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Making the Transition from Private Business to Business Librarian

After spending over twenty years in the private sector, I decided to go in a different direction. While taking some time to explore different careers, I came across the profession of librarianship. Reading literature concerning the various positions within the profession, especially that of reference specialist, I realized I could bundle my business experience and MBA to become a business librarian. I found the transition to be easier than I expected, since I had a well-developed sense of service, management expertise, and people skills gleaned from the private sector.

I then had to learn librarianship and the accompanying skill sets. I was fortunate to have an internship at the Federal Reserve Bank and a practicum at a large urban public library. In both instances, service was paramount, even though the clientele was different. I found this was a natural fit for me. With each new opportunity, I was able to expand both my reference and library skills as I learned of the numerous business resources that were used in large universities as well as top business schools.

I have been able to parlay my business skills, MBA, and overall experiences with the skills learned as a librarian by presenting patrons with real world experiences from the areas that I was involved in. I believe sharing my business experiences has provided useful insights to students on how the business world works and how various industrial and manufacturing industries operate. I also feel some patrons' respect for the library profession increases when they learn you have a business background.

Having an MBA oftentimes enhances one's credibility, especially among the Executive MBAs, who for the most part are older and have more business experience and tend to be more demanding in regard to information retrieval as well as timeliness. They, more often than not, have no problem requesting information on Saturdays and Sundays at 3:00AM! They identify the MBA Librarian as a kindred spirit who is always available, and responds to their character traits and needs on a level they have been accustomed to. While it certainly was not my intention to promote this, I have often prefaced my introductory messages with "please feel free

to contact me anytime, and I (we) will try to respond in a timely manner." I am fortunate to be in an environment that is focused on serving the needs of the customers—whether students, faculty, staff, or the public.

These statements are by no means an attempt to denigrate other business librarians who may not possess an MBA, but I feel having one can make a difference when dealing with schools who have expanded the business programs to include entrepreneurial studies; high-tech startups coming from engineering, medical, and technology schools; and community outreach programs for a number of venues, both for profit and non-profit. It is these schools with strong, business-oriented programs that would most likely benefit from the enhanced skills of a business librarian with an MBA or equivalent business experience.

Lessons Learned

The common ground between the academic and private sector is SERVICE!

In the private sector working in the steel industry, I was constantly learning about my product line and new products, as well as understanding my customer's business and all the intricacies of making many different grades of steel. It was of vital importance that I make correct recommendations regarding the use of products. A mistake could be not only financially costly, but life threatening. This is not dissimilar to what I do now; my success as a business librarian is contingent upon my ongoing product knowledge and the ability to articulate this knowledge, so that the patron understands how to use or retrieve data from the available resources. If I am incorrect, it will cost a patron or team loss of critical time, which may have an adverse effect on the project, the grade, or the credibility/reputation of the librarians.

We have a unique program at the Ross Business School called MAP (Multi-Discipline Action Program). This is a program in which companies all over the world pay UMICH (Ross) a fee for student services. In return, student teams work on an assigned project for a company, which is time sensitive, entails travel for weeks, and culminates in a presentation to both the company and faculty for a grade. This is a mandatory program for all Ross MBA students, and it is a high-stress situation for both the teams and the assigned librarians. We all have between 12 and 16 teams, and the time period (approximately 8 weeks) is anything but dull!

Having been in an environment that required me to be available 24/7, this is really something I enjoy! My experiences in the steel industry taught me to not only be knowledgeable and service oriented, but to be able to think outside the box when necessary!

An example of this is when something goes awry in the middle of an industrial project (as it always does!). This could include materials being damaged, not enough material to complete a project (and no time to order more), or an incident at the steel mill, such as: an explosion, loss of power, or flooding. Under these circumstances, it becomes necessary to improvise, adapt, and overcome. There is little time to sit down and analyze. No one wants to hear excuses, just solutions! This is the pinnacle of good service—to deliver under the gun!

The same precepts may apply to one of our MAP teams changing directions in mid-stream, either at the request of their sponsor or by a team's decision. There is no time to complain about all the time and resources we have already supplied the team! The project is now moving in a different direction and the resource requirements have changed. We need to react quickly to the change and come up with data and solutions to support the new direction. This may include the use of non-traditional resources in order to achieve an end (phone calls, personal contacts, non-business resources, etc). Our patrons depend on us for our expertise in guiding them to the data they seek. In this it is imperative that we keep a broad perspective on their project, and try to expect the unexpected.

So in closing, I feel fortunate that I have developed skills in the private sector which I have been able to transition into the public (academic) sector. Especially important are skills such as constantly learning about new resources or ways to reach my customer/patron, the ability to anticipate possible problems and have solutions, and to be able to think outside of the box or look for resources in non-traditional areas. But above all, it is essential to have a commitment to quality service that remains consistent and enhances the standing of the library and its staff.