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**Bridging the digital divide:
libraries providing access for all?**

“Certification of information professionals, the way we should go?”

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Abstract:

This paper is meant to revitalize the discussion amongst information professionals about the benefits of certification for their trade. Is certification the way to stimulate and secure the profession in future? Pros and cons will be taken into consideration.

Keywords:

information professionals, professionalisation, competencies, certification

Intro:

He looked at me intensely and said, "Every information professional should know Greek. I was somewhat surprised but didn't give in and asked him for more important qualities for information professionals. "Latin, they should also know that" he roared: "The young generation does not know its languages, it is a shame how our profession is lost. I got a bit scared and thought our conversation would last very short, because I don't know Greek nor Latin. He wanted to know if I had read the book: "Adviser pour dresser une Bibliothèque" by Gabriel Naudé (Naudé, G., 1627). My dumbfounded facial expression apparently said enough to him and he grabbed my notebook from my hands and wrote the title and author name down for me. Yet it was a pleasant conversation. He told me everything about his life work, managing the Bibliotheca Angelica in Rome, with a fire and a passion, a Roman man worthy. This meeting made me think about the specific knowledge and skills that an information professional should have.

Certification of information professionals, the way we should go?

Ask a random passer-by if he knows what an information professional does for a living. Ten to one he does not know the answer. In fact, ask any information professional to give a brief and concise description of his “metier” and in many cases he will not succeed. Long and wide, that will go, but concise, no. Often we as professionals are ranged with the ICT-ers who do "something with computers". Because of the unfamiliarity with the “metier” of information professionals only a few secondary school students choose for a study in this direction after graduation. This has contributed to the closure of many study-programs for information professionals in the Netherlands. In 2000 there were seven different places where one could go for information studies (Information Services Management (IDM), Information management (IM) and the like). Now, in 2010 there are only four places left. A course in librarianship at Higher Vocational Education level or at the University is not offered anywhere in the Netherlands anymore. The “Archiefschool”, (School for Archivists), as an independent institution exists no longer since early 2009. She has been absorbed in the HvA, more precisely in the study Media, Information and Communication (MIC) of the HvA.

Who are these information professionals?

For information professionals, there is plenty of work. This is only logical in an era when the amount of digital information is growing exponentially. Think only of the immense task of managing our economic, social and cultural memory by record managers and archivists. Modern libraries offer the public not only books, but education and entertainment as well. There is a need for professional information managers in organizations to keep the essential corporate information accessible and up-to-date for all staff as well as for customers and stakeholders. The empowered public keeps organisations accountable for their actions, information managers help organisations to keep all necessary information available and in good shape to avoid claims. The internet generation, or “the copy-paste generation”, believes that everything on the internet is true. Information professionals can eliminate this misconception and are by their professional skills designated to make information literacy a universal competency for people living in the 21st century.

Education for information professionals has to adapt to new circumstances continuously. Of the old library school curriculum, which is the basis of the information studies of today, almost nothing remains in the current program. This is obvious since internet and digitalization of communication arose and the curriculum of the information studies had to be changed according to the new digital era we live in and to the new tasks for information professionals. At some colleges, the existing training (IDM) has merged into a new broader IT training. At other colleges, the IDM course was located in the Communication domain.

The result of this chameleonic changing with the environment is that the training and the trade of information professionals are not readily identifiable to many people anymore: to future generations of students, employers, governments for example. A.o. this causes the decline in student numbers. How do we solve this? Back to the old times with rigid distinctions between librarians, archivists, documentation specialists, etc.? In the old days everybody knew at least what the profession of a librarian stood for. But as librarians seldom work in libraries nowadays that wouldn't help much. Raising the old distinctions between librarians, archivists, document managers etc. won't do no good, to my opinion. In a society where people change jobs often and the mobility on the labour market is high this is not possible nor desirable. I think certification is a better way of clearing up the ambiguity around information professionals and their schooling.

As mentioned above, there are heaps of possibilities of employment for information professionals. In the Netherlands, there are neither reliable figures on the amount of information workers nor of their schooling. Because more and more information professionals come from different disciplines the question "Who exactly are these information professionals?" is increasingly difficult to give. In the information professions a lot of lateral-entry staff is employed, like historians, linguists, lawyers, economists and even people with a hotel-school background or health-education. Often, these people have valuable professional knowledge to combine with the skills of the information profession. There are even libraries where people from other disciplines are more highly rated than "real" librarians (Calff, J., 2009).

Knowledge and skills of information professionals.

There is specific knowledge and expertise which makes an information professional an information professional. This body of professional knowledge is essential to sustainable management, provision, operation and exploitation of information. That knowledge becomes obsolete quickly because of the speed of technological developments. Keeping their professional knowledge up-to-date is vital for the quality of the work of information professionals. In the Netherlands we lack a validated system of ongoing training for information professionals operating in the field. All training that information professionals take is based on individual enthusiasm or a motivating employer.

In the Netherlands information professionals are currently nothing more than semi-professionals. They lack comprehensive knowledge of the profession itself and there is no clear professional image. They can neither measure the quality of their performance nor their unique professional skills, because there are no benchmarks. Anyone can call himself an information professional. The difference between a good and an excellent information professional is not hard to make, but difficult to prove. Several isolated attempts have been made to describe the professional competencies and skills in the information field, by several trade unions in Holland. The Royal Association of Archivists (KVAN) is conducting a study into the feasibility of certification of archive staff and a corresponding chartered register (Schenk, M., 2009). In 2007 a renewed Professional Code of Ethics for librarians in Public Libraries was launched by the Public Libraries Department of the Dutch Association for Library, Information and Knowledge Professionals (NVB). The aim was to boost the profession of librarians.

Existing programs of certification for information professionals.

The CERTIDOC consortium came out in 2004 with a European certification system for information specialists. The professional knowledge and skills to be used for the accreditation of information professionals, were labelled and summarized in the “Euroreferentieel” by three trade-organizations: ADBS in France, DGI in Germany and SEDIC Spain, together with ULB (Université Libre de Bruxelles) and Bureau van DIJK Ingénieur conseil (Paris). Today there are partnerships between ADBS and professional organizations in Belgium, Romania and Switzerland and in Italy CERTIDoc Italia has been installed. So, in many European countries it is possible for information professionals to enter the Certidoc program of certification. Information Professionals with three or more years of working-experience can

be assessed and certified for a period of 5 years at four different levels (Assistant, Technician, Manager or Expert in I & D). In Appendix 1 the list of competencies from the CERTIDOC Euroréférentiel 2004 can be read (www.certidoc.net/en/eurefl-english.pdf). The register on the Certidoc website counts 26 names of certified information professionals, which is a rather small number.

An example of an accreditation system for information professionals in England is CILIP, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, which was created in 2002 by fusing the Library Association and the Institute of Information Scientists. This independent organization uses a standard body of knowledge that distinguishes the information workers from other professionals. They call this their Body of Professional Knowledge (BPK) (<http://www.cilip.org.uk/jobs-careers/qualifications/accreditation/bpk/Pages/default.aspx>). The target group of CILIP is very broad: librarians, documentation specialists, archivists, desk researchers, market researchers, etc. The term information professional is used by CILIP as an umbrella term under which many specific occupations can be ranked. The general competencies described in the Body of Professional Knowledge of CILIP, apply to all information professionals. In addition, every specialist, be it a clinical- librarian, a market researcher or a builder of geographical databases has its own specific knowledge, which is not included in the CILIP programme. Most information professionals work in different environments during their career and collect a lot of knowledge and expertise apart from the CILIP BPK (Huckle, M, McKee, B, 2009). In England there are currently around 11,500 CILIP certified information professionals, which is far more than the 26 CERTIDOC certified information professionals in Europe. A reason to explain this big difference is that CILIP and his predecessors have been permitted to award professional (Chartered) status to members since 1898 and CERTIDOC only started in 2004.

Benefits of certification.

The advantages of certification as expressed by Paul Heyvaert, chairman of the Belgian professional association ABD-BVD and CERTIDoc judge, are:

- the information professionals get a clearer and better image
- the convenience of professional mobility [in Europe]
- professional recognition
- individual development tool

(Heyvaert, P., 2007)

A true professional of any trade is proud of his knowledge and skills. He works as an independent entrepreneur within or outside an organization. The possibility to be able to prove the quality of his skills will give the information professional more freedom and autonomy. Lateral-entry staff would profit even more from certification, because it makes it much easier for them to climb on the career ladder. Looking for jobs in other European countries is easier with a personal certificate, because you can prove what knowledge and capacities you have. For employers, certification makes it simpler to estimate what type of professional is needed for a certain job.

Why don't more information professionals opt for certification?

As I said before, at this moment in the Netherlands there is neither register nor a system of certification for information professionals. Everyone is busy describing professional competencies in his own small circle. This, however, does not bring a quality instrument for the total profession any closer. What would be the reason? Perhaps archivists and librarians don't see themselves as information professionals. That, however, is strange. It would be the same as heart surgeons and dentists not seeing themselves as doctors. From where comes this urge to reflect on professional skills and certification in small groups only, but not in the larger context of the overall profession? It would not be too difficult to embrace the CERTIDOC certification system for the generic professional skills to start with. Perhaps the lack of a strong supportive organization on the Continent for the entire profession as CILIP in England is one reason. Or is it the solistic nature of the information professional that blocks broad cooperation? Ultimately, fragmentation will not help our profession.

Now what?

It seems wise to begin with a wide consultation of all information professionals, preferably by way of the existing Trade Unions and their members, coordinated from one point. One of the central questions should be: "Do we want certification associated with a professional register for information professionals?" Additional questions may be asked about education, present positions, a wish for further training, plans to go for an international career, etc. Without

identifying the opinion of our entire profession on this matter, talking about certification has little use. Depending on the results of this "wide consultation", next steps should be made. I think it is important to clarify the characteristics and specific knowledge of our profession and pave the way for the many future generations of information professionals.

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Appendix 1:

CERTIDOC Summary of the fields of expertise and principal aptitudes

| THIRTY-THREE FIELDS OF EXPERTISE ¹ | TWENTY PRINCIPAL APTITUDES ¹ |
|---|--|
| <p>Group I – Information I01 – Relations with users and clients I02 – Understanding the LIS environment I03 – Application of the law of information I04 – Contents and knowledge management I05 – Identification and validation of information sources I06 – Analysis and representation of information I07 – Information seeking I08 – Management of collections I09 – Enrichment of collections I10 – Material handling of documents I11 – Organisation of site and equipment I12 – Conception of products and services</p> <p>Group T – Technology T01 – Computer based design of information systems T02 – Computer based development of applications T03 – Publishing and editing T04 – Internet technology T05 – Information and computer technology</p> <p>Group C – Communication C01 – Oral communication C02 – Written communication C03 – Audiovisual communication C04 – Computerized communication C05 – Using a foreign language C06 – Interpersonal communication C07 – Institutional communication</p> <p>Group M – Management M01 – Global management of information M02 – Marketing M03 – Sales and diffusion M04 – Budgetary management M05 – Project management and planning M06 – Diagnosis and evaluation M07 – Human resources management M08 – Management of education and training</p> <p>Group S – Other scientific knowledge S01 – Additional fields</p> | <p>A – Personal Relations 1 – Autonomy 2 – Communication skills 3 – Availability 4 – Empathy 5 – Team spirit 6 – Sense for negotiation 7 – Teaching skills</p> <p>B – Research 1 – An enquiring mind</p> <p>C – Analysis 1 – Analytical ability 2 – Critical ability 3 – Ability to synthesise</p> <p>D – Communication 1 – Discretion 2 – Responsiveness</p> <p>E – Managing 1 – Perseverance 2 – Rigour</p> <p>F – Organising 1 – Adaptability 2 – Foresight 3 – Decisiveness 4 – Initiative 5 – Sense of organisation</p> |

Source: www.certidoc.net/en/euref1-english.pdf