

What Professional Skills Will Business Information Services (BIS) Demand in the Post-Covid-19 Era?

Yoo-Seong Song
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
yoosong@illinois.edu

Abstract

Covid-19 has created enormous uncertainty and complex issues especially for the global economy and business, and the pandemic will eventually bring unprecedented and inevitable challenges to BIS as well. Studying how BIS at international companies copes with the Covid-19 crisis and prepares for the post-Covid-19 era will yield insights into how special libraries in general may evolve in the future. The insights will also help understand how LIS education must train future information professionals in the post-Covid-19 era. LIS educators must be keenly aware of the demands from employers of information professionals, and they must strengthen their curriculum by helping students acquire soft skills via more hands-on experience opportunities. There will be a growing demand for information professionals who bring exceptional soft skills such as communications, critical and analytical thinking, teamwork, and creativity.

Keywords: business information services, special libraries, professional skills, Covid-19

1. Introduction

Among many types of special libraries, business information services (BIS) have usually been quick and innovative in terms of adapting to changes and new environments. Corporations always seek to find ways to adopt new ideas and technologies in their efforts to increase efficiency and profitability; similarly, BIS in a corporate setting must present innovative services based on organizational values and goals. For this research, BIS refers to a wide range of special libraries in the business world such as corporate libraries, knowledge centers, and information service centers. Covid-19 has created enormous uncertainty and complex issues especially for the global economy and business, and the pandemic will eventually bring unprecedented and inevitable challenges to BIS as well. Studying how BIS at international companies copes with the Covid-19 crisis and prepares for the post-Covid-19 era will yield insights into how special libraries in general may evolve in the future. The insights will also help understand how LIS education must train future information professionals in the post-Covid-19 era.

The author interviewed business information professionals at five professional firms to investigate how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted BIS at their companies. All of them are globally recognized management consulting firms, especially known for their knowledge management practices. The author interviewed those who were responsible for supervising and recruiting information professionals. The interview questions centered around the theme of how Covid-19 impacted their information services, and what changes they were envisioning after the pandemic.

2. Methods

The author initially contacted managers at management consulting firms located in the United States. The author obtained the list of top 50 consulting firms ranked by Vault.com Inc., which is a leading career

advice company and whose rankings of companies are widely respected and cited. Using the member directory of the Special Libraries Association, the author identified the contact information of managers at those companies. Additionally, the author also used his personal network to contact managers of research and information services at some firms. Five managers agreed to have online interviews with me. This paper presents preliminary results from those interviews.

3. Questions

The respondents were initially asked five key questions: 1) What changes did you make during the pandemic? 2) What changes do you think will take place after the Covid-19 in the areas of personnel and service profiles? 3) What skills did you see as critical and essential in providing services during the pandemic? 4) Once the pandemic is over, what new skills would you seek from new practitioners? and 5) What suggestions do you have for LIS educators in training future information practitioners?

Once the responses were collected, the author interviewed five of the respondents to probe their responses deeper via online meetings. They elaborated their answers with more contextual information. For example, they discussed the history of their BIS over the years, which helped the author compare the impact of Covid-19 with other global issues such as the Great Recession of 2008-2009 and the Dot-Com Bubble in early 2000.

4. Results

The Covid-19 pandemic brought sudden disruption in many corporate functions, and BIS is not an exception. However, the respondents all agreed that their units did not experience much change at least in 2020. BIS in the corporate sector had already been using electronic resources for their research services, and their services had also been largely been remote, requiring less physical contact with colleagues and clients than consultants would. All respondents commented that transitioning to the remote working environment was smooth and seamless. On the other hand, no respondent believed that BIS in post-Covid-19 would return to the way the services had been delivered. They shared their opinions on some key attributes that would make future BIS successful, as the global business will have to meet the challenges of the “new normal.”

To report the results, the author will describe the respondents as follows:

- Respondent 1 (R1): Manager of Knowledge Research Services at a firm with three US offices and one international office for BIS
- Respondent 2 (R2): Manager of Information Services at a firm with three US offices in the US and three international offices for BIS
- Respondent 3 (R3): Manager of Knowledge Services at a firm with two US offices and two international offices for BIS
- Respondent 4 (R4): Senior Analyst of Business Knowledge at a firm with two US offices and three international offices for BIS
- Respondent 5 (R5): Senior Researcher of Information Services at a firm with one US office for BIS

A total of nine managers at consulting firms agreed to discuss my questions. All of them wished to stay anonymous, and thus the results of interviews for this article will not contain any identifiers of the respondents and their employers.

4.1. Changes made during the pandemic

All respondents noted that they did not have to make significant changes except helping every information professional to work remotely. All information professionals and researchers had been using laptops prior to the pandemic, and thus no additional equipment had to be purchased. Three respondents also mentioned that some of their information professionals had been working from home at least on a part-time basis prior to the pandemic, so the change to remote working was very smooth and seamless.

In addition to the transition to remote working, recruiting was negatively impacted by the pandemic. Hiring was halted indefinitely, and this brought some additional stress as the volume of research and information requests surprisingly increased in most cases. R1 and R3 responded that they had an increase in the number of research requests from internal clients, and they also experienced a small increase in online meeting requests and video calls. Additionally, they continued their infrastructure-related projects such as developing new Intranet sites and upgrading their in-house research management platforms. R3 even mentioned that the last nine months have been some of the busiest during her tenure at the company. Overall, information professionals in those companies experienced only a small number of changes while they felt their productivity improved by working remotely from home.

Interestingly, there are currently conflicting views on how remote working affects workers' productivity. In its "Future of Jobs 2020 Report," the World Economic Forum (2020) reported that 78% of business leaders were initially predicting a significant reduction in productivity because of new remote and hybrid work arrangements. However, according to John Quiggin, Professor of Economics at the University of Queensland, the transition to remote work was "remarkably" smooth (2020). Furthermore, Parke (2020) reported that productivity remained stable and even increased for many companies that transitioned to remote working during the pandemic.

4.2. Challenges experienced during the pandemic

The fact that they did not experience too much disruption did not mean that there was no challenge. Most notably, communication proved to be the common concern for all respondents, especially in the areas of training, collaboration, and client interaction.

The remote environment necessitated that information professionals be familiar with productivity software and be knowledgeable in their assigned industries. R2 commented that her company invested in providing training sessions in Tableau, SAS, Excel, and other statistics software for information professionals, so that they could become comfortable with working on an increasingly high number of data-related research projects. Without much knowledge in those software products, information professionals would experience great difficulty in understanding questions and delivering results as requested by their internal clients. R2 noted that online training on using data-driven software was more challenging than initially anticipated, compared to on-site training sessions where hands-on opportunities would have increased the interaction with the trainers and among the participants.

R4 raised some interesting points regarding online training in his remote work environment. First, online training sessions were mostly designed to be one-sided, meaning they were lectures without giving hands-on experience to participants. Second, participants almost always wished to turn their video off (either for personal or technology issues), and this contributed to the loss of interactivity as the level of engagement could not be gauged. Third, that online training sessions could be recorded helped build a database of recorded training sessions tailored to the needs of the BIS at his company specifically. Information professionals in his team could access recorded training sessions whenever necessary.

R1 and R5 expressed some concern over the lack of interactivity in problem-solving efforts. Especially new hires or those without long tenure suffered from the decreased level of mentorship traditionally provided by managers and colleagues. When co-located in the office, information professionals could easily exchange ideas and offer insights when working on difficult research questions. Information specialists often work on research projects requiring fast turnaround, and thus not being able to receive timely suggestions and coaching created resentment and possibly impacted work quality negatively.

5. Suggestions for BIS in the Post-Covid-19 Era

R2 and R3 shared great insights regarding the need for managing institutional knowledge in BIS. While the nature of their work did not change much, a remote environment may create a sense of disconnect and isolation. Unless they are self-motivated and disciplined, especially new information professionals may not be able to learn how to provide high-quality BIS in a fast-paced and remote environment without close mentoring. Re-visiting internal knowledge management (KM) practices seem to be a great place to start. KM systems which actively create, store, and share ideas and processes will be essential in the remote environment. Since mentors and colleagues cannot offer immediate suggestions, providing a robust KM platform that helps access tacit knowledge of other information professionals promptly on time is critical. KM systems must be updated and if possible, upgraded so that information professionals can easily and quickly collaborate on research projects most of which are often time-sensitive. KM skills will be critical to sustain and grow not only BIS but other special libraries altogether.

R1, R4, and R5 discussed professional maturity including ethics, professionalism, and teamwork. Although none of them experienced any serious ethical violation, they were worried that some potential ethical issues may continue unnoticed. Also, they strongly believed that being co-located in the same office contributed to stronger teamwork and growth. They learned and gained diverse perspectives of colleagues by interacting with one another for significant hours daily. Such understanding would not come just by being trained – it must come from actual experience. They feared that a remote environment would prevent colleagues from appreciating diversity in the workplace and limit positive professional growth. How to maintain teamwork via mutual respect and high ethical standards in the new working environment must be a priority question for BIS managers.

Without frequent interaction among colleagues, teamwork may suffer, and this would eventually lead to poor productivity and quality of BIS. R3 described one of her colleagues, who was hired only two months before their team completely transitioned to remote working, expressed frustration that she was feeling isolated and disconnected from the rest of the team. It was equally difficult to monitor how each information professional was performing when everyone was working from home; senior professionals and managers were greatly concerned about the mental state of their information professionals during the pandemic, but short online meetings did not prove to be helpful. Stress management, therefore, will be a very important practice when everyone is working remotely. Assuming that remote working may continue even after the pandemic is over, BIS managers must be prepared to ensure that information professionals are not suffering emotionally by working independently most of their work hours.

Still, it is too early to assess the true impact of Covid-19 on productivity in general. Although employees may spend more time working in comfortable home environments, many of them also experience mental stress. They must struggle with the feeling of isolation and uncertainty while maintaining professional commitment becomes more challenging at home. Parke discovered that the most challenging aspect of remote working was a potential slowdown in innovation (Parke, 2020). The pandemic has forced many workers to work independently at home, and it inevitably becomes difficult to maintain company culture and workplace camaraderie. According to Parke, the loss of work cohesion during the pandemic is already leading to a decreased pace of innovation. While BIS professionals must collaboratively develop

innovative service profiles in the preparation for the post-Covid-19 era, the current remote and hybrid work arrangements may hinder such efforts considerably.

Similarly, R1, R2, and R5 discussed a need for BIS to expand their service profiles boldly. If remote working becomes a norm even after the pandemic is over, then BIS would very likely be one of the first corporate functions to be converted to remote working permanently. Thus, BIS would have to prepare strategies to remain visible throughout the organization, and proactive marketing with clear value propositions would be essential. R1 suggested that information professionals should be available to volunteer for projects that may be beyond the scope of their usual roles. In doing so, they can gain new skills quickly and, at the same time, they show agility and flexibility as to how much information-related work they can deliver. On a similar note, R2 urged information professionals to be open to new ways of providing information services, however drastic and unconventional they may seem. To do so, R5 strongly urged information professionals to be willing to learn new subjects and techniques such as database management, statistical analysis, coding, and even analytics. Continuing education or re-skilling may become an important theme not only for BIS but all special libraries.

Regarding their suggestions for educators teaching students in Library and Information Sciences (LIS), there was one clear theme: soft skills are more important than ever. All respondents emphasized that proactive communication was the key to success in the remote environment. As their clients started working remotely, information professionals began to receive more research requests via email and phone calls. Instead of participating in on-site meetings with their clients, they now provide most of their research outcomes in writing as well as online presentations. LIS educators must be mindful of such developments in the workplace, and they are asked to provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their written and video communications skills. Hands-on experience using up-to-date communication tools is critical while maintaining professionalism and work ethics in the remote environment must not be overlooked.

6. Conclusion

Due to the small size of the interviewees, this study presents opinions of a small community and thus cannot be generalized. However, given that consulting firms are one of the largest and active recruiters of information professionals and LIS students, their opinions matter significantly and help shape the future of LIS education. The preliminary results of this qualitative study offer practical and realistic views on how corporate information practitioners must adapt to the “new normal.”

The pandemic has brought unexpected turbulence not only to BIS but the entire global business. In the post-Covid-19 era, only those who adapt to the new normal will survive. Most information service units have been relatively better prepared for remote working compared to other corporate functions; however, it does not guarantee that BIS will continue to thrive in the post-pandemic. Although a high degree of uncertainty still exists, BIS and other types of special libraries must be prepared to overcome challenges caused by the new normal, even if such changes seem painful and sometimes even frustrating. LIS educators must be keenly aware of the demands from employers of information professionals, and they must strengthen their curriculum by helping students acquire soft skills via more hands-on experience opportunities. There will be a growing demand for information professionals who bring exceptional soft skills such as communications, critical and analytical thinking, teamwork, and creativity.

Analyzing the pre-Covid-19 and post-Covid-19 eras, Sneader and Singhai (2021) wrote that the pandemic would expedite the adoption of digital transformation (also called “The Fourth Industrial Revolution”). All businesses and organizations must be ready to accept the new reality and quickly change the way of running their operations. BIS has been nimble in transforming information services over the decades, and new challenges are now awaiting all information professionals. New technologies such as artificial intelligence and digitization may attempt to replace information professionals’ roles. One of the

respondents noted that her company might restructure information services unit by placing data analytics team at the core while reducing the number of information professionals gradually. It is imperative for information professionals to search for new frontiers and seize opportunities as soon as we enter the post-Covid-19 era.

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