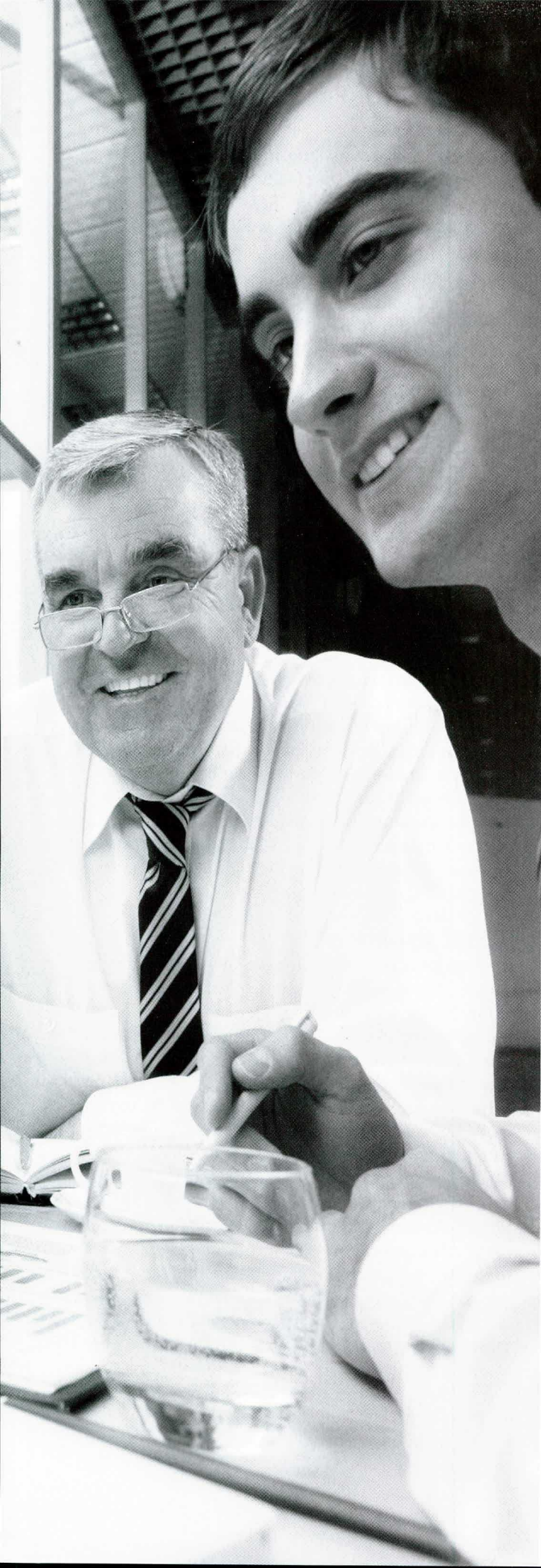


Making Information Literacy Relevant in Employment Settings



By Charles Inskip

It's now been more than 40 years since Paul Zurkowski identified information literacy as "being able to find what is known or knowable on any subject" [1]. Since then, there has been an enormous amount of work devoted to this. In spite of Zurkowski's focus on the workplace, research and practice have primarily concentrated on the education sector, particularly in higher education, with delivery mainly by the library community.



Supporting statements at the professional level that relate to developing the skills and competencies of library and information professionals charged with developing the information capabilities of school and university library users reflect this interest. Similar frameworks and strategies, such as Big6, Sconul's Seven Pillars, and the ALA Competency Standards, were developed for users and are widely used in the education sector.

However, despite information literacy being considered a "basic human right in a digital world" [2], the transferability of these skills from education into the workplace is in question. Students are engaging with increasing numbers of digital resources in the pursuit of their studies, as well as for their extracurricular activities. But the lifelong learning element of information literacy needs to link more closely to the growing need for competent knowledge workers in the new information economy. Many graduates are entering the professions with ill-fitting skill sets caused by the mismatch between study culture and work practice.

Existing research into workplace information literacy strongly supports this view. The experiences of auditors, engineers, firefighters, ambulance drivers, lawyers, and business graduates have been considered by various leading researchers in the field [3]. This work sheds some light on the difficulty in transitioning skills and competencies from education to workplace settings and the differences between these settings that contribute to these difficulties.

EXPLORING THE LANDSCAPE

There is nothing wrong with an apparent disconnect between education and the workplace. Employability is not the only reason students take classes—many of them study to acquire, explore, and develop knowledge for the sake of it, rather than to increase their employability. Once we acknowledge this disconnect, we can explore it. The result is that the challenges are more likely to be met. In order to explore this landscape, a new initiative, InformAll (informall.co.uk) has been gathering data with the aim of identifying strategies to address the challenges around information literacy and lifelong learning.

Stéphane Goldstein of the U.K. consultancy Research Information Network established InformAll as a working group in 2012. Known then as the Research Information and Digital Literacies Coalition, it was funded by Higher Education Funding Council for England to investigate research-based information needs and behavior. From this work, it became clear that the broader scope of transferability of information and data literacy beyond academia was increasingly relevant. This led to the formation of InformAll, which aims to provide a collaborative approach to promote the lifelong benefit of information literacy as people move from education into the workplace and, ultimately, into retirement.



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Through collaboration with partners outside the obvious library and education sectors, InformAll wants to provide a more representative view of the challenges around information engagement and know-how. This broadening of scope has led to various context-setting projects exploring the transferability of information literacy from academia into professional employment.

VIEWS FROM THE WORKPLACE

Interviews with careers services, professional and accreditation bodies, employers, and other stakeholders indicate that while information literacy is not regarded as a concept as such, components such as analytical and problem-solving skills are widely considered essential [4]. The term “information literacy” is a concept that does not successfully map to employment—many interviewees did not recognize it at all until components were explained and “translated.”

Once the information skills, competencies, and attributes in question were identified, interviewees agreed that these were relevant and important in the workplace scenario. Indeed, employers expect graduates to arrive into the professions armed with this know-how. After all, they spend years in education searching and evaluating, creating new knowledge, and circulating their findings. Yet graduates seem to find it difficult to apply their academic skills within the workplace.

This supports further discussion [5], which suggests that without making it clearer to employers what information literacy actually is and how it contributes to the bottom line, there is a challenge in communicating its value and impact to competitiveness and profitability. This means uptake and support from employers is likely to be minimal in terms of training employees in developing their information know-how and facilitating that transition.

BRIDGING THE SEMANTIC GAP

More recently, I’ve been exploring the language barrier, or semantic gap, between education and workplace views of information literacy. I data-mined a large body of nearly 900 texts relating to employability skills and competencies from two careers services websites. I imported all the texts into qualitative text analysis software NVivo 10. This allowed me to map the skills and competencies that related directly to information literacy to two sets of higher-education benchmark statements and graduate attributes in order to investigate what language careers services and education providers were using around this topic.

The term “information literacy” barely appeared. It was in two texts, one from education and one from careers, both relating to the information profession. Broadening my query to include IT/ICT/computer literacy showed that there were some examples of a more technical focus to be found in the careers texts, but still the numbers were very low. There were no mentions of these technical skills in the education texts.

I then dug more deeply into the datasets and examined how the most frequently appearing information literacy-related terms mapped across the two sectors. This enabled

me to identify vocabulary that was being used in education and workplace texts—and vocabulary specific to each of the sectors in the sample.

Both education and careers identify key information-related skills such as communicating, managing, planning, and presenting. They also adopt terms such as analyzing, problem-solving, and research, although these are used more by the careers services than the educators. Vocabulary specific to education reflects the coursework focus of that context (“argument,” “critical,” “interpret,” “reflection,” “sources”), while the careers texts place more of an emphasis on accuracy, attention to detail, awareness, creativity, methodical and organized approach, reporting, working with others, and technical understanding.

While still preliminary, these results do seem to support other work that, unsurprisingly, identifies the emphasis by employers on the contribution of information to the bottom line through effective use of workplace skills. Understanding that these different uses of language reflect different ways of thinking about information literacy means that we are in a better position to start to build bridges across this semantic gap. It is planned that this and further work looking at job descriptions and talking to employers and employees will contribute to enabling transferability.

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GAP OF UNDERSTANDING

We have identified a clear gap in terms of understanding of information literacies: Graduates are not meeting employers’ expectations in terms of applying their university-developed information skills to workplace scenarios. The workplace context is different from the study environment encountered in academia.

- People are more likely to work in teams and to satisfice (accept available options and alternatives as satisfactory) rather than study alone and search comprehensively,
- The company’s bottom line is what is at stake, rather than an individual’s coursework grade.
- Support is provided in education, primarily by librarians but also by other service departments as well as faculty, while the workplace may not have a library.
- Training may focus more on identifiably “productive” skills than on problem-solving and report writing.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that if graduates are to develop more relevant skill sets for their employment while in school, this is likely to require not just a change in the type of delivery to reflect more closely what is needed at work—through closer collaboration among library, careers services, employers, professional, and accrediting bodies—but also a better understanding of how employers view these capabilities and what words they use to describe them.

Armed with this vocabulary, graduates are more likely to write job applications that highlight the transferability of their information skills and competencies and then, hopefully, will be more able to transition these into workplace contexts. After all, a report and presentation on a study group research project needs research, creative problem-solving, and communication among peers. And that sounds a bit like work, right?

There’s a groundswell of interest in the U.K.: InformAll is working with library association CILIP’s policy makers and its special interest Information Literacy Group (informationliteracy.org.uk) on an advocacy statement communicating the value of the library and information professional to workplace information literacy. This is due to be published in September 2015.

Further research by InformAll will be looking into value and impact, and connections are being made between librarians and careers services in the pursuit of maximizing the lifelong learning opportunities available through quality delivery. If all stakeholders recognize these challenges, the opportunities for the profession are boundless.

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