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The Status of Librarians' Communication Skills and the Effective Factors in Public Libraries

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Abstract

The main aim of this survey was to assess the status of librarians' communication skills in public libraries of Mashhad, Iran. The research population included all the librarians (n = 70) employed in the public libraries. The desired sample (n=59) was selected based on Krejcie and Morgan's sample size table through simple random sampling. A researcher-made questionnaire of communication skills was used to collect data. The collected data were analyzed via the SPSS using descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings showed that the level of the librarians' communication skills was undesirable and that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the librarians' communication skills in terms of demographic and professional characteristics.

Keywords

Communication Skills, Librarians, Public Libraries, Mashhad, Iran.

Introduction

Establishing effective communication is not only one of the key elements of individual life, but it is also a significant element in organizational success because "communication skills" refer to the establishment of relationships with others in an efficient and appropriate way to achieve the desired goals (Wood, 2010). In this case, the success of an organization depends on the communication skills of all its employees because their communication skills are related to the attitude and satisfaction of their customers. In other words, effective communication leads to enthusiasm and positive thinking in customers. However, ineffective communication in commercial markets leads to inattention and negative attitudes and creates a state of violence in customers (Percy & Rossiter, 1980). In addition, having communication skills in the workplace can increase the quality of the relationship, the satisfaction of the audience and his/her attraction and ultimately contribute to the increase in productivity in the profession and organization. Mathis (2007) mentioned that lack of communication skills increases costs and ultimately reduces the effectiveness of the organization. Hence, Artur (1999) described the existence of communication skills for those dealing with clients highly significant. Therefore, one of the significant points for organizations, and in particular public libraries dealing with a wide range of clients, is the communication skills of their employees which can play an important role in the success of the organization. Service organizations, which are always seeking to provide maximum satisfaction to their clients, are no exception to this. Such organizations highly consider the communication skills of their employees and continually train these skills to their employees because when employees have these skills, they will feel more job satisfaction and will have more effective performance (Karimi et al., 2012).

Library is one of the service organizations and librarians are a group of service professionals. Based on Ranganathan's laws, the main mission of library is to serve people and the quality of their relationship with their clients is one of the factors that can be useful in advancing this mission (Ashrafi Rizi et al., 2012). Since the clients of public libraries are heterogeneous and their librarians face a variety of interactions, having communication skills for librarians in public libraries are very important.

Meanwhile, previous studies showed that librarians are ineffective in communicating effectively with users which can affect their performance and, as a result, they cannot be successful librarians, despite having sufficient knowledge. As Karimi et al. (2012) concluded half of the users' complaints were due to a weakness in the relationship between librarian and user and indeed because of a misunderstanding between them. Hua (2011) observed that more than 80% of complaints from library were due to the lack of appropriate communication between librarians and users. Accordingly, the study of the status of communication skills of librarians and its effective factors is of great importance that the present study aimed to investigate it.

Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted on interpersonal and communication skills among different groups of individuals, such as management students (Srivastava, 2018), pharmacists and pharmacy students (Aghakouchakzadeh et al., 2018), medical students (Vogel, Meyer, & Harendza, 2018), nursing students (Oliveira & Braga, 2016), accounting students (Oussii & Klibi, 2017), and physicians (Kee, Khoo, Lim, & Koh, 2018). However, a brief review of the related studies regarding the librarians and LIS professionals is given blow in a chronological order.

The analysis of 220 job advertisements during 1973-1998 carried out by Lynch and Smith (2001) showed that until 1998 all academic library jobs generally contained communication skills, particularly verbal and written communication skills. In a study at Liverpool John Moores University, Ashcroft (2004) concluded that communication, negotiation, and collaboration skills were important skills for information professionals in the electronic information environment. In a Delphi research, Feret and Marcinek (2005) attempted to identify the skills required for librarians to satisfy future needs. The results showed that the necessary skills and characteristics for academic librarians included skills such as communication skills, managerial skills, information technology skills, etc. of which communication skills were of greater importance. Through an interview with 34 academic librarians in Australia, Mills and Lodge (2006) also concluded that using verbal and non-verbal skills was of great importance in librarians' success. Chan (2006) found that in a highly technological environment, the main skills

needed for public librarians included communication, and interpersonal skills (written and verbal communication skills); in fact, an undesirable performance in any of these skills entails an action plan for improving the essential skills. Gerolimos and Konsta (2008) examined 200 job advertisements during 2006-2007 to identify the needed skills for modern librarians. They found 38 skills and qualifications for modern librarians, while the item of communication skills was reported in more than 60 percent of the advertisements; therefore, the researchers concluded that communication skills were necessary for modern librarians. Choi and Rasmussen (2009) investigated the qualifications and skills required for professionals in academic libraries by analyzing the job advertisements in College and Research Libraries News during 1999-2007. After their analysis, it was found that communication and interpersonal skills were essential skills for the librarians. To identify the key skills needed for "librarian 2.0", Partridge, Lee, and Munro (2010) performed focus groups by participating 81 members of the LIS profession in Australia. It was observed that communication skills were among the critical skills for the "librarian 2.0". In another research project by Partridge, Menzies, Lee & Munro (2010), 76 librarians participated in focus groups to explore the skills needed for current librarians. The librarians believed that traits such as interpersonal and communication skills were critical to become a successful librarian in the future. In another survey, Karimi et al. (2012) also reported the moderate level of communication skills in librarians employed in the universities of Isfahan, Iran. In this case, the librarians also had better skills in non-verbal communication than verbal communication. Meanwhile, the impact of the academic librarians' communication skills on delivering reference services was investigated by Akor and Udensi (2013) using the questionnaire and interview. In their study, the findings suggested that the reference librarians and users did not possess adequate communication skills due to language or semantic barriers. Ameen (2013) also investigated the effect of teaching communication skills as part of LIS education at the Department of LIS at University of Punjab, Lahore. The results of this web-based survey showed that most students realized the necessity of learning communication skills for LIS professionals, and that this course might have a good effect on the personality development of LIS students; however, their written communication skills did not significantly improve as such.

Through a questionnaire-based survey, Rahnama, Fattahi, and Dayani (2015) found that the academic librarians in Iran had a good level of communication skills. In addition, no significant relationship was found between education level and experience with the librarians' level of communication skills. Seyyed Hosseini, Khosravi, and Basirian Jahromi (2016) also evaluated the level of communication skills of Bushehr academic librarians from the perspectives of the users and librarians. Their results indicated the fairly good communication skills of the librarians; however, there was no difference in the level of librarians' communication skills in terms of demographic characteristics.

Research Objectives

- Assessing the status of librarians' communication skills;
- Determining the status of librarians' communication skills based on their demographic and professional characteristics (i.e. gender, level of education, and professional experience).

Methodology

The statistical population of this survey was all librarians working in 20 public libraries in Mashhad, Iran (n = 70). The sample size was calculated based on the Krejcie and Morgan's sample size table (n = 59). The sample members were all selected by simple random sampling method. Through reviewing the related literatures (e.g., Jennerich, 1981; Hartley, 1999; Rahnama, Fattahi, and Dayani, 2015), a researcher-made questionnaire of communication skills was designed. The questionnaire included two categories. In the first category, "verbal communication skills" included seven components and thirteen statements. These components included remembering, avoidance of early detection, verbal reflection of feelings, restate or paraphrase comments, use of incentives, acceptable ending of negotiation, opinion and suggestion. In the second category, "non-verbal communication skills" included seven components and 31 statements. These components consisted of eye contact, gestures, comfortable physical state, facial expression and tone of voice, listening, adjusting emotions and message comprehension. The statements of the questionnaire were designed in a 20-point scale (1 = lowest score and 20 = highest score). Content validity of the

questionnaire was approved by some experts in Library and Information Science. High reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed by calculating its Cronbach's alpha coefficient. In this research, SPSS $_{23}$ was used to analyze the data. The results of Shapiro-Wilk test for measuring the normality of the data showed that the investigated research variables had normal distribution so that parametric tests were used in this study.

Findings

Demographic and Professional Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the distribution of the respondents in terms of gender, age group, education level, and professional experience. The table indicates that the majority of the respondents were female (83%) and the largest age group was between 36 to 45 years of age (50.8%). Furthermore, a large number of the respondents had a bachelor's degree (45.8%), and more than half of the respondents had 11-20 years of professional experience (50.8%).

Table 1. Demographic and Professional Characteristics of Respondents

Variable		No.	%
Gender	Female	49	83.1
	Male	10	16.9
	26-35 years	21	35.6
Age Group	36-45 years	30	50.8
	46-55 years	8	13.6
	Associate	8	13.6
Education Level	Bachelor	27	45.8
	Master	24	40.7
	1-10 years	22	37.3
Professional Experience	11-20 years	30	50.8
	More than 20 years	7	11.9

The Status of Librarians' Communication Skills

The questionnaire of communication skills had 44 statements in the score range of 1-20. Accordingly, the highest mean was 880 and the lowest mean was 44. In order to evaluate the librarians' communication skills, the desired level of 80% was considered. Therefore, the desired level of communication skills was calculated to be 704 which was obtained by multiplying the score of 16 in the number of statements in the questionnaire (44). As shown in Table 2, the mean of the librarians' communication skills was lower than the desired level. One- sample t test was used to generalize the results from the sample to the population and to compare the mean of communication skills with the desired level. Based on the results of the test with 95% confidence level, there was a significant difference between the communication skills of librarians and the desired mean, so that the librarians' communication skills were significantly lower than the desirable level.

Table 2. Comparison of the Mean of Librarians' Communication Skills with Desirable Level

Variable	Mean	SD	t	Sig.	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Communication skills	678.47	58.75	-3.33	0.00[*]	-25.52	-40.83	-10.21

Note: SD=Standard deviation; df=degree of freedom=58

Since the communication skills were classified into two general categories of "verbal communication skills" and "non-verbal communication skills", the status of communication skills' components was studied and compared with the desired level (the product of multiplying number of statements in each component by the score 16) in order to have a more accurate and thorough analysis (Table 3 and Table 4).

Table 3. Comparison of the Mean of Librarians' Verbal Communication Skills with Desirable Level

Variable	Mean	SD	t	Sig.	Desirable level	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Remembering	13.64	4.08	-4.42	0.00*	16	-2.35	-3.42	-1.29
Avoidance of Early Detection	28.64	6.54	-3.93	0.00*	32	-3.35	-5.06	-1.64
Verbal Reflection of Feelings	52.32	8.75	-10.24	0.00*	64	-11.67	-13.95	-9.39
Restate or Paraphrase Comments	15.45	2.25	-1.84	0.07	16	-0.54	-1.12	0.04
Use of Incentives	15.13	2.55	-2.59	0.01*	16	-0.86	-1.53	-0.19
Acceptable Ending of Negotiation	15.91	2.66	-0.24	0.80	16	-0.08	-0.77	0.60
Opinion and Suggestion	47.61	5.23	-0.57	0.56	48	-0.38	-1.75	0.93
Total	188.72	23.56	-6.28	0.00*	208	-19.27	-25.41	-13.12

Note: SD=Standard deviation; df=degree of freedom=58

Table 4. Comparison of the Mean of Librarians' Non-Verbal Communication Skills with Desirable Level

Variable	Mean	SD	t	Sig.	Desirable Level	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Eye Contact	15.42	2.53	-1.74	0.08	16	-0.57	-1.23	0.08
Gestures	49.32	5.17	1.96	0.05	48	1.32	-0.26	2.67
Comfortable Physical State	32.88	3.11	2.17	0.03*	32	0.88	0.07	1.69
Facial Expression, Tone of Voice	33.44	2.96	3.73	0.00*	32	1.44	0.66	2.21
Listening	123	11.87	-3.23	0.00*	128	-5	-8.09	-1.90
Adjusting Emotions	103.89	12.25	-5.08	0.00*	112	-8.10	-11.29	-4.90
Message Comprehension	123.77	13.06	-2.48	0.01*	128	-4.22	-7.62	-0.81
Total	481.74	39.21	-2.79	0.00*	496	-14.25	-24.47	-24.47

Note: SD=Standard deviation; df=degree of freedom=58

According to the results of the test, there was no significant difference between the mean of "restate or paraphrase comments ", "acceptable ending of negotiation", "opinion and suggestion," "eye contact," and "gestures" and the desirable level. However, the mean of "comfortable physical state" and "facial expression; tone of voice" were significantly higher than the desired mean. Whereas, the mean of remaining components were significantly lower than the desired mean. In general, the mean of communication skills and the mean of verbal and nonverbal skills of librarians were evaluated below the desired level. In addition, the verbal skills had a higher mean difference with the desirable level compared to the non-verbal skills.

The Status of Librarians' Communication Skills in terms of Demographic and Professional Characteristics

To compare the mean of communication skills in terms of gender, two –sample t-test was done. It was found that there was no significant difference between females and males in this regard (Table 5).

Table 5. Comparison of the Mean of Librarians' Communication Skills by Gender

Variable	Gender	No.	Mean	SD	Levene's Test for equality of Variances		df	t	Sig.	Mean Difference
					F	Sig.				
Communication Skills	Female	49	681.95	60.69			57	1.00	0.31	20.55
	Male	10	661.40	47.01	0.15	0.70				

Note: SD=Standard deviation; df=degree of freedom=57

To determine the level of librarians' communication skills with different levels of education, a one-way ANOVA was performed. The results of the test showed that there was no significant difference between the librarians' level of communication skills (Table 6).

Table 6. Comparison of the Mean of Librarians' Communication Skills by Education Level

Variable	Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	F	Sig.
Communication Skills	Between Groups	4916.06	2	0.70	0.49
	Within Groups	195318.64	56		
	Total	200234.71	58		

Furthermore, the results of the analysis of variance showed no significant difference between the communication skills of librarians with various professional experiences (Table 7).

Table 7. Comparison of the Mean of Librarians' Communication Skills by Professional Experience

Variable	Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	F	Sig.
	Between Groups	1033.73	2		
Communication Skills	Within Groups	199200.97	56	0.14	0.86
	Total	200234.71	58		

Discussion and Conclusion

Todays, various governmental and private organizations, in particular service-oriented and customer-oriented organizations, are looking for ways to improve the quality of their services. In public libraries as one of the diverse service-provider organizations, librarians can improve the quality of services and promote the organization through establishing proper communication with clients using communication skills. Therefore, addressing the communication skills of librarians in public libraries is of great importance. Hence, the present study aimed to assess the status of communication skills of librarians in public libraries. In general, the findings of this study showed that the communication skills of librarians in public libraries of Mashhad, Iran were below the desired level. This finding was in line with the results of several studies (Karimi et al., 2012; Rahnama et al., 2015; Ashrafi Rizi et al., 2012; Seyyed Hosseini et al., 2016) so that in these studies, the communication skills of librarians were not evaluated as the desired level. In addition, the results of this study indicating that the librarians had a better status in having nonverbal skills, were consistent with Karimi et al. (2012) and Rahnama et al. (2015). Although verbal communication is one of the key elements of communication (Haizer, 2005), according to the findings of this study, librarians were weaker in verbal skills, which could be due to the fact that learning verbal communication skills requires more education than non-verbal communication skills (Khorshidi, 2009). Perhaps, it can be said that the librarians of public libraries may not have sufficient education either during their education or during their employment. Another finding was that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of communication skills of librarians in terms of demographic characteristics, as there was no significant difference in the level of communication

skills of female and male librarians. This finding was in accordance with the findings of Salimi et al. (2013) but inconsistent with the findings of Vogel et al. (2018). According to Richardson (2000), the communication skills of individuals are affected by a variety of variables including their age, gender, occupation, and position. Hargie (1997) argued that the factors affecting interpersonal communication include individual factors (personality, gender, age, and appearance) and situational factors (roles, rules, skills and problems, language, physical environment, and culture). It seems that the role of other unrecognized variables in this study as a moderating variable in the effect of demographic factors on communication skills has led to such an outcome. In addition, another reason for this lack of difference can be related to the fact that according to the findings of this study, the level of communication skills in both male and female groups was undesirable and significant difference between two groups was not observable. Therefore, further research is needed in this field.

In addition, there was no significant difference between the level of communication skills of the librarians according to the education level which is inconsistent with the findings of Salimi et al. (2013). It seems that the higher education system has failed to play a significant role in improving the level of communication skills of the librarians. However, the individuals are expected to benefit from growing skills and competences in terms of education at varying degrees in different levels of education.

Contrary to expectation, there was no significant difference between the level of the librarians' communication skills according to the professional experience. It seems that professional experience and work in the library environment have failed to provide librarians with a very useful experience in communication skills and better interaction with users. In other words, the work environment and the librarians' duties for gaining communication skills have not been challenging or reinforcing. In addition, it is concluded that the in-service training in this area was not provided to the librarians or was not at a desired and adequate level.

Thus, according to the results and considering the importance of communication skills for the librarians of public libraries and its role in providing services and library position, the managers and authorities of public libraries need to pay attention to this

issue and plan for the teaching of communication skills especially verbal skills to the librarians. In this regard, the implementation of workshops and training courses, under the supervision of groups and professional associations, changes in courses related to the communication skills and interaction with users, appropriate teaching for the students of the LIS field during the course of study, and holding in-service training to improve and enhance the communication skills of the librarians are the main responsibilities of the managers of public libraries. Further, the allocation of a specific budget for all costs of these activities is recommended.

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