Future Skill Development for LIS Professionals

Executive Summary

CB Resourcing has conducted a survey of leads of legal research and libraries at top firms, associations and academic organisations.   The survey was aimed at clarifying current activities, identifying skills gaps and understanding concerns of leaders in meeting the evolving expectations of their users.

The results of the survey provide varying perspectives and insights into the future skills requirements of LIS professionals as well as raising some very provocative questions as to how as a profession we may acquire the skills needed for the future.

Results

The majority of respondents have small teams (10 or less team members) supporting a large number of primary users (>250).

Leaders surveyed perceive several skill gaps in their existing teams. Their key concerns are around skills in four broad categories

- Analysis (ability to conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis- drawing insights from data and/or complex information sets). 83% perceived gaps

- Technology (utilising technology enabled solutions and new platforms for research and knowledge activities i.e. social media, AI, intranet...) 79% perceived gaps

- Communication (ability to influence and inform) 72% perceived gaps

- Project management (ability to manage large and long-term projects) 71% perceived gaps

Significant gaps were also noted in both existing teams and new graduates in business and commercial knowledge, defined as an understanding of how organisation functions as a business and within larger commercial landscape.

Skill gaps and team size may be inhibiting the ability to provide a broader range of offerings to users. While nearly all organisations take the lead in their organisation in training users on research tools and methods (97%) and enhancing information literacy (85%).

While (79%) have taken on fulfilling non-legal research requests, only a bit over half of organisations are using new technology and format (59%) or drawing insights and delivering value added outputs (55%).   Highlighting perhaps the impact of not having either capacity or ability to deliver given the skills gaps in technology, project management and analysis required to offer these services.

Leaders appear keen to develop their teams and fill skill gaps and would overwhelmingly prefer to train existing team members. However, existing professional development in organisations is perceived as not focused enough on specific gaps or ubiquitous enough to drive the appropriate skill development. With most organisations (52%) investing in training on an ad hoc basis.

Hiring people with new skills was favoured as an option by 62% of respondents. The skills/characteristics valued in new hires- customer service orientation, legal research and knowledge, communication and business research and knowledge only overlap marginally with the skill gaps identified.

CB Resourcing

Qualitative responses from respondents highlighted the concern of achieving the balance between valuing of core skills (information management, knowledge management, research) and offering new capabilities. Evolving expectations around services and value provided has increased pressure to provide more content/sector knowledge and requires team members who can easily flex across numerous skill areas.

A few representative comments illustrate the evolving expectations and challenge:

"Increased ability to conduct in depth analysis. Looking to move almost towards a consultancy level of analytical ability, which many in the industry are lacking so it is difficult to come by"

"Appropriate skills to collect, manage, analyse and interpret data. Deep sector knowledge. Ability to impress in front of senior leadership"

Leaders of LIS are best positioned to judge which skills will be needed to keep their function relevant to their organisations. To meet the future challenges, however, strategic and creative approaches to forming, developing and retaining teams will need to be considered. Different staffing models, new hiring profiles, redefining core services, creating targeted training, relevant career paths and managing stakeholders may all play a part. In coming months CB Resourcing will be publishing a series of blogs providing case studies addressing how some firms are addressing the challenges.

Survey Methodology

The survey was conducted from 5 March to 9 April 2018, using Survey Monkey.
There were 75 potential participants identified as heads of research or libraries at law firms, academic institutions and organisations. These individuals were sent the survey link by email. A link to the survey was also posted on SLA Legal Connect board. As the survey was anonymous, there was no intent or ability to identify individual participants who responded.
Analysis was conducted using widely available numerical and text analysis tools. The number of respondents (n=29) are not adequately representative of all potential respondents to be statistically significant yet provide some consistent themes and insights worthy of further study and discussion.