

# New MLIS graduates: Tech gurus or tunnel vision?

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**Abstract:** New MLIS graduates in the library are expected to meet the technological needs of a changing profession, but is this coming at the expense of their ability to connect with patrons?

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There is no doubt that new graduates in the library and information science profession are expected to have highly developed technological skills. This can be seen in the ever-evolving nature of academic course structures, as well as in the literature examining the “21st century librarian.” Indeed, several librarianship programs in Australian universities are now offering coursework that revolves around the skilled use of technology. For example, library programs at Monash University, Charles Sturt University, and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University offer courses dealing with game based learning, web publishing, social networking, programming, digital preservation and curation, and electronic publishing. A literature search brings up a multitude of reports on “employability” skills generally, with one of the common themes being the “application of information technology” and “using IT effectively” (Lowden, Hall, Elliot & Lewin, 2011). King (2007) argues that basic competencies for new librarians should cover blogging, video and image editing, learning of new technologies, knowledge of Creative Commons licensing, and more (as cited in Partridge, Menzies, Lee & Munro, 2010). In addition to these skills, employers also expect librarians to have exceptional “soft skills,” adaptability, affective and interpersonal skills, communication skills, and so on (Gerolimos & Konsta, 2008). A well-rounded librarian therefore has a breadth of both technological and soft skills.

Despite their well-roundedness, however, many new MLIS graduates find that they are stereotyped or pigeonholed solely as the technology authorities within libraries. This is compounded by the fact that new graduates are generally younger than their more experienced counterparts, and are therefore assumed to be “digital natives” (Emanuel, 2013). From an organization’s point of view, it can be easier and less expensive to give high-tech tasks to the new graduates rather than attempting to close the “skills gap” by providing technology training to existing staff (Rogers, 2013). Occasionally, this happens because experienced librarians don’t feel it is necessary, or believe it is too difficult, to learn

these new skills. While this should not discount from those experienced librarians who do pioneer new technologies and seek to develop their skills, many times I have heard experienced colleagues proclaim, “oh I’m no good with technology.” This lack of confidence from some seasoned librarians further perpetuates the new librarian’s “techie” status. In all my library roles, it has been an expectation, and part of the reason why I was hired, that I would be one of the library’s technology experts. My main responsibilities typically involve building and maintaining an online presence (including websites, social media, apps, and catalogues), as well as creating eLearning content. I am requested to test out new software, and I am the first point of contact to troubleshoot issues with current technology.

It is no wonder why these expectations of new graduates have emerged. The library environment has drastically changed, and MLIS courses, new graduate skills, and employer requirements are simply aligning to meet new expectations. Technology is an integral part of innovation and growth in libraries, and new technology adoption is only predicted to expand (Adams Becker et al., 2017). An especially notable change to the profession stemming from this new technology adoption is the growing prominence of online, indirect, potentially impersonal connections with patrons. With more of our daily activities and education moving online, libraries are expected to teach users digital literacy skills, and provide online content themselves. Users also have less face-to-face interaction with librarians, instead desiring remote access to eBooks and digital publications, online databases, and virtual librarians who can provide assistance through online chat. All of this means that librarians are having less face-to-face interaction with our patrons.

It is not just users who are shaped by this lack of connection. What effect will this change have on the library profession? I spend at least 80% of a standard day in front of a computer, and in a week

only about a third of my time is spent working with patrons face-to-face. From a personal perspective, this isn't necessarily a disadvantage. I can leverage my technological skills when applying for new roles, since they are highly sought after abilities in the modern library. For the library industry more broadly, however, there is a risk that new graduates will fail to develop "soft skills" like communication skills, interpersonal awareness, empathy, and customer service skills. Such a loss may cause us to lose touch with the very people we are here to serve.

Job descriptions are already showing a divergence between library roles that are people-oriented versus those which are technology-oriented (also known as the "digital librarian") (Radniecki, 2013; Choi & Rasmussen, 2009). Data and coding are all the rage right now, but we should be wary of encouraging such specializations too much, lest a whole generation of new graduates focus solely upon technology. One of the most important roles of the librarian is in connecting with individuals and creating community, which cannot be achieved solely from behind a computer. As always, contemplating the big picture and maintaining a balanced approach will ensure that this paradigm shift is not to the detriment of our profession.

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