Digital archivist as lone arranger: an interrogation of staffing models for digital preservation

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Background

This project began as I reflected on my previous position as a digital archivist. While I received support, training, and resources from my supervisors and administration, I still felt the work of digital preservation was challenging due to the structural silos pervasive in most academic libraries including the ambiguity of responsibilities, disconnect between practitioners and leadership, and organization competition for resources. [1]

I decided to turn this reflection on my career into research and interrogate the existing models for digital preservation staffing. More specifically, I wanted to look at the lone digital archivist [2] position or the employment of a single individual or 1.0 FTE to address an institution's digital preservation needs. Is this a sustainable model? Is the digital archivist position a short-term solution which has been adopted as a long-term strategy?

For the first phase of this research, I was interested in the growing dissatisfaction in institutional approaches to preservation efforts as reported in the 2017 NDSA report "Staffing for Effective Digital Preservation" [3] and how that related to the presence of digital and electronic records archivists. I hypothesized that respondents who identified a lone digital archivist within their institution would be more likely to be dissatisfied in the institutional function of digital preservation.

MY THEORY:

The presence and location of digital preservation staff within an organization affects the satisfaction of digital preservation services and function.

Methods

Using NDSA's 2017 Digital Preservation Staffing Survey data [4], I narrowed my focus to responses that indicated satisfaction with the function of digital preservation in their institutions and to those who were dissatisfied [5]. Within these responses, I noted the presence of digital archivists or electronic records archivists [5], dividing the responses into two categories: 1 or fewer digital/electronic records archivists (</= 1) and more than one digital/electronic records archivist (>1). I combined the responses of digital archivist and electronic archivist for the initial analysis.

Results

I saw a slight correlation between the number of digital/electronic records archivists and the degree of satisfaction with the institution's response to digital preservation.
- Of the respondents who were unsatisfied (answered Disagree or Strongly Disagree to survey Q16), 92% had 1 FTE or fewer digital archivists on staff where only 8% had one or more.
- Of the respondents who were satisfied (answered Agree or Strongly Agree to Q16), 88% had 1 FTE or fewer digital archivists on staff and 12% had more than one.

The number of archivists, in this case, does not have a meaningful impact on the overall satisfaction of how digital preservation is organized. This suggests it is not the number of digital archivists employed but how they work within the organization that accounts for level of perceived satisfaction.

	Number of Archivists		
	Total (N=119)	</= 1	> 1
Disagree	66%	92%	8%
Agree	34%	88%	12%

Future work

These initial results raise more questions than answers and represent a fraction of the work needed to address the sustainability of the lone digital archivist staffing model. In order to better understand the numbers presented here, similar analyses of satisfaction should be studied against other job categories presented in NDSA's data. These initial results do not paint the true picture of lone digital archivists as the position may be part of a larger digital preservation unit and / or collaborate frequently with other units in the organization. To narrow in on the concept of lone digital archivist, these data will have to be refined to include only those responses which did not identify a digital preservation unit or department at their institution.

Future work will also consider the institutional location of digital archivists and draw from organizational theory to study satisfaction as it relates to work environment and organizational reporting levels. Research into reporting levels indicates that satisfaction is higher in organizations with fewer reporting levels [7], is this also true for cultural heritage organizations?

Notes and citations

[1] Rieger, Oya. "The State of Digital Preservation in 2018." Ithaka S+R. Accessed November 6, 2019. https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/the-state-of-digital-preservation-in-2018/.
[2] Phrase used in Arroyo-Ramirez, Elvia, Kelly Bolding, and Faith Charlton. "Moving Beyond the Lone Digital Archivist Model Through Collaboration and Living Documentation." Presentation at Code4Lib 2017, Los Angeles, CA, March 2017.
[3] Nearly 46% of respondents indicated a negative perception which demonstrates a dramatic reversal in the findings from the 2012 survey where 43% of respondents were pleased with the organizational function of digital preservation. Atkins, Winston, Carol Kussmann, Katherine Kim, and Aliya Reich. "Staffing for Effective Digital Preservation 2017: An NDSA Report," September 13, 2017. https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/3RCQK.
[4] ibid.
[5] Question 16:The way our digital preservation function is currently organized (staffing levels, expertise, where they are placed within the larger organization) works well. Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree no Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree
[5] Question 15: For each of these positions, how many FTE do you currently have supporting digital preservation (or supporting digital collections, even if the activity is not considered in scope of your DP program) and how many would be ideal?
[7] Wickramasinghe, Vathsala. "Effects of Reporting Levels on Team Workers in New Business Sectors." Performance Improvement Quarterly 28, no. 4 (January 1, 2016): 91–106. https://doi.org/10.1002/piq.21211.