

Digital Preservation at Oxford and Cambridge

A collaborative research project to evaluate and provide sustainable recommendations for our digital preservation programmes

Memory Makers: Digital preservation skills and how to get them

Posted on [6 December, 2018](#) by [ehalvarsson](#)

The Memory Makers Conference was hosted at [Amsterdam Museum](#) in the Netherlands 29th-30th November. Bodleian Libraries' Policy and Planning Fellow, Edith Halvarsson, attended.

[The Memory Makers conference](#) in Amsterdam brought together training providers from the private, higher education and continuing education sector to discuss digital preservation skills, how to get them (and how to retain them).

In my experience, research on skills development is often underrepresented at digital preservation conferences, and when such talks are included the attendance tend to be lower than for technology based strands. However, taking a 1.5 day deep dive into this topic is one of the most interesting and thought-provoking activities I've done this year and I am happy that [NDE](#) and [DPC](#) decided to highlight this area by giving it its own conference. So in this blog I wanted to summarise some of the thoughts that have stayed with me since coming back from Amsterdam

The expectation gap

'The expectation gap' is something which we have discussed in a roundabout way among the Fellows over the past years, but it was a presentation by Dr Sarah Higgins which really put words onto this phenomena for me. The notion of an 'expectation gap' also nicely frames why we need to think seriously about lifelong learning and competency frameworks.

Sarah has been teaching Information Management to Masters Students at Aberystwyth University (Wales) for almost a decade and has been observing both the development of the programme and the career trajectories of students graduating into the field. In this time there's been a growing gap between what employers expect of students in terms of digital preservation skills and what certified MA programmes can offer.

The bodies which certify Information Management courses in the UK (CILIP and ARA) still only require minimal digital skills as part of their competency frameworks. This has made it challenging to argue for new and mandatory digital preservation related modules on UK MA programmes. MA programmes have definitely shifted to begin meeting the digital preservation challenge, but they are still at an early stage.

So while UK Information Management courses continue to frame a lot of teaching around physical collections, the expectations of digital skills from organisations hiring recent graduates from these programmes has skyrocketed. This has made the gap between reality and fantasy even larger. There has been a growing trend for organisations to hire new graduates and expecting them to be the magic bullet; the readymade lone experts in all areas of digital preservation who do not require any further development or support ever again. Many of Sarah's graduates who began working on digital preservation/curation/archiving projects after graduation were essentially 'set up to fail' – not a nice or fair place to be at in your first job.



— Dr Natalie Harrower:

<https://twitter.com/natalieharrower/status/1068124988358709254>

Developing skills frameworks

To meet the challenge of unclear competency expectations, Sharon McMeekin (Head of Training and Skills at DPC) called for continued development of skills frameworks such as [DigCurV](#). While [DigCurV](#) has been immensely valuable (we have for example drawn on it continuously in the DPOC project), the digital preservation field has matured a lot over the past couple of years and new learnings could now be incorporated into the model. A useful new addition to [DigCurV](#), Sharon argued, would be to create more practitioner levels which reflects the expected skills progressions over 1-10 years for new graduates entering the field.

If such frameworks were taken on by certifying bodies, it could potentially temper both unrealistic job descriptions and help staff argue for professional development opportunities.

Lifelong learning

In her talk, Sarah strongly argued that we should expect recent Information Management graduates to also require more workplace based training after graduation. A two-year MA programme is not the endpoint for learning, especially in a quickly moving and developing field. This means that ongoing learning opportunities must also be considered by hiring organisations.

It was refreshing to hear from the [British Library](#) who strongly subscribe to this idea. The British Library team teach introductory courses on digital preservation and drop in lab sessions for all library staff on a yearly basis.



— Micky Lindlar:
<https://twitter.com/MickyLindlar/status/1068155027108306944>

But the digital preservation team also engages with a wide range of training opportunities that are perhaps not considered traditional Information Management skills. Maureen Pennock (Head of Digital Preservation at the BL) argued that skills for digital preservation are

not necessarily unique to the field, and can be acquired in places which you may not initially have considered. Such skills include project management, social media management, presentation delivery, and statistical analysis. Although it should be noted that Maureen also strongly stated that no one person should be expected to be an expert in all these areas at the same time.

Learning collaboratively.

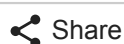
Another set of presentations which I really enjoyed was focused on “collaborative learning”. Puck Huijtsing ([Netwerk Oorlogsbronnen](#)) challenged why we are so attached to lecture style learning which we are familiar with from school and higher education. She argued that collaborative learning has been shown to be a successful model when training people to take on a new craft (and she believes that digital preservation is a craft). Puck went on to elaborate on Amsterdam’s strong history of craft guilds and how these taught and shared new skills, arguing that it could potentially be a more accessible and sustainable model for workplace based training.

A number of successful training models presented by the [Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision](#) then illustrated how collaborative hands-on workshops can be delivered in practice. In one workshop series delivered by the institute, participants were asked to undertake small projects which focused on discreet digital collection material which they had a pre-existing relationship with. The institute’s research indicates that this model is successful in aiding retention and uptake of digital preservation and archiving skills. These are workshops which we are also keen to test out at Bodleian Libraries next year to see if they are received well by staff.

Summary.

It is clear from the Memory Makers conference that there are a lot of people out there who care about learning and professional development in the digital preservation field. This blog only summarises a small section of all the excellent work that was presented over 1.5 days, and I would encourage others to look at presentation slides and the Twitter hash for the event ([#MemoryMakers18](#)) if this is a topic which interests you as well.

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