

## [At the Corner of Personality and Competencies: Exploring Professional Personas for Librarians](#)

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### **Abstract:**

Cultural representations of the profession are familiar to librarians. Stereotypes are common, and when librarians appear in the media—whether in song, television, or film—there are certain assumptions about what librarians should look like (e.g., cardigans, buns, and glasses) as well as how they should act (e.g., timidity, rigid adherence to rules). One common theme is the personalities of library workers, and this chapter will examine how assumptions and stereotypes about personality do not necessarily hold true in the field—and even across specialties within it. This discussion will also provide an explanation and exploration of a library worker’s “professional persona,” which is defined as the intersection of an individual’s personality, competencies, and professional interests. An individual’s persona is a complex system that might include some traits, perspectives, and tendencies that align with librarian stereotypes and some that are at odds with those stereotypes. This chapter will situate the concept of persona in the existing literature on core competencies and career selection and then examine the implications of personas in the profession with a specific eye toward organizational design.

**Keywords:** Librarianship | Librarians | Core competences | Professional Personas | Stereotypes

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of chapter below**

# At the Corner of Personality and Competencies

## Exploring Professional Personas for Librarians

*Lauren Pressley, Jenny Dale, and Lynda Kellam*

Cultural representations of the profession are familiar to librarians. Stereotypes are common, and when librarians appear in the media—whether in song, television, or film—there are certain assumptions about what librarians should look like (e.g., cardigans, buns, and glasses) as well as how they should act (e.g., timidity, rigid adherence to rules). One common theme is the personalities of library workers, and this chapter will examine how assumptions and stereotypes about personality do not necessarily hold true in the field—and even across specialties within it. This discussion will also provide an explanation and exploration of a library worker’s “professional persona,” which is defined as the intersection of an individual’s personality, competencies, and professional interests. An individual’s persona is a complex system that might include some traits, perspectives, and tendencies that align with librarian stereotypes and some that are at odds with those stereotypes. This chapter will situate the concept of persona in the existing literature on core competencies and career selection and then examine the implications of personas in the profession with a specific eye toward organizational design.

Our interest in this area has grown from the collaborative work that we have done on presentations and writing projects. We find that we collaborate effectively because each of us brings a unique persona to the team. For instance, when preparing for a recent presentation on personas and core competencies, we found that we naturally split the work based on our personas. Pressley, who focuses on systems and design thinking, imme-

diately jumped in on the design of the presentation and on how our idea of personas could apply to organizational design. Kellam, our relationship builder, took on the task of talking with colleagues and soliciting short video interviews from other librarians for our presentation. Dale, who has a preference for teaching and performing, took on the role of breaking down content and concepts for effective presentation to our audience. The authors have found that our personas come to bear on the work that we do in our own institutions as well, both in the roles that we play and in the ways that we contribute to teams.

## Literature Review

This framing of personas is partially based on the idea of applying the concept of core competencies to individual professionals. This concept, which originated in the business world, can be traced back to a 1990 article in the *Harvard Business Review* entitled, “The Core Competence of the Corporation.” The authors, C. K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel, describe core competencies as those competencies of an organization that can be applied in various markets, that “make a significant contribution to the perceived customer benefits of the end product,” and that “should be difficult for competitors to imitate.”<sup>1</sup> One of their examples that still resonates today is the corporation 3M, whose lasting success is based on a core competence in producing sticky tape.<sup>2</sup> In her book *168 Hours*, author Laura Vanderkam argues that people have core competencies, just as companies do. Vanderkam applies the Prahalad and Hamel definition to individuals: “An individual’s core competencies are best thought of as abilities that can be leveraged across multiple spheres. They should be important and meaningful. And they should be things we do best and that others cannot do nearly as well.”<sup>3</sup>

Based on Vanderkam’s definition, core competencies are the activities a person can leverage the most effectively and should spend most of their time doing. For example, Venus Williams is best served in her career by focusing on tennis, while employing someone else to design her website. Vanderkam focuses primarily on core competencies as they relate to home and time management, but these principles can also be applied to the

workplace in terms of the types of jobs individuals are good at and enjoy doing as opposed to the types of jobs those same individuals consider dull or tedious. Each individual's core competencies intersect with personality and professional interests to form a professional persona.

Librarianship as a profession has shown an interest in identifying professional competencies. In fact, the American Library Association (ALA) has published a statement on core competencies entitled *ALA's Core Competencies of Librarianship*.<sup>4</sup> Examples of these competencies include knowing and being able to employ "the ethics, values, and foundational principles of the library and information profession" and "the principles involved in the organization and representation of recorded knowledge and information."<sup>5</sup> Unlike Vanderkam's idea of personal core competencies, which focuses on honing a small number of competencies that an individual can do best, this list is a broad framework of what students graduating from ALA-accredited library schools "should know and, where appropriate, be able to employ."<sup>6</sup> Other professional organizations within librarianship, including divisions of ALA, have published similar statements that include competencies specific to a particular type or function of librarianship.\* Generally, these statements on competencies focus on the broad knowledge and skills required for a particular segment of the profession (e.g., law librarians, children's services librarians, etc.). While these statements speak to the broad-based knowledge and wide range of skills that librarians are expected to have after completing a graduate education, the use of the term *core competencies* in this chapter refers to the specific skills that emerge as critical for individual librarians in their positions.

While competencies are critical to the formation of the professional person, personality is another dimension that has a significant impact. Career literature tends to focus on stereotypes of various professions and to match those stereotypes up with a person's personality. For example, in the book *What's Your Type of Career? Find Your Perfect Career by Using your Personality Type*, Dunning matches the personality types in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) with specific careers.<sup>7</sup> Rather than present-

\* For a comprehensive list, see American Library Association, "Knowledge and Competencies Statements Developed by Relevant Professional Organizations," [www.ala.org/educationcareers/careers/corecomp/corecompspecial/knowledgecompetencies](http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/careers/corecomp/corecompspecial/knowledgecompetencies).

ing librarianship in terms of the full spectrum of possible roles within an organization (e.g., instruction librarians, systems librarians, etc.), librarians are represented by a single category. Dunning also includes categories for library technicians and library assistants, but does not explain the distinctions between these three careers. Interestingly, Dunning matches several personality types with librarianship but does not explain why an INFJ (Introverted iNtuitive Feeling Judging) versus an ENTJ (Extroverted iNtuitive Thinking Judging) might be attracted to librarianship in particular.

While this approach may be helpful to someone just starting to explore potential careers, it gives a very one-dimensional representation of librarianship, which is a truly multidimensional profession. There are many different types of librarians, and different skill sets are required depending on the department or type of library in which the librarian is employed.\* While this is true for all professions, librarianship in particular tends to show up as one homogenous category in the career literature. This may be a result of a lack of awareness of librarianship as a profession or the evolving roles of libraries and may also be influenced by long-held stereotypes about librarians and the work that librarians do.

Within the library literature, there has been a long tradition of interest in how professionals' personalities influence their career choices, and that scholarship has shown a more nuanced approach than the general vocational and career guidance literature. In 1992, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) sponsored a national study of librarians and other information professionals meant to update vocational profiles of the profession. A sample of 3,500 librarians were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, the Strong Interest Inventory, and the MBTI.<sup>8</sup> The respondents fell into three groups: American Library Association (ALA) officers and committee members, ALA members, and Special Libraries Association (SLA) members.<sup>9</sup> Participants represented a wide range of different specializations within librarianship as well as a range of different institutional settings, though academic and public libraries were the most heavily represented at 41 percent and 30 percent respectively.<sup>10</sup> This study generated a great deal of nuanced data, including the finding

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\* Again, for examples see American Library Association, "Knowledge and Competencies."

that the top two personality types among surveyed librarians were ISTJ (Introverted Sensing Thinking Judging) and INTJ (Introverted iNtuitive Thinking Judging).<sup>11</sup>

The Strong Interest Inventory is a vocational interest and career guidance instrument based on the idea that “personality traits have a bearing on occupational behavior, affecting both one’s choice of and success in a particular occupation.”<sup>12</sup> This instrument has been revised and updated frequently since its original development. John Holland’s theory that vocational interests are actually an aspect of an individual’s personality was integrated into the Strong Interest Inventory in the 1950s and has been considered integral to the inventory since then.<sup>13</sup> There are six “Holland types” or “General Occupational Themes” described by the Strong Interest Inventory: Realistic types (with “technical and outdoor interests”), Investigative types (focused on “scientific or laboratory work”), Artistic types (with “dramatic, self-expressive interests”), Social types (people who “like to help others and have people-oriented interests”), Enterprising types (salespersons, leaders, and managers), and Conventional types (who are drawn to activities like scheduling and bookkeeping).<sup>14</sup>

While Holland originally placed librarians in the Conventional category in the 1950s, studies since the 1970s (and including the ACRL study) have shown that librarians actually tend to have preferences aligning them with the Artistic category. In their ACRL-sponsored study, David and Scherdin explain that the Strong Interest Inventory guide indicates “that some people who score high in the Artistic category may be involved in the arts as spectators or observers rather than direct participants. Their potential competencies include creativity, imagination and verbal-linguistic skills.”<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned earlier, in the MBTI phase of the study, Scherdin found that out of the 1,600 responses analyzed, the top two personality types were ISTJ (Introverted Sensing Thinking Judging) at 17 percent and INTJ (Introverted iNtuitive Thinking Judging) at 12 percent.<sup>16</sup> This reality is at odds with popular representations of librarians in films as explored in Jeanine Williamson’s study of MBTI types of librarian characters in popular films, indicating that popular personality stereotypes of librarians are

as inaccurate or at least as incomplete as other common stereotypes of our profession.<sup>17</sup> Williamson found that ISTJ and INTJ were actually among the underrepresented personality types in her sample of 28 films.<sup>18</sup> The real librarians in Scherdin's study showed a significant preference for introversion, with 63 percent of respondents favoring introversion, compared to 35 percent of the general population.<sup>19</sup> It is critical to note, however, that, among the 1,600 responses analyzed, all 16 possible MBTI types were represented, supporting the idea that the field has a diversity of personality types within it.<sup>20</sup> This diversity is also at odds with the representations described by Williamson, as she found that six of the 16 types (ISTP, ISFP, INTP, ESFP, ENFJ, and ENTJ) were not represented in the films she analyzed at all.<sup>21</sup> She concludes that these films "fail to represent the rich variety of personality characteristics found in real librarians."<sup>22</sup> While no one has conducted another personality study of practicing librarians on the same scale as Scherdin's since the 1990s, several have discussed the importance of having a variety of personalities in librarianship.<sup>23</sup>

## **Personality Types and Personas in Libraries**

This diversity of personality types and thus personas is critical because libraries as organizations depend on professionals who can successfully complete a wide variety of tasks. To give an idea of the variety in the academic library, instruction librarians should be good at working with people (and hopefully like it) and have the ability to present in front of groups. The ability to perform in front of an audience is a great skill to make instruction sessions more engaging. Working in technical services, a librarian must still be service-minded, but having the ability to present well to large audiences may be less of a priority. A higher priority would be attention to detail and project management skills.

While it may not be possible to find a job within librarianship that is a perfect fit with a given persona, being cognizant of one's own personality, traits, and skills will help in understanding better why some tasks are easy to complete and others are put off until the last moment. If professionals can understand this, they can better structure their time (and rewards) to get the job done as needed. On the organizational level, supervisors and

employees who are keyed into personalities and competencies may be able to reassign aspects of work to those who most enjoy them and are best skilled in them so as to free up the efforts of employees for whom the time to do those tasks would be better spent in other ways. In a perfect world, our organizations would be open and flexible about personas in a way that would help maximize the potential and effectiveness of individuals and of the larger organization. There is much to be said for encouraging employees to expand their skill sets and areas of work. While reassigning tasks might appear to be a foray into narrowed jobs, it can better be seen as giving other workers more opportunities for growth by picking up new areas to explore.

## Personas and Organizational Design

Individuals' core competencies and professional personas, or the competencies, personality, and interests that a person brings to their job, impact organizations in a number of ways. For example, Vanderkam's assertion that core competencies are the abilities an individual can leverage the most effectively and should spend most of their time doing has significant implications for effective use of time. If *time* is an individual's most valuable resource, a manager has to ask: is any given employee using their time in a way that maximizes their potential contribution to the organization?<sup>24</sup> In all likelihood, given the wide distribution of duties most library professionals perform and the broad-based knowledge that library professionals are expected to have, many people probably are not focusing on their core competencies. If a manager is concerned about employee satisfaction, that manager should also be thinking about helping people reach their potential and professional goals and assessing whether employees are happy in the work they do. Understanding personas and organizational design allows administrators to think about how to help library employees participate in the organization in a way that makes the most sense for both the institution and the individual.

Can an organization be created around the concept of personas? Can the library be reimagined based on this idea? Several institutions are beginning to do this, specifically academic libraries looking at ways to increase specialization in liaison duties, allowing those who have strong



preferences or skill sets to focus on specific aspects of liaisonship such as collections, reference, and instruction.

## **Personas and Liaison Models**

One way to think about how to design an organization around personas is to think about how one aspect of the organization—such as liaison support—is currently structured. As librarians take on new responsibilities, such as scholarly communication duties, liaison models have begun to evolve in response.<sup>25</sup> The section below will discuss a spectrum of three possible liaison models: an informal approach that could be implemented at a library just beginning to explore this concept, formalized teams that give structure to the idea, and individualized liaisonships that push the concept of liaison to very specific designations.

### *Informal*

A common approach for a smaller library, or a library that is just beginning to consider this type of structure, is an informal one. For instance, if two colleagues find that they have very different interests and skill sets, they might informally split up duties accordingly. If one of the two librarians has an interest in collection development and a core competency in analyzing and building a collection that serves the institution, that librarian might take on the bulk of collection duties and do less teaching. At the same time, the other colleague might have an interest in pedagogy and a core competency in teaching information literacy skills. That person might assume primary responsibility for instruction and reduce collections responsibilities. Or, in a team where one person loves the reference desk and has developed a core competency in one-on-one reference assistance while the rest of the team members find that they prefer not to work it, that one person might take on the majority of reference hours and push instruction and collection duties to other librarians freed up by the lack of desk shifts. Or, even more simply, if a teaching request comes in during a time that an instruction-leaning librarian is working the desk, they might see if someone would be willing to take the desk shift instead of the class so that they might use the time to teach instead. Of course, in this scenario, a

department would need to be very careful that work is balanced equitably. Most libraries deal with this now and work to create workplace equity with uneven work demands from different departments or colleges.

### *Formalized Teams*

A more formalized approach is the liaison model that the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) University Libraries is currently implementing.\* In this model, there are three subject teams (Humanities, Social Science, and Science teams) and several functional teams (Instruction, Collections, Reference Desk, and Scholarly Communications at the time of writing). Each subject team has at least one representative on each functional team, affording the subject teams the opportunity to adequately support all of their academic liaison areas while allowing specific liaisons to specialize in a particular function reflecting that person's area of interest. This team-based liaison model was based on research conducted by a liaison task force.<sup>26</sup> Many other libraries have also transitioned to a team-based liaison model, some with more emphasis on functional teams, and some with more emphasis on subject teams.<sup>27</sup>

These formalized teams provide a path to specialization that also includes some flexibility for continued involvement in the areas that people enjoy but may not want to specialize in. Many liaison librarians want to give up some part of their job but do not want to walk away forever for any number of reasons, not the least of which is that there is job security in maintaining a broad skill set. In some cases, the broad spectrum of duties might provide a rare chance to interact with users for an otherwise internally facing position. Or, in the reverse case, this broad spectrum of duties might provide a liaison librarian with a chance to be with or away from users at times. In this team-based model, each team has the flexibility and autonomy to divide the labor of liaisonship as the team members see fit. This model is in the very early stages of implementation at UNCG University Libraries at the time of writing, but plans are in place to reflect on this model at the end of the first year and to design an assessment plan to evaluate its effectiveness and sustainability.

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\* Chapter authors Jenny Dale and Lynda Kellam are liaisons at UNCG University Libraries.

### *Individualized Liaisons*

A third model involves the creation of highly specialized liaisons. This is one model that Virginia Tech University Libraries is exploring due to a new administration and a changing vision for what the library ought to be.\* This library system is driven by a start-up culture that embraces pilot projects, agile development, and a build-measure-learn philosophy, and the libraries will use this perspective to evaluate the success of the program.<sup>28</sup> In this model, liaisons will choose an area of professional specialty: instruction and reference, collections, liaising with colleagues, etc. Most librarians would choose one, but some might choose to have two or to have a primary and secondary area as well. The framework the institution is considering is to think of these as analogous to academic majors and minors.

In this model, roles would determine departmental affiliations. For instance, most librarians with a primary focus in instruction and reference would be located in the reference and instruction department. Likewise, collections would be located in technical services. Academic department liaison roles, separate from reference and instruction, would be the primary point people and consultants, facilitating partnerships between teaching faculty and librarians.

The power of this model is that it also allows the library to bring other areas of expertise on board as they emerge. An example from recent years is scholarly communications. As the need for this expertise has grown in academic libraries, so has the number of librarians interested in this type of work. This model makes it very easy to bring on liaisons in new areas of interest, as identified by the libraries or the larger university community. Virginia Tech University Libraries have already hired liaisons with expertise in data and visual literacy, for example. The visual literacy liaison can work faculty members interested in introducing visual concepts like poster design in their assignments, and the data services librarian can liaise around issues of data literacy for undergraduates and graduate students.

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\* Chapter author Lauren Pressley is a manager at the Virginia Tech University Libraries.

## **Adaptability, Fit, and Attitude of Professionals**

Perhaps the most important thing any manager does in their work is to find future colleagues. Jeffrey J. Fox, author of *How to Become a Great Boss*, speaks at length about the dangers of hiring the wrong person for a job. The costs include stress, lost resources, disruption to the organization, decreased energy from goals and organizational strategy, and low morale.<sup>29</sup> New hires might work in the organization for many years, and managers certainly want to be sure they have the skills they need to be successful in their jobs. But perhaps more important, administration needs to know that a new employee is the type of person that existing employees can work with, that they will be a good fit for the local community of users, and that they will be able to adapt to the current rapidly changing information environment.

In recruitment and hiring, soft skills are arguably more important than the hard skills we look for on transcripts and curricula vitae.<sup>30</sup> A frequent refrain from library professionals is that they learned as much on the job as they did in graduate school. Librarianship as a profession relies heavily on on-the-job training that is either community- or organization-specific. A library cannot expect everyone it hires to come in the door knowing how to do everything that is important for their specific context. If they did, they would likely find the job unstimulating and quickly grow bored. Learning the hard skills required to complete certain tasks is usually part and parcel of any library job. Soft skills, on the other hand, can be difficult to teach. Some people have a generally positive or negative view of the world that impacts their approach to work. Some people have an interest in playing around to figure out new things on their own, while others prefer to be taught. These examples simplify the complex nature of a personality and create a false sense of dualistic choices. However, being able to think about the soft skills and approaches that a given organization needs will allow a manager to be able to look for employees with appropriate attitudes.

There are several general traits that many libraries would be likely to seek out. For example, library literature and conference presentations are filled with claims that a general inclination toward learning, and aptitude for learning new technologies, effective communication, systems think-

ing, and comfort with ambiguity or change are necessary in today's information professionals. For instance, Reeves and Hahn conducted a content analysis of over 1,000 entry-level job advertisements in 2009 and found that, in addition to specific training, experience, and skills, many of these advertisements specifically mentioned personal traits.<sup>31</sup> More than half of the advertisements analyzed mentioned communication skills, and 20 percent mentioned service orientation, collaboration, and "team capabilities."<sup>32</sup> These are essential traits that will help people be successful in their work, but they are not necessarily traits that we can teach or instill externally.

Once there is evidence that candidates possess the skills required for the job, many managers claim the attitude and fit they bring to the organization becomes the next most important variable to consider.<sup>33</sup> A library might find itself with a candidate who has the background that is needed, would be an excellent fit, and also has additional areas of expertise. In a case like this the library might want to hire the candidate, but also consider how to shift work within the organization to allow the job to evolve to fit the employee and to allow other jobs in the organization to evolve to maximize the skills and strengths of the employees in them.

In informal interviews with library workers, the chapter authors are often asked if assigning job duties based on personas will lead to everyone wanting to take on the "good" jobs, leaving entire areas of service unassigned. The authors have found, though, that in conversations about what people would like to emphasize in their work, librarians tend to express preferences covering the broad spectrum of existing services. For instance, one colleague asserted that she would gladly take over library instruction responsibilities for others if it meant no longer having regularly scheduled reference desk shifts or collection management assignments. In conversations with her colleagues, she found that there were several with opposing preferences. If this group of colleagues shifted duties around, everyone would be able to focus on their core competencies and become true experts in those areas rather than attempting to be competent in a broad spectrum of tasks. On a larger scale, the literature supports the idea that librarians generally have a wide range of professional interests. In the de-

mographic component of the ACRL study conducted in the early 1990s, respondents were asked which activities they preferred to spend time on.<sup>34</sup> While Collection Development/Acquisitions and Reference/Reader Services were the two highest areas of interest, both at 18 percent, respondents showed individual preferences for a wide variety of other activities that represent the broad spectrum of tasks required in an organization.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

Libraries are not the homogenous organizations that the general career literature might suggest; they are shaped by the different—and, ideally, complementary—personas of their employees. Knowing this, it should be a priority of library management to think about the hiring processes and consider the implications of any assumptions about how a library worker ought to process information, engage with others, or work. Hiring managers should consider personas within their own organization in order to plan for greater diversity in the candidate pool. For example, does a phone interview serve as an impassable threshold to people who would not typically communicate via phone in their day-to-day job? Does relying too heavily on the face-to-face interview enable high-energy extroverts to overshadow more reserved candidates? Does a behaviorally based interview bias the committee against new professionals? Considering the unintended consequences of an interview process can enable an organization to avoid hiring a homogeneous workforce for their diverse community.

Once a library worker is hired, it is useful to consider how she can integrate into the team. For example, with the aid of tools like the MBTI, the Strong Interest Inventory, or even a popular press option like *Strengths-Finder 2.0*,<sup>36</sup> team members can learn more about each other and how they can maximize their effectiveness by leveraging their individual personas and strengths. Related to this, as a professional grows in their position and skill set, it is likely that their persona may shift as well. Continued individual reflection and team building can give the organization the opportunity to evolve as its members do. This type of organizational growth can allow professionals to continue to gain new skills and add expertise to their work while keeping the employees' interest and enabling growth in their work.

The authors' interest in this idea of the professional persona has grown as they have considered the implications that these personas could have on their own careers, institutions, and the profession as a whole. The theory presented here, rooted in the idea that libraries are organizations built around the diverse professional personas of library professionals, calls into question cultural representations of librarians that tend to homogenize us based not just on our appearance and attire, but also on our personalities. Discarding this notion of librarians as reflections of any broad stereotype is essential for moving the profession forward and building in the flexibility required to truly embrace the many personas necessary for a vibrant and thriving 21st-century library.

## Notes

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