by the tremendous changes in technical services operations over the past 20 years. Many managers have led their libraries through the implementation, from investigation to installation, of at least one, if not two, integrated library systems. They have dealt with downsizing and outsourcing. They have led the library through major reclassification and shifting projects. Their creative leadership has enabled their libraries to continue to

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provide necessary resources in times of shrinking budgets and rising expectations.

Technical services managers are required to exercise a variety of management skills on a daily basis. One of the most important skills is the ability to lead, motivate and manage staff. Technical services operations include staff of all levels including professional librarians, paraprofessional staff and student workers. They can be full- or part-time workers, temps or contract employees. Some managers deal with both union and non-union employees. Because of the changing nature of the work in technical services departments, managers have significant experience in redesigning workflow, assigning work to appropriate level of personnel and developing appropriate job descriptions. They have motivated, hired, counseled, coached and disciplined employees at all levels. This is exceptional training for a directorship.

One of the great strengths that technical services librarians bring is their experience in dealing with other administrative units on campus on a day-to-day basis. Their responsibilities necessitate frequent contact with purchasing, accounting, central computing and human resources departments. Technical services librarians need to learn and familiarize themselves with the distinct cultures that permeate each of these departments to establish and maintain successful work relationships with each department. The lessons learned in technical services provide a strong foundation for dealing with other campus constituencies as a director.

Librarians with technical services backgrounds have often developed sophisticated negotiating skills. They frequently deal with vendors to negotiate licenses for library resources (a growing responsibility within libraries). They are also often involved in the contract negotiations for complex online systems. This experience is vital because directors negotiate regularly on behalf of the library on matters both large and small.

Library directors today spend a considerable amount of their time dealing with the issues surrounding the procurement and implementation of

technology, sometimes not only for the library but also for the law school as a whole. Technical services librarians were among the first to embrace the use of technology. As noted earlier, some have implemented more than one library system. Many have led their departments from the typewriter to the shared terminal to a terminal at every work station. Their success dealing with information storage and retrieval and the hardware and software that support these endeavors has led to a sophisticated understanding of the possibilities of technology. Not only does the operation of their departments rely on highly developed online systems, they make use of a variety of hardware and software to interact with colleagues, evaluate resources, prepare reports and statistics, analyze collections and the like.

The budgets of most law libraries make up a significant portion of the law-school budgets as a whole. While directors are ultimately responsible for the development of the library budget, it is often the acquisitions librarian or head of technical services who drafts the budget and provides the initial analysis of current and projected spending. This leads to a familiarity with all aspects of the library budget, including resource expenditures — both capital and non-capital — other capital expenditures, personnel costs and non-book expenses. Such in-depth understanding of the budget process is very important for directors and often difficult to master when one has not dealt with the budget on a regular basis.

Librarians who have spent their careers in technical services have considerable knowledge of legal resources, much of it gained because most of the resources of the library pass, in one way or another, through their hands. Catalogers, through subject analysis and classification, place each new title into the collection in relation to existing titles. Acquisitions librarians who have collection development experience evaluate potential purchases for content and format in relation to other resources. They become familiar with not only materials selected for their own libraries but with materials that have not been selected but are available should the need arise.

There is a lingering perception that technical services librarians do not work

with the public and therefore may not understand the library as a service organization. (This may harken back to the old stereotype of technical services being the chosen specialty of those who don't have the "people skills" to work with patrons.)

While many technical services librarians do not provide reference or circulation service to patrons, most technical services managers understand full well the service nature of the library. Almost every process they supervise — from creating bibliographic records, to searching for out-of-print materials, to evaluating potential purchases, to routing materials to certain patrons — provides service to patrons. In addition, many technical services managers are involved in traditional public-service activities. They often take a scheduled shift on the reference desk or serve in the library's faculty liaison program. Those with a J.D. may routinely participate in teaching legal research skills.

If your interest or background lies in technical services, I firmly believe that successful, progressive experience in technical services will provide the skills necessary to undertake a directorship. But remember, becoming the director of an academic law library is a career choice. There are certain educational requirements that must be met. The choice requires the systematic acquisition of leadership, management and people skills through what is often described as "progressively more responsible experience." You also need to go the extra mile to sharpen your skills: Take management courses. Get involved in faculty governance. Offer to take a shift at the reference desk. Let your director know your ambitions. Get a mentor. Most of all, be confident that your success as a technical services librarian and manager can lead to a directorship.

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