

EDITORIAL

In the early days of computers in libraries and information centres, the profession tended to be split into two parts; the devotees of the technology, usually possessing a strong scientific technological background, and the opponents, or the rather less enthusiastic, usually with an arts/humanities background. Today it is hard to refute that computers have been universally embraced by all parts of the profession. Historical bibliographers are often avid users of online databases such as the Eighteenth Century Short Title Catalogue, chief librarians with impeccable scholarly backgrounds in Egyptology, Ancient Greek, Theology, etc. are often to be found using spreadsheets, and authors of papers on the most obscure of historical topics eagerly embrace word processors and software packages which even organize their references in a consistent and accurate manner.

Library and information schools, even though they, too, in the past have had staff splits between supporters and opponents of automation, have always showed a willingness to embrace the technology and provide instruction for both current students and those following continuing education programmes. Schools played an important part in introducing online searching and microcomputers to the profession. More recently schools have been active in using CD-ROMs in teaching, and expert systems and hypertext have been embraced by one school (Strathclyde University, Scotland) to the extent that staff at the school have launched and are editing journals in these very advanced areas of knowledge. Whilst no doubt some in the profession might question the emphasis of some schools on Information Technology (IT) at the expense of other aspects of the curriculum, there is no evidence that any significant body of opinion totally opposes the direction the schools have taken. On the contrary, there is every reason to suppose that the profession routinely expects graduates to possess IT skills at a high level. So, if the schools are providing graduates with the kind of IT skills the profession wants, even if there is not an exact matching of provision and requirements, is this not cause to celebrate the fact that, as far as this topic is concerned, the profession seems united?

Certainly it is gratifying to see the profession seeming to agree on this area, but a potential problem lies ahead because of the very fact of teaching students IT skills. Whereas the kind of education and training provided before the era of computers tended to equip the graduate to enter only the library and information profession, providing students with IT skills does offer the opportunity, at least to those with well-developed skills, to enter other occupations. To a large extent IT skills, such as database construction using dBase IV for example, desktop publishing, spreadsheets, etc., are neutral skills capable of being applied in a variety of activities. The salaries paid to librarians, even those with skills such as computer expertise, hardly compare to salaries paid to others with IT skills in the private sector. There is now

every indication in many countries, as the public sector, in which most libraries exist, finds its budget reduced and the private sector increases salaries to 'buy in' scarce IT talent, that the salary gulf is widening.

There is little quantitative evidence, it has to be said, that there is a 'flight' of graduates with these skills from the information profession. Some would argue anyway, that the information profession has to be defined in a very broad sense and that the graduate is still an information professional because they are likely to be in an information-handling role (this is even though they might be working as a dBase IV programmer for a car firm!). Whether the individual concerned, though, sees him/herself as an information professional and pays the membership fees to the appropriate professional body is quite another issue. Leaving aside, though, the issue of exactly how broad the information profession is, it is clear that the institutional basis of the profession, libraries and information centres, may face difficulties in attracting and retaining quality staff with the desired IT skills.

The information profession is not alone in facing this potential problem. At least in the United Kingdom, as the IT skills shortage increases, because of increased demand coupled with reduced supply due to a declining birthrate, the demand for individual graduates in computing science has pushed starting salaries for new graduates above those paid to many lecturing staff in universities. Whilst it is recognized that jobs should not be solely assessed by the remuneration they offer, it is surely not a healthy development, nor conducive to recruitment, for teachers and lecturers to be paid less than those they have just finished educating.

It might be said that there is no point in worrying about *possible* future difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff and that anyway in the face of market forces there is little which either the information profession, or others, can do. It would be unfortunate if this was a universally held view in a profession which has embraced IT as a means of enhancing its image and has, at the same time, become increasingly reliant upon it. Such a view runs contrary, too, to that held by other sectors of the economy. There are, of course, no easy solutions or answers but it would be comforting, and offer some hope for the future of the information profession, if there was more evidence that the profession was at least monitoring and assessing developments.

R.F. Guy and J.A. Large
Editors