Bridging the past and the future –

a standards-based approach to transferable skills

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Abstract

Library technicians who are searching for work need a list of their skills for use in resumes and for answering selection criteria, however identifing and precisely defining these skills can be a problem. While the ideal situation is to have relevant work experience for all criteria, sometimes users lack this and need to obtain wording from elsewhere, even is this is likely ot end up weaker. This investigation will examine transferable skills from a structured, user-based perspective focusing on using skills from the standards for activities that the user already undertakes. A literature review was undertaken, which found that identifing transferable skills is currently mostly done by two methods, firstly by literature reviews and subsequent analysis of past job advertisements or alternatively by creating lists of skills, either using a pre-defined skills list or simply asking what the individual is good at. As a new approach, diferent areas where activities controlled by standards were likely to be found were defined. These included position descriptions of past and current jobs, formal training courses, volunteer positions, sports and hobbies. Standards for various activities within each category were then found and investigated for definitions of skills which would be transferable. Esoteric skills which were far removed from what was required for work as a library technician were also investigated in an attempt to determine if there was any similarity between the skill sets required. Standards exist for a huge variety of activities, and usually have lists of skills included in them. Many of these skills are transferable, and the descriptions of the skills are also often quite detailed. Even in esoteric cases, there were some useful skill areas such as workplace health and safety. Standards are a good place to look for transferable skills, as the skills listed within them are specific and already written using formalised terminology. Areas that standards can be found in include position descriptions of past and current jobs, formal training courses, volunteer positions, sports and hobbies. The main problem with this methodology is that skills from outside a relevant work environment will be seen as weaker, sometimes much

weaker, that skills obtained during relevant work or training The exact areas, and the amount and relevance of standards found within them, will vary between individuals.

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A major bridge which needs to be crossed at one time or another by almost the entire population, including almost everyone working in the Library and Information Services (LIS) sector, is the need to find work. Part of crossing this bridge involves responding to writing responses to formalised selection criteria with information about what skills and attributes the user has which are relevant to the job. This response is usually the first stage in the selection process, and needs to be completed successfully before the user gets to the stage of being interviewed – things such as interview skills will not help until after this bridge has been crossed.

While users with any significant amount of work experience – in the same field that they are trying to obtain employment in or otherwise - should be able to respond to selection criteria, those without significant work experience are often at a substantial disadvantage. As these people cannot word answers to selection criteria using work examples, they will need to use other avenues to respond.

One approach that the user could use for crossing this bridge to their future is to come up with formalised information about their capabilities by looking at the standards for all the activities which they already undertake in the hope of finding skills that match with a selection criteria on a job application. This method is not going to be as strong as having substantial work experience, but is a potential option for those who lack the experience.

A literature review was undertaken looking for papers or other information linking wording from standards with job applications, ideally in the LIS context. Several areas were investigated, starting with job descriptions and continuing education. These two areas were both full of usefully-worded standards, and were very LIS-specific. Several educational institutions were found to have checklists of skills available in various formats,

however these tended to be generic and not foocused on LIS skills. Anecdotal articles written by several people were, on the other hand, found to be too individualistic for anyone other than the author to use any wording from them. A couple of attempts had been made to use focus groups to define what skills were required, and these were extremely useful. There was still, however, a gap between what was found in prior attempts to define LIS-specific skills in terms of what was useful for job applications and the full variety of skills known by the user.

My objective for this study was to examine standards in other areas, looking for wording that could reasonably be used for answering LIS selection criteria. I was also keeping in mind that many LIS jobs are in large organisations, and some of the criteria involved (ie WH&S compliance) are often written generically. The approach taken was was to look through various other areas which were likely to contain standards with wording which, although most of it was unlikely to be LIS-specific, could potentially be either modified to be used in an LIS environment or would be useful for generically worded criteria. The areas looked at included:

- Legislation
- Volunteer activities
- Sports
- Hobbies
- Esoteric skills

One of the main methodologies used previously for identifing transferrable skills is by looking at previous job descriptions, either individually or as part of literature reviews, then trying to analyse the skills listed. This is a very good starting point, as the selection criteria for one's existing job give both a list of skills that each individual should posess, and will

give wording that can be used – even if in a modified form – in future job applications. An example of a skill from an individual job description would be something like "Demonstrated ability to support the skill development of yourself and others" (Brisbane City Council 2016, p.4). A more complex version of this method of this is to collate a number of job advertisements, and figure out the percentage of the time that each skill is required. For example, Teaching, Training and instruction skills were needed in 4.7% of LIS Job Advertisement Competency Groups (Fraser-Arnott 2013, p.6). This is extremely useful when looking at a range of skills, as the skills that are required more frequently can be concentrated upon. One good point for this information is that it is specific to LIS jobs rather than being generic informetion for job seekers. The main limitation of this type of analysis is that it focuses on the job descriptions rather than the user, so it will need to be combined with something more user-focused.

Any prior continuing education that the user may have done will also have associated standards that can be reviewed for transferrable skills, and for wording that can be used in job applications. For example, in the standard for the Diploma of Library and Information Services standard, there is a table of Employability Skills and Industry/Enterprise requirements for this qualification which is both large and detailed(Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2012, pp. 4-6). This is extremely useful information, as it is detailed, it is set up in a format easy to match up with selection criteria, and it is very specific to Library and Information Services.

Another method of defining which transferrable skills that an individual has is by coming up with a pre-packaged list of skills, and getting them to use it as a checklist so that they end up with a list of useful skills that they have. A simple example of this would be the Skills Identification Exercise from the University of Toronto (University of Toronto Career Centre

2006, pp. 1-2). A slightly more sophisticated version of this can have additional exercises, such as Saint Anselm College (2004), which has the user break down the selected skills into those which are high or low priority to incorporate into their job. Another option, used by the Government of Western Australia Department of Training and Workforce Development (2016), is to sort the skills by the user's level of competance in them. While the use of pre-packaged lists of skills is fast and easy, it has problems such as not being specific to any given job or sector in most cases; in not having every possible skill on the list; and in being subjective in terms of whether the user thinks they have a given skill and what level they have it at. Unfortunately, these skill lists are also not written specifically for LIS jobs.

One further place to look for ideas about transferrable skills is in other people's experiences. On an individual level, they are very interesting, however they are highly personalised – for someone else. A couple of examples of these are Baker and Milne (2009), and Berry (2011). A more useful variation on this theme is to get a large number of people and use them as a focus group. Using a focus group for these studies allows collection of statistics on the participants (Partridge and Menzies 2010, p.4). Consensus definition of fields of knowledge, and definition of these fields, are also possible (Partridge and Hallam 2004, p. 6). Having things like fields of knowledge with consensus definitions is a definite advantage for attempting to define and describe transferrable skills – these give a definition of a potential bridge to the future as it exists in the minds of the rest of the community. Hopefully the people that the user applies to for their next job will have similar definitions of their selection criteria in mind. This research is all the more valuable as it is specific to LIS roles. While this type of defined skilllist is extremely useful, there are plenty of other areas that definitions of transferrable skills can be found in.

One place to look for transferrable skills is in any legislation relevant to the user's workplace. One example of this is the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (Qld), as this effects everyone working in Queensland, and those working elsewhere will have an equivilent piece of legislation applicable. Although the duties of a worker (p. 40) are relatively straightforward, there are other possibilities are scatterred throughout the document. For example, under the Nature of Consultation (p. 49), it includes "to contribute to the decision-making process relating to the matter". For those who have been WH&S representatives, there is much more information, particularly on pages 56 to 59, and 62 to 65. Unfortunately, or more probably fortunately, LIS work isn't considered dangerous enough to require more specific guidance than the act.

Although much less relevant than work-related standards as they are not being used at a professional level, standards covering volunteer activities that the user is engaged in can usually also be found. As an example of this, under the by-laws for Unidive, the University of Queensland Underwater Club, the duties of the Safety Committee are "The Committee is to hold meetings, keep records, check boating and *Dive Log* records, report to the *Management Committee*, set safety guidelines for *Club* activities, monitor operations, grant authority to members with respect to boating, diving and other activities as required by the *Management Committee*, and make suggestions to the *Management Committee* as to remedial action that it may considered necessary. " (Unidive 2016, p. 8). Wording such as this can potentially be used to fill holes in the user's resume where he or she has no relevant work experience – while this isn't as strong as doing something professionally in an LIS environment, it is far better than nothing.

Sports are also governed by rules, which are simply standards under another name. While some of the wording within these standards might be useful, the useful parts are likely to

be minimal, as most of the standard will deal with the technicalities of playing the game. There may be enough here to justify at least a quick search, however. As an example, the Laws of the Game Rugby Union incorporates a player charter, which lays out the basic principles of the game, including wording such as "social and emotional aspects such as courage, loyalty, sportsmanship, discipline and teamwork" (World Rugby 2016, p. 11), and "achieve this through fairness, consistency, sensitivity and, at the highest level, management" (World Rugby 2016, p. 21). Although there is likely to be some useful wording in the rules of any sports that the user plays, anything coming from here should be considered to be much weaker than getting the same skill at a professional level in a work-related context.

Other hobbies would come accross in a similar way to volunteer positions and sports. The main difference is that the less formalised the hobby is, the less likely it is to have standards around it, and the less detailed and well thought out that any standards are likely to be. There are, however, exceptions to this. As an example, SCUBA diving has a large number of standards used for things like the structure of courses, but is also – at least in Queensland – very tightly regulated. For example, there is a section within the standard about instruction and advice to non-English speaking persons (Department of Justice and Attorney-General, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland 2011, p. 32). While most of this particular standard is a very long way from being written for someone working in an LIS environment, things such as having to communicate to someone with little or no English is a common factor.

As far as esoteric skills go, most are unlikely to be covered by standards, and those that are tend to be extensions of existing areas. For example, the Recreational Diving, Recreational Technical Diving and Snorkelling Code of Practice 2011 (Department of

Justice and Attorney-General, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland 2011) mentioned above contains information for technical diving (ie diving inside wrecks or to greater depths than is normally allowed). There is also the problem that most of the skills involved in an esoteric activity such as technical diving won't translate very well to anything outside the particular activity in question. Using skills obtained this way in a job application should be approached with extreme caution.

An example of using a standard to come up with wording for a selection criteria would be to use the Queensland recreational diving, recreational technical diving and snorkelling code of practice 2011 (Department of Justice and Attorney-General, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland 2011) to answer a criteria involving written and verbal customer service for internal and external customers. For written, internal communications, section 2.2.1 deals with active head count systems, which require paperwork logging everone onto a vessel prior to moving it (Department of Justice and Attorney-General, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland 2011, p. 11). For written communications to external customers, this is the best way to communicate complex information to non-English speaking customers (Department of Justice and Attorney-General, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland, 2011, p. 21). For internal, verbal communications, anyone being used as a lookout on a boat must be able to communicate with the rest of the crew (Department of Justice and Attorney-General, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland, 2011, p. 13). Finally, for verbal communication with external customers, communication must be possible and efficient, as poor communications are a risk factor that might reuqire increased supervision (Department of Justice and Attorney-General, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland, 2011, p. 17). From this background, a response might be:

My previous volunteer experience working on dive boats has demonstrated excellent written and verbal customer service for internal and external customers. My duties

included developing and using paperwork for use in logging customers on and off the boat; writing briefing notes for customers, some of which were also translated into other languages; communicating information with the rest of the crew; and efficient and clear verbal communication with customers. I was regarded as an excellent communicator, the paperwork that I developed is still in use several years later, and I was very good at developing relationships with customers.

There are also, however, some limitations on this technique. As an example of this, teamwork is noted as being required by a huge variety of standards, however if possible examples of this should be based on work – while teamwork is required for playing rugby (World Rugby 2016, p. 18), it is a rather different sort of teamwork from working in an LIS environment. Using the Rugby example may be appropriate for someone applying for thier first job, but after that point, any previous jobs would make far better examples.

It is also worth keeping in mind that when skills are asked for as a high level, this is going to be referring to having the skills in either the same or a very similar environment to the job being applied for. Those with esoteric skills often have them at very high levels, but they are usually only relevant in a niche area – WH&S in an LIS environment is a very different thing from trying to stay safe while cave diving, climbing mountains or so on.

For people working in the LIS Sector, as for everyone, the importance of being able to find suitable wording for answering selection criteria as the initial part of the bridge to their future job cannot be overstated, as this bridge needs to be crossed before the rest of the selection process can be attempted. Although the user would ideally have sufficient work experience to answer all the selection criteria from an LIS work perspective, some people lack this experience and need to find suitable wording from elsewhere, even if this is likely

to end up weaker than relevant work experience would be. Looking through standards for all of the activities that the user is involved in rather than just places such as their job description can give enough extra wording to potentially make a difference. Extra areas that could be used include any legislation that the user works with; any volunteer activities that the user is involved in; any sports and/or hobbies undertaken; or any other (possibly esoteric) skills that the user has picked up. Some of these areas are going to be more relevant than others depending on both the individual user's history and the job being applied for.

Given the importance of finding work, if anything can be found that gives an advantage, it should be used. If a user hasn't got useful work experience, wording from standards relevant to non-work areas of the user's life can potentially be useful, and should not be ignored.

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