Competencies for public library managers: diversity in practice

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify competencies in common across public library managers.

Design/methodology/approach – The request for public library managers to participate in this survey was posted to the public listserve. Participants were asked about the tasks they do regularly, to identify the skills currently seen as most important in their work. They were then given a list of competencies, and asked to identify those they felt were most important for current public library managers, for those in future managers.

Findings – Some commonalities emerged, but there was not a substantial amount of overlap between skills identified by directors and non-director managers as important now or into the future.

Research limitations/implications – Further research into managerial competencies focussed on specific job titles is necessary to see what kinds of skills each may value. Likewise, a broader look at public library managers may provide a better set of common competencies that will be useful for both training and hiring.

Practical implications – Understanding strategies for managerial competencies will be useful in building successful training programs.

Social implications – Learning in this study that it will be challenging to carry out training relevant to all types of public library managers is useful; instead it can be tailored to different levels of managers for more success.

Originality/value – This is an original study, building on other work the author has carried out. The value is in understanding the real needs of managers, not just anecdotal stories.

Keywords Leadership, Management, Public library, Public libraries, Competency development, Competencies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Public library managers, regardless of their titles, are busy. There is a lot to do and many responsibilities to juggle; and reductions in both budget and staff make their work more complicated. But what do managers actually do? What takes up most of their time? This survey asked managers about their tasks and daily responsibilities, to uncover the most common things managers are expected to do and to know. As public libraries work to keep pace with the changes in society, what skills do they need? How will they compare to the necessary skills of today's libraries? This study looked at both the current and future issues, and asked current public library managers to share their ideas.

Literature review

Identifying the skills required to be a public library manager will always be difficult. The challenges of knowing both the theoretical and the practical things managers need to be successful can be daunting; determining what is most important adds to the complexity. Tension between the traditional definitions of management and leadership exists when the just-get-it-done nature of "management" comes into conflict with the

more transformative aspects associated with the idea of leadership (Hicks and Given, 2013, p. 15). To be a successful manager (no matter what the title), librarians need to combine both of these aspects into their work. But defining what specific skills these are, and in what amounts they should exist across the profession and across types of managers, makes things more complicated for managers. In trying to understand and identify a common set of competencies for public library managers, the most important skills needed are still quite uncertain.

Looking at job ads is a useful way to see what kinds of skills are currently required within a library, or within a job specialty. Huff-Eibl *et al.* (2011) reviewed a variety of articles to see what information was relevant to the creation of job ads, and they saw that the tasks were emphasized over the title of the job (p. 677). This may indicate there is a lack of overlap across jobs, if they need to be spelled out for each one and each job is so different. The University of Arizona has codified and defined job descriptions, including those of managers; thereby making jobs easier to understand and allowing for great accuracy in hiring and in performance appraisal (Huff-Eibl *et al.*, 2011, p. 681). This process of identifying competencies is the key to understanding the work required of a manager, and in demonstrating the requirements to be effective in that job. How to do that effectively is the challenge, particularly across a range of management positions available in the public library field.

The tasks required for public library managers even a few years ago may not be the same as those required today. Looking at the mission of the organization allows development of competencies that will align with and transform as the vision develops (Giuse *et al.*, 2013, p. 262). There may be some carry-over across time, and across different managerial jobs. Bringing that vision of a transformative future to the tasks of a public library manager is always a challenge – but not impossible. Understanding whether some competencies will be relevant across the different types of public library and different jobs within the library may provide some structure or foundation for libraries to use in building new job descriptions and performance evaluations.

The need to balance the professional skills of a library manager with the changes in technology and user needs is a constant tension for managers (Hicks and Given, 2013, p. 15). Skills necessary for managers today may not only have not been important ten or 20 years ago, they may not have even existed. And other skills may be important in new ways. Just keeping up with the shifting responsibilities is a challenge for all managers; thinking about keeping current into the future is a challenge on top of that. Developing a set of competencies for public library managers, particularly if a common core of competencies can be identified, will help to guide the process of continued updates and skill development. And it will help to ensure managers employed to handle this level of shifting changes in skills will be up to the task.

Methodology and results

The request for public library managers to participate in this survey was posted to the public listserve. Many public librarians from around the country are subscribed to this listserve, so it was a quick way to reach out to the variety of different library managers targeted. Public library managers of all levels were asked to respond and participate in the survey (non-managers were asked to wait for an upcoming survey on their views). There was an immediate response from managers, then a drop-off after a day or two.

In total, 57 people responded to the survey: 52 identifying as female, five as male, zero as other. The ages of respondents varied, and were concentrated in the 41-60 years choices; Figure 1 shows the range of responses.

Thought it was not required that the respondents have a master's degree to complete the survey (as it is not uncommon for small public library directors and managers to lack this degree), nearly all respondents did. Two people said they were in progress on their degree. Three people were part-time in their library; the rest were full time. Figure 2 shows the wide spread of time in the length of time respondents had been librarians, from one to more than 30 years.

Figure 3 details the length of time respondents have worked as managers. In some cases, respondents have managed longer periods than they have been librarians, indicating they came to the profession with managerial skills. These could be useful to the profession, and future studies should identify the managerial skills librarians arrive in our profession already possessing.

Another aspect of demographics diversity of respondents was population size served in their library. Figure 4 details the range of community sizes served by the respondents. The largest number of respondents (49 percent) came from communities with population sizes between 25,000 and 99,999.
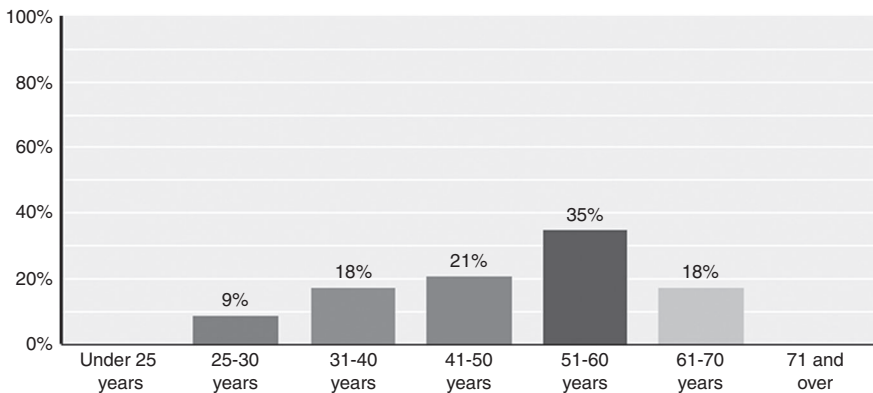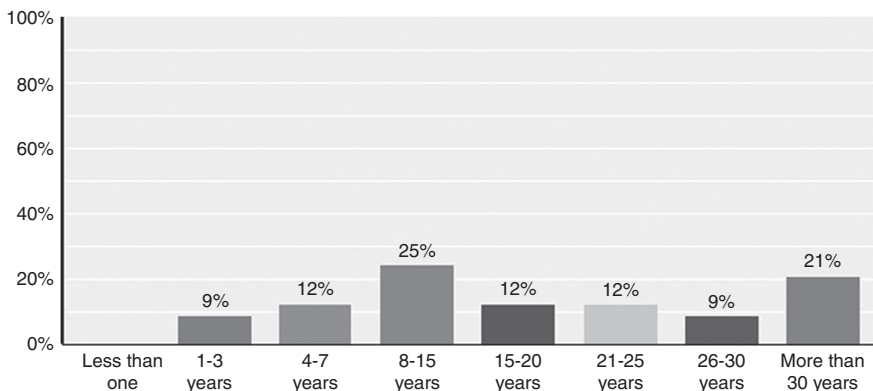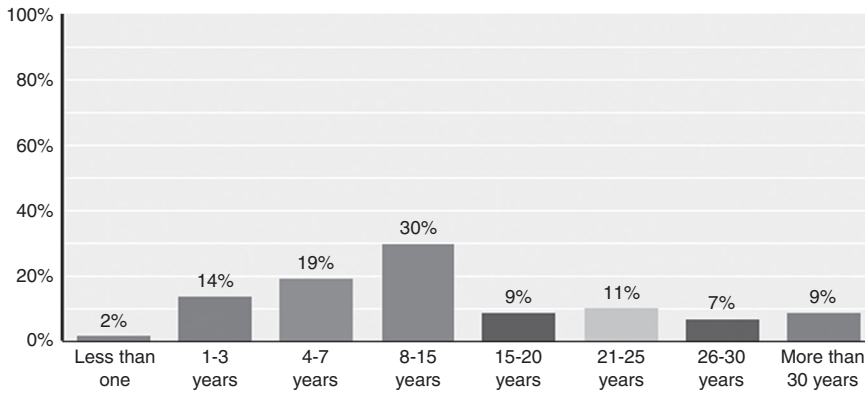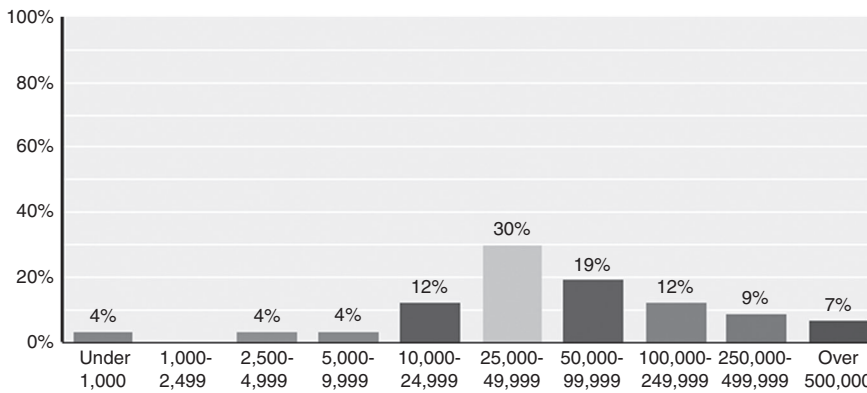
Figure 1.
Ages of respondents

Figure 2.
Length of time as a librarian

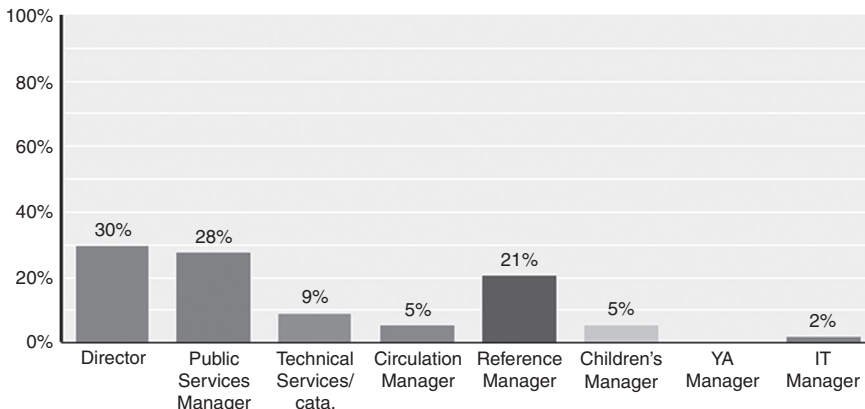Knowing what managers do can be dependent on their specific managerial position within the public library. Figure 5 shows the range of titles the respondents hold; they were invited to share specific titles, or other comments, in an "other" box. All 57 checked a title for this chart, and 24 responded with additional information – specific

titles (Librarian II, for example) or more detailed information about the specifics of their jobs.

Most respondents (58 percent) were directors or public services managers – a common result in my prior research. Presumably, smaller libraries would not have the same range of titles in the larger libraries; but all libraries have a director, and many seem to have a public services manager even if they do not have other management positions. At least a couple of people noted that they checked public services manager, but their actual title was Outreach.

A couple of strategies were used in this survey to understand the tasks typically done by managers. In the first section, people were asked to make a list of everything they are doing in a typical week. Beyond a title, it is challenging to know what managers really do all day; the range of possible activities is quite broad. In total, 47 people responded with lists of their regular tasks in a typical week. There was a range in the number of responses participants provided, from three tasks to more than 40. The majority of people provided between ten and 15 responses. Despite the direction asking managers to list regular activities, it seems pretty unlikely that snow shoveling and fixing the plumbing happens quite so often. (Though one participant was very emphatic about managers all learning plumbing skills; an easy assumption is there was a recent issue in that library.) Brainstorming and thinking about the future were surprisingly common. Some had a broad range of different tasks from all over the library; others were more focussed on a narrow range of specific tasks.

The range of services and skills in this answer was substantial. People tended to start off alphabetizing or capitalizing their responses, then giving it up as they kept adding to their lists as ideas start to flow. The most frequent task these managers reported was attending meetings (48 different items). Some people indicated frustration with their meetings, using many exclamation points after listing three different kinds of regular meetings, or using sad-faced emoticons. Programming was the next most frequent activity, with 30 people indicating they planned and carried out different programs. As this survey encompassed managers of all types across the library, activities usually considered staff as opposed to strictly managerial were often included in their lists. Directors in small libraries also mentioned the need to handle a wide variety of different tasks – including the daily operation of the library. Working at a desk was mentioned 32 times. Collection development and maintenance was mentioned 23 times; reference work 22 times, circulation 17 times, and cataloging 17 times. Training staff and patrons takes up time for 17 respondents – an activity likely increasing in many public libraries, as they bring in more technology tools and services people may not otherwise have access to without the library.

Some of the more typical managerial tasks also had several mentions. Budget work was listed 17 times, writing reports 16 times, supervising staff ten times, evaluating eight times. Dealing with city government was mentioned four times – all by directors. Several people mentioned working on publicity (including newsletter, newspaper column, radio show, press releases) and/or social media for their library; this may reflect the increased importance on advocacy and outreach in many public libraries. Updating or fixing the web site was mentioned by 12 people as a regular task. Other technology tasks included everything from troubleshooting all the machines, microfilm and microfiche, and working with makerspaces – requiring a substantial range of skills. Although many time management articles discuss the need to tame e-mail, only six people in this study mentioned it as an activity significant enough in their daily schedule to be worthy of notice. Other tasks included grants, facilities, community

relations, scheduling staff, collection development, policy and procedure writing, project management, CE, staff training, monitoring ongoing projects and issues, staffing (hiring, disciplining, mentoring), work public desks, representing the library on community boards. Directors necessarily have a greater diversity of tasks than other managers in most places, as their work should encompass everything done in the library. The responses from other types of managers were more focussed on tasks that might typically be thought of as librarian or staff.

The next question built on the previous one, and asked respondents about the list they had created – to identify the three to five most frequent tasks for them in a typical week. This answer compressed their thinking down to the things they are really doing regularly (it seemed unlikely in the prior question, e.g. that someone is actually shoveling the sidewalks each week as reported). The responses were to be somewhat scattered across participants, and some identified in the prior question were discarded. Unsurprisingly, supervising staff was the most frequently mentioned task for 26 of the respondents. Going to meetings was the second most frequent answer to this question, with 20 participants saying they do this in a typical week. In total, 15 people said they spend time working at a desk, 14 spent time working on reference tasks, and 14 identified collection development and maintenance as some of their most frequent tasks.

Dealing with problems occupied the time of 15 people. Working with patrons was a regular activity for 13 people. Scheduling takes up time for 11 respondents (and some of them were not happy about that, including some exasperated comments with their responses). Working with computers or technology issues was a regular weekly activity for 12 of them. See Table I for other infrequently selected tasks by the respondents.

While it may not be easy to quantify the answer "work on paper-shuffling tasks" provided by one respondent, the time-consuming administrative dimension of managerial work identified seems evident. There were several comments added in about the amount of time spent on paperwork and report writing.

They were then given a list of 19 competencies developed in my prior research, and identified as important for public library directors to possess (Jordan, 2012). Definitions from the prior research study were included with each competency, to be sure everyone understood each idea the same way. Respondents were invited to select as many as they thought were important for public library managers. See Table II for those identified most frequently as most important (by more than 80 percent of the respondents).

Ordering	Seven people
Programming	Six
Budget/payroll	Six
Cataloging	Five
Circulation	Five
E-mail	Four
Supervising	Four
Publicity	Three
Writing reports	Three
Web site issues	Two
Boards	Two

Table I.
Infrequently
selected tasks

In this question, the competencies selected least frequently (by 40 percent or fewer of the participants) are shown in Table III.

The answers most frequently selected by respondents identifying as directors (all with 92 percent of directors selecting) were:

- advocacy skills;

- communication skills;

- conflict resolution;

- flexibility; and

- interpersonal skills.

Looking at this question with all non-director managers gave a much more diverse range of competencies selected, with only two skills identified as important: customer service (63 percent) and flexibility (56 percent). None of the rest had a majority of the participants selecting them.

As in the prior set of questions, they were then given the same list again, and asked to select up to five they believed were most important. The answers here were much more widely dispersed, with no individual skill identified by more than half the participants. The most-selected skills (selected by over 35 percent of participants) are identified in Table IV.

Directors had almost no consistency in their choices for most important, with none of the 19 selected by a majority of the participants. The most-selected were: advocacy skills (selected by 46 percent, political understanding (38 percent), communication skills (38 percent), and customer service (38 percent).

Flexibility	97% of respondents
Communication	88%
Customer service	86%
Interpersonal skills	86%
Problem solving	84%
Conflict resolution	82%

Table II.
Identified most frequently

Multicultural awareness	40% of respondents
Intelligence	40%
Emotional intelligence	36%
Personal energy	34%
Previous experience	34%
Ambition	23%

Table III.
Identified least frequently

Customer service	47% of respondents
Communication	40%
Flexibility	40%
Vision	37%
Advocacy	35%
Problem solving	35%

Table IV.
Identified most frequently by non-director managers

Non-director managers had more consistency in this answer with several competencies identified by more than 60 percent of respondents, as seen in Table V.

This lack of consistency in those selected as most important is surprising. When asked to identify important skills from the same list, people had no trouble identifying many of them; but have a decided lack of consistency in narrowing down to only their view of the most important ones. And it seems the inconsistency was coming from directors, not the non-director managers; it would be assumed directors would be more consistent in their responses here, as their jobs would provide them with a most consistent vision of the library.

The skills not selected by any respondent in this question were more consistent with those least selected in the prior question:

- emotional intelligence;
- intelligence;
- multicultural awareness;
- personal energy;
- self-awareness; and
- self-confidence.

Skills not selected by any respondent who is a director were much more numerous than the responses as a whole:

- ambition;
- commitment to the profession;
- emotional intelligence;
- employee centered;
- intelligence;
- maturity;
- mentoring;
- multicultural;
- personal;
- resource management;
- self-awareness;
- self-confidence;

Communication	81% of respondents
Planning	75%
Teamwork	69%
Conflict resolution	69%
Customer service	69%
Time management	69%
Political understanding	69%
Interpersonal skills	62%

Table V.
Non-directors identified most frequently

- sense of humor; and

- time management.

This was a little surprising, as many of these had been inserted into this list by directors in my prior study, and were expected to carry over in this study. Ambition is a skill rarely selected as important in studies I have carried out, and workshops I have conducted with library managers. As this is often very important in other professions, a future study should look at this specific idea in more detail to identify some reasons why it indeed is not important, or to clarify definitions and intentions behind this consistent lack in public library managers.

For the next set of questions, the same list of 19 competencies was again provided, and participants were asked to identify those skills most necessary in the education of new public library managers. As current public library managers, their insights into the future needs of the profession is valuable. No effort was made to ensure the managers themselves were "good" in any way; this was merely a survey of current views. There was again a lack of any very strong viewpoints to this question; but the most frequently selected (by more than 60 percent of respondents) are identified in Table VI.

Answers from directors showed some consistency in their choices, as seen in Table VII.

The competencies most frequently selected by other managers are shown in Table VIII.

Communication	80% of respondents
Customer service	70%
Planning	68%
Political understanding	66%
Conflict resolution	61%
Time management	61%
Resource management	60%
Interpersonal skills	62%

Table VI.
Identified most frequently by all respondents

Communication skills	77% of respondents
Conflict resolution	77%
Customer service	77%
Resource management	77%
Problem solving	69%
Political understanding	69%
Advocacy skills	69%

Table VII.
Identified most frequently by directors

Communication skills	81% of respondents
Planning	75%
Teamwork	69%
Conflict resolution	69%
Customer service	69%
Time management	69%
Political understanding	69%

Table VIII.
Identified most frequently by other managers

Despite being able to check as many skills as they wished, many of those provided were selected by very few respondents. Skills selected as important for training future public library managers least often (by 30 percent or fewer of all the respondents) are identified in Table IX.

These choices stand in contrast to my prior study (Jordan, 2012), in which many of these were identified as very important for future public library directors. Differences in these two studies include the prior study was looking specifically at directors, not managers in general; and the prior study was specifically aimed at successful directors, not a general information gathering from managers. Clearly, more follow up on these skills is necessary to identify a consistent set of skills important for managers across the public library field.

Next, respondents were invited to share, in an open-ended response, any other ideas they have about skills important for future public library managers. In total, 30 people responded with a variety of answers. Most of their answers were expansions to the skills given in the list: political understanding, conflict resolution primarily. But they also had a lot of discussion here (and in their list of weekly activities previously) about the need to know facilities management – snow shoveling, unclogging toilets, handling the HVAC system. And budgeting was mentioned in a variety of ways: balancing payroll, overseeing bills, planning for programs and grants. The need for practical experience was also stressed by several people, citing their own experience of not understanding how management worked until they dived in and did it for a while. Several people also mentioned the need for what some termed "librarian skills": managers need to know how to work the public desks, to answer reference and reader's advisory questions, to catalog. A few mentioned the need to be willing to do anything required for the job, and not to be too caught up in the idea of a manager as too important to do certain tasks.

An issue in looking at necessary management skills for a successful future in public library work is the need to then train people in those skills. When asked if they had received any management training, 91 percent of the respondents said they had some.

Accountability	30% of respondents
Risk taking	27%
Commitment to the profession	25%
Creativity	25%
Multicultural awareness	23%
Mentoring	20%
Sense of humor	20%
Emotional intelligence	18%
Self-awareness	18%
Modeling values	16%
Self-confidence	16%
Enthusiasm	14%
Maturity	14%
Intelligence	11%
Personal energy	9%
Credibility	9%
Previous experience	5%
Ambition	5%
Tenacity	3%

Table IX.
Identified least
frequently for
training

The next question asked them where they had received this training, and they could choose as many answers as they wanted. "While I was getting my LIS degree" was selected by 43 percent, "Prior to getting my LIS degree" was chosen by 37 percent of respondents, and 70 percent selected "After getting my LIS degree." Relying on training received while in an LIS program is probably insufficient; with most schools providing one or two classes in management-related topics, and most of these at an introductory level. So the 70 percent who have also added training after their graduation are definitely helping themselves to be more successful as managers.

The next question asked where they got training, if they had any; again they could choose multiple responses. Figure 6 identifies the options chosen.

Further research into the specific types, durations, and evaluations done in post-graduate training would be useful in understanding where library managers are acquiring their skills, and what skills are being identified in these training opportunities as significant.

The final question was open-ended and asked what else they would like to say about management. In total, 19 people responded with different ideas on their experiences and advice to others interested in public library management. Some of the comments were:

• "Effective managers need to learn how to be involved in their community so that the library is at the table in crucial discussions about funding and future services for the community."

• "I think MLS students should have a good grounding in finance – first in budging – what it means (it really does determine how you will reach your goal – but should not be viewed as a limiting factor). Today's Library leader needs to know about investing and about raising funds."

• "Another big area of being the director is public relations – getting the word out to the public, both for what the Library offers and why the public should be proud of what it has and work to make it better."

• "Theories are fine, but there is nothing like actually being on the ground. Get as much real-world experience as you can."
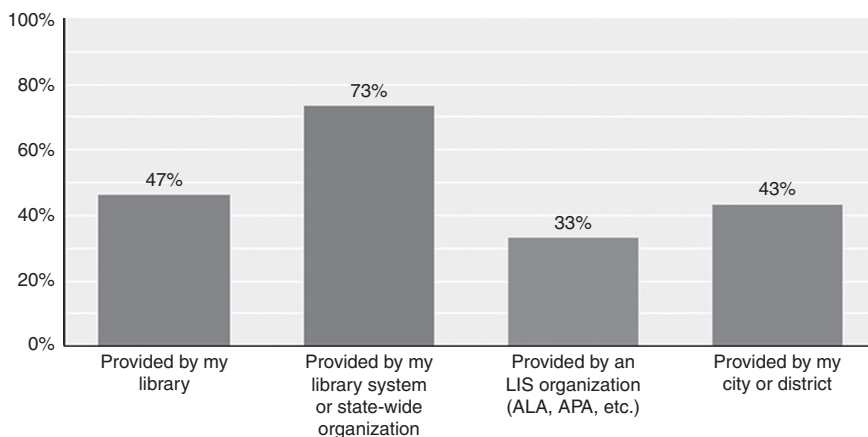
Figure 6.
Forums for library management training

- "Your people can't do their job(s) if you don't give them tools and support. Almost the last person management is about is: you, the manager."

- "People will be surprised at how quickly they may become a manager. Knowing how to deal with staff, and all your other commitments is very important."

- "It is very rewarding."

Discussion

This survey is part of my continuing work to focus on the skills needed by public library managers, trying to identify the basic competencies agreed on by the profession. Identifying a set of skills and knowledge that are common to all public library managers would be useful in creating training programs to better guide new and prospective managers toward success at work. This study identified some competencies that are common across all types of managers in public libraries, but also the difficulty of developing one common set that will be useful to such a broad spectrum of work requirements. Public library managers have a broad array of duties and responsibilities, so there will always be a selection of competencies that must be individualized to the specific job. This study suggests the need to focus on specific titles in assembling training for managerial competencies, instead of looking across a broad spectrum of management positions for commonalities.

A few skills were consistently the highest rated by the participants: communication skills (and this was the most highly rated skill by everyone for LIS education), customer service, conflict resolution, political understanding, and advocacy. The lack of consistency across questions was unexpected, but may be at least partially explained by the diversity of job experiences these different managers experienced.

Flexibility was chosen as the most important competency from the list given to respondents, when they were asked to identify the competencies more important for their jobs. In total, 97 percent of the respondents selected it as one of the most important competencies. But it did not carry over to other possible questions and responses. Only 40 percent of respondents identified it as one of the most important competencies for managers to know now, and it was not even in the running as important for future generations. Why? Based on the first question, this seems like it would be so important; but being dropped to the bottom of priorities in subsequent lists would imply that was an aberration. This is definitely an area for future research work.

There was greater consistency in other competencies. In total, 88 percent of respondents selected communication as something they do regularly, and 80 percent identified it when forecasting future needs in the profession. Oddly, only 40 percent of people identified it as one of the top competencies – leading to speculation about what the other 60 percent are doing with their staff and patrons. Another skill consistently identified was customer service, with 86 percent of respondents saying it is important for them now, and 70 percent identifying it as important for the future. It was the most-identified competency in the list of the most important, however with another sharp drop-off of 47 percent selecting it there – again, leading to speculation as to what the rest of managers are valuing.

This lack of consistency in competencies identified by a spectrum of public library managers indicates a lack of a common definition of what it means to be a manager in different aspects of public libraries. That would not be a problem, necessarily; but a lack of common pool of skills for public library managers complicates training and

hiring by requiring individualization of the skills for each job, rather than having a common set of qualifications. This study points to the need for more research into the necessary skills for managers, and the need to continue searching for a common set of standardized skills all public library managers will find useful – if such a set exists. Skills will continue to change and develop over time, but a common set of competencies would be useful and it seems reasonable to hypothesize that it can be identified.

There were other unexpected results. Vision is often regarded as one of the most important competency for leaders, but was only selected as somewhat important here in one question, and only by 37 percent of participants overall. The difference between leadership and management in definitions may account for this apparent oddity, as this survey was using the vocabulary of management rather than leadership. Planning, teamwork, and time management showed up here as more important to non-director managers. Again, this was somewhat unexpected; however it could be that managers at a non-director level experience the need for more of these skills in their daily work. This would be a useful area for follow up studies. Resource management was only identified as important on the list of skills new public library managers should learn. The comments on the open-ended questions back up the need for familiarity with skills in this set; it is surprising that it is not then identified as important for current managers.

Conclusion

This study has, building on earlier work, attempted to work toward a better understanding of the skill sets which are valuable to managers of public libraries. Identifying one all-inclusive set of skills for public library managers, of all types and across all time, is probably unachievable and likely to be of little value. However, continuing to strive to identify the most important skills for public library managers to be successful seems has the potential to be a useful exercise in setting standards which may be useful and valuable for both hiring and training of public library managers. Even though that goal may be elusive, working to understand the skills most important to managers helps to provide guidance on successful training for new and continuing managers and information to help make the best hiring decisions. Further studies may want to narrow the focus to targeted management types and groups, to best ensure development of targeted and tailored skill sets. The information gathered in this study provide important guidance as to the skills sets that public library managers are likely to find most useful and sought after. Future studies may help further clarify and refine the needs of all public library managers, showing further commonalities in the skills that will allow those managers to achieve success in their roles and in making their libraries successful.

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