

## Digital Futures! How Ready are Academic Librarians of the North East?

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Librarians, especially academic librarians have had to cope with a lot of changes in their profession. They are especially affected by the onslaught of information technology which they cannot ignore anymore. There is a lot for them to cope with and they are having to change their mentality to adapt to this new environment. Different librarians are dealing with information technology differently. This article studies the attitude towards technology of some academic librarians who had attended a Refresher Course on Database Management, at the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Its findings are that academic librarians are enthusiastic about IT though they still have feelings of inadequacy and that they are willing to face this new challenge bravely.

### 0 INTRODUCTION

There is a new belief amongst many today, and that is that "librarians are no longer needed and that libraries are dull and replaceable. There are some who view the future of libraries and consequently of librarians, as determined by technology and who therefore predict a diminished role for both in the digital future." (Deegan & Tanner, 2002, 209, 210).

Digital Future! Digital Librarians! Libraries Without Walls! Paperless Society! words that are making a lot of librarians (including academic librarians) cringe. Especially those among the older generation. As if their routine work is not taking enough of their time and energy - academic librarians are now being confronted with a new problem in information technology. A 'monster' of a problem -out to replace/displace them. Should they embrace it gracefully or reject it totally?

According to Biddiscombe (1996, 5), "One certainty is that there is no option than to accept that change is inevitable. It is not possible to remain as we are; it will be necessary for everyone to re-examine traditional methods and systems in the light of end-user needs and demands." The verdict is thus clear. You either

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embrace technology or lose your job. Yes it can be as drastic as that (as the first few sentences of the article have stressed).

Librarians everywhere have to face this uncomfortable situation. Different librarians are being affected differently by information technology. Perhaps one of the most common attitudes that they have is that of fear. Technophobia, computer phobia and stress are some of the common words the whispering of which is growing louder in the many articles and books that are being published rapidly.

The academic librarians of the North-East cannot escape the above phenomenon either. They are as affected by information technology as librarians in other parts of India and the rest of the world, if not more. For, many of them have developed an attitude of complacency towards their work and are being rudely nudged out of it by the inevitable appearance of information technology right under their noses.

The author was able to get a glimpse of the impact that technology was having on some of the academic librarians of North-East India at a refresher course that was held recently.

The Refresher Course with the theme, 'Database Management,' was held at the Department of Library and Information Science, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong from the 8th to the 28th of November 2002. There were twenty-two participants including four lecturers.

For the purpose of this study only the librarians were taken, the lecturers were excluded. Though a majority of the librarians were from the North-East, there were also participants from as far as Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh. These too were included in the study in order to acquire some variety in opinions. While most of the participants were working in college libraries, there was also one working in the university.

The method used was a questionnaire. The author who was herself a participant was also able to interact with and observe the participants as a result of which additional information was obtained.

Eight of the libraries were found to possess computers. Some of the participants however complained that though computers were supposed to be allotted to them, the machines were actually kept in the offices of the Principals or Heads of Departments. Thus technically, their libraries did not possess computers. The ten participants who did not have computers agreed that computers should be

Table 1

Number of male participants		13
Number of female participants	2	5
Total		18

**Table 2:** *Geographical scattering (addresses) of participants*

Place	Number of Participants
Assam	10 (2 females)
Manipur	4 (1 female)
Meghalaya	1 (1 female)
Uttaranchal	2 (1 female)
Himachal Pradesh	1 (male)

**Table 3:** *Age of participants*

Age	Number of participants
Below 40 years	4 (3 females)
Between 40-49 years	6 (1 female)
Between 50-59 years	8 (1 female)

**Table 4:** *Work Experience*

Less than 10 years	4 (2 females)
Between 10-19 years	5 (1 female)
Between 20-25 years	4 (2 females)
More than 25 years	5

**Table 5:** *Designation*

Librarian	15
Assistant Librarian	3

introduced in their libraries. They all must have been motivated by the words of the experts who dared them to confront their principals for their 'right.' It was found during informal talks that some felt it was not necessary in their tenure as they were about to retire. The participants also unanimously agreed that they would attend training courses to develop their computer skills. Some were willing to learn even from their own children.

Twelve of the participants (out of which were four females) answered that they had some kind of training in handling computers. But the author's observation throughout the practical sessions was that most were nervous around the machines and needed help.

A majority (sixteen) of the participants found information technology to be interesting. They certainly seemed to mean it for they paid a lot of attention to and asked a lot of questions of the experts who were able to make them understand the finer points of IT in a most simple and down-to-earth manner. Every effort was made to equip the participants (to some extent) for any eventuality in dealing with computers. Right from the ability to choose the best hardware and software, to the ability to solve technical problems (do-it-yourself), all were explained beautifully.

However, two of the participants, both males above fifty years were honest in saying that they found technology complicated.

Excitement was the feeling that six (three females) of the participants had when dealing with computers. Another six (two females) felt pleasure. While two males felt both excitement and pleasure when handling computers. One male participant confessed to a feeling of inadequacy in training when dealing with computers though he too felt excitement and pleasure when handling one. The older generation (three males, 50-59 years) could just about tolerate information technology and had none of the gushing feelings of the younger lot.

The strain of keeping up with all the new developments was honestly admitted to by seven (four females) of the participants who agreed that the pace at which new technology is being introduced into their workplace is too fast. Surprisingly this group comprised people between the ages of thirty-five and forty years. Fifteen participants also felt that library employees are expected to learn too many new things too fast. Seven male participants in the age range of forty-one to fifty-nine years felt that the pace of the introduction of new technology into their workplace is just right. Four (one female) participants on the other hand felt that technology is creeping in too slowly. Surprisingly again, this included people who were above fifty years.

The participants were made acquainted with a few library softwares from amongst the hundreds available. Special emphasis was put on CDS/ISIS which according to most of the experts is the better one because it is cheap and flexible. The participants (thirteen) seemed to be quite convinced about its usefulness as they were found to be listening attentively during the lectures and taking part enthusiastically during the practical demonstrations.

The readymade software LIBSYS was also pushed forward by some of the experts and its easy format had the support of three participants.

Some of the experts also talked, in passing, about the "even better than LIBSYS" software, SOUL. Though there were no demonstrations on its greatness, yet one of the participants was convinced that it was the one for her library.

One of the participants who was quite well versed with computers and who used the software TechLib felt that the choice of software depends on the requirements of the library and the funds available.

Perhaps the refresher course helped the participants get over (to some extent) the fear of information technology that they had brought along. Eleven were already motivated while five felt that the duration was too short for learning new things. Two of the participants though motivated felt that the duration was too short. "It should be at least thirty days," said one. So much for enthusiasm!

Since there were less female participants it was difficult to make a comparison of the attitudes gender wise. However, even the five that were there seemed to be quite forward thinking and in fact only one was found to be lacking training in computer handling. Age wise, some surprises did spring up in that some of the younger participants (between thirty-five and forty years) confessed that the pace at which new technology is being introduced into their work area is too fast. Whereas some from the higher age bracket (above fifty years) actually felt the pace was too slow.

Thus, the academic librarians in the North-East are not lagging behind in their enthusiasm about the new technology that is being introduced in their libraries. They are not averse to it and are eager to develop themselves to meet the challenge. It remains to be seen however, how well they cope with the situation. The librarians will of course need the serious cooperation of the principals of their colleges without which their hands will remain tied. This they will be able to achieve only if they assert themselves and prove that they are not mere keepers of books but are as professional as the teachers, if not more. Perhaps actions will speak more than words.

#### REFERENCES

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