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Information Literacy In The Work World

As business librarians, we take pride in fostering the ability of students to find, evaluate and use information effectively. These abilities result in A+ research papers, but what happens after these students graduate? Will the work world appreciate the information literacy skills they have mastered? The short answer is: yes, a lot.

The term “information literacy” does not appear frequently in the workplace, but the skills it encompasses are critical in running a company effectively. Information management, knowledge management, critical thinking, decision making, complex problem solving—all of these are essential in business and all of them require the abilities librarians know as information literacy (Conley and Gill 219; Head et al 92; O’Connor 113).

In a national workforce study conducted by the University of Phoenix, when asked to name the most important skills evaluated in new hires, 82% of the respondents rated “critical thinking and problem solving” as very important (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 4). Sixty-nine percent also rated “the ability to analyze and synthesize information” as very important. Both skills are key components of an information literate person.

Supporting these findings is a qualitative study of recent college graduates and their employers conducted by Project Information Literacy that found evidence that companies across a variety of industries value the online research skills new hires bring to the job. Examples of the new recruits’ tasks included “locating information about industry competitors, tax regulations, conference planning, or news coverage of a particular issue” (Head et al 86). Managers felt that their new employees should explore additional resources—such as the information available from their coworkers and print material—but their ability to find and evaluate information was highly appreciated by all 23 employers surveyed (Head et al 87).

Environmental Resources Management (ERM), an environmental consulting company, is an example of one firm that recognized the value trained researchers brought to their business. After realizing the worth of workers who could find, evaluate and use information well, ERM instituted a program on information literacy skills for all its employees. ERM reported that these abilities “added critical business value” and introduced “a culture of interacting with information to increase work productivity” (Cheuk 142).

ERM appreciated information-literate employees because workers who lack these skills have a definite impact on an organization’s bottom line. The inability to evaluate information effectively is especially harmful because it can hurt a business strategically (Cheuk 137). A lack of information literacy also hurts a company’s productivity. According to a survey of 3,000 knowledge workers conducted by Basex, workers spend up to 50% of their day managing and searching for information (Spira). This trend also appears in government workers. One hundred federal, state and local government employees were asked what percentage of time they were unable to find the information they needed to do their job. Over 25% of respondents reported being unable to find the digital information they need more than 50% of the time (Clarke and O’Brien 3). Time spent looking and not finding the information required to do their work is a constant drain on employees’ productivity.

Librarians are doing an important job. The skills students are learning in the library become valuable tools when they join the workforce. Information literacy may be known by many different names once graduates are out in the work world, but the abilities it requires are even more valuable there than in the classroom.

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