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Library Informational Technology Workers: Their Demographic Characteristics, Sense of Belonging, Role and Job Autonomy

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Problem Statement

There has been considerable growth in job categories dealing with computer technologies and in hiring information technology (IT) workers in academic libraries (Association of Research Libraries, 2005; Gordon, 2003; Lynch & Smith, 2001; Simmons-Welburn, 2000). Currently, two groups of library IT workers appear to exist. One group comprises "systems librarians" who have expanded their roles by learning the technological knowledge needed to cope with changing library environments (Gordon, 2003; Lavagnino, 1997; Wilson, 1998). Some of these systems librarians have shifted their roles toward exclusively technology work as library technology becomes more complex (Gordon, 2003). The other group consists of information technology specialists who are not librarians, but who work for libraries. Their job codes include IT-programming, IT-Systems and IT-Web Development (Association of Research Libraries, 2005).

However, there exist few empirical studies regarding library IT workers beyond their tasks and responsibilities. In particular, little is known about library IT workers concerning their sense of belonging, their role, and their job autonomy. This study attempts to explore such characteristics of library IT workers.

The literature of technical workers provides a good starting point for research on library IT workers. (Barley & Orr, 1997b) characterize technical workers as those who perform technical tasks requiring both scientific knowledge and practical skills by using complex technologies. In this sense, library IT workers are technical workers. The integration of scientific knowledge and technical skills generates anomalous characteristics of technical workers, which places them in their ambiguous status in organizations (Barley, 1996; Barley & Orr, 1997a; Creighton & Hodson, 1997a; Whalley & Barley, 1997a; Zabusky, 1997a). This ambiguous status of technical workers has been addressed in discussions of certain issues, such as their sense of belonging, their role, and their job autonomy.

IT workers' sense of belonging is one of the key issues regarding their ambiguous status. The literature demonstrates that IT workers have a low sense of belonging to their organizations, which leads to questions of the credibility or loyalty of IT workers. Often considered to be outsiders, these IT workers are nicknamed "computer geeks" or "techies." As a result, IT workers tend not to be trusted by the management, due to their technical orientation or lack of social interactions with other organizational members (Bashein & Markus, 1997; Zabusky, 1997a). Frequently observing that IT workers display asocial behavior, some researchers have begun to pay specific attention to their need for social and business acumen (Bassellier & Benbasat, 2004; Enns, 2005; Pare & Jutras, 2004).

The second issue involves the role of IT workers as brokers or boundary spanners who bridge the user and technical communities (Barley, 1996). Researchers provide inconsistent interpretations regarding this role. According to (Pawlowski & Robey, 2004), IT workers perceive their broker's role as opportunities to advance in their positions by moving across organizational boundaries and forming partnerships with other units or users. On the contrary, (Moore & Love, 2005) note that the interdependence and boundary spanning of IT jobs, indeed, generate a loose relationship with their supervisors, which may lead to a minimally trustful relationship between them.

Finally, most studies show consistent findings regarding the autonomy of IT workers. That is, since IT workers have more technical knowledge and skills than administrators or managers, they often have a considerable amount of autonomy (Burris, 1993; Creighton & Hodson, 1997b; Creighton & Hodson, 1997b; Whalley & Barley, 1997b; Zabusky, 1997b; Zabusky, 1997b). Some researchers, however, notice that the autonomy of computer experts is not as great as their technical expertise because managers may feel threatened by their technical expertise (Burris, 1998; Creighton & Hodson, 1997a). (Pare & Jutras, 2004) also note that the autonomy of in-house IT workers has decreased as users have increasingly become familiar with the use of computers.

Little is known about library IT workers concerning these issues above. At most, Gordon (2003) asserts a bridging role of systems librarians and describes these librarians as translators between librarians without an IT background and IT staff without a library background. However, there is a dearth of empirical research concerning systems librarians' role as boundary spanners. Furthermore, little is known about non-librarian IT workers. There exists little research on the issue of job autonomy of library IT workers, as well. The present study attempts to fill that gap.

Purpose, Research Questions and the Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the characteristics of IT workers as organizational members. The study explores the following research questions: 1. What are the characteristics of library IT workers? 2. To what extent do library IT workers have a sense of belonging to their organizations? 3. To what extent do library IT workers have job autonomy? 4. Is there a relationship between the role of IT workers as boundary spanners and their sense of belonging? Finally 5. Are there any differences between systems librarians and non-librarian IT workers with respect to their sense of belonging, their role and their job autonomy?

The significance of this study lies in the following: first, the study provides new knowledge about library IT workers, which contributes to both Library and Information Science research and organizational research. A sense of belonging has been an important topic for organizational researchers due to its important relationship with the motivation of employees, participation in activities, job satisfaction and job performance (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003; Friedkin, 2004; Lustig & Strauser, 2002). Job autonomy is also considered as an important component of job satisfaction (Llies & Judge, 2004). Second, the study findings may benefit both IT workers and library administrators. The study may help library IT workers identify their own group characteristics. Moreover, the new knowledge of IT workers may help library administrators develop effective management approaches by understanding the characteristics of IT workers.

Methodology

A survey of library IT workers regarding their sense of belonging, their role and job autonomy will be conducted. The population consists of the IT workers in each main library of the 99 university member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in the United States. The sample of the study will be the IT workers of 30 university libraries in the mid-western and north-eastern United States. Two sampling frames will be used: the ARL directory and the library staff directories of each sample university library.

A couple of well-established scales will be used to measure the main concepts of the study. These scales include: the Perceived Cohesion Scales (PCS) (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990) and the Job Autonomy Scale (Sims, Szilagyi, & Keller, 1976). In addition, a scale developed by the author will be used to measure the concept of the role of boundary spanner. This poster session will present the primary findings of the study.

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