Committed to Chemical Information: What to Expect in a Small Corporate R&D Library

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My Background

• Bachelor’s in Chemistry from Ohio State - also worked in Chemistry Library part-time
• Entered Ph.D. program at University of Nebraska-Lincoln and completed coursework
• Got tired of being a lab rat with no social life
• Decided to leave with Master’s degree and enter information profession instead
• Attended University of Arizona’s School of Information Resources and Library Science
On-the-Job Training

• First job out of school was at Georgia Tech as a Reference Librarian
• Good place to start because I learned that academia wasn’t my best option
• I was pursued by a headhunter because of my skill set and an available position (with better money)
• I moved on to become an Assistant Librarian at Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp.
• Later moved to Rhodia, Inc as the manager
On-the-Job Training (cont.)

• Libraries at both B&W and Rhodia have only 2 librarians and 1 staff person (and research communities are between 120-170)
• Responsibilities are divided amongst folks, but each can cover if another is out
• Very close working relationships - heavy reliance on each other and trust is essential
• Constantly looking for ways to improve services, resources, and efficiency
• Easy to see your organizational impact
Differences

• Main differences between academic and corporate libraries center around responsibilities and resources

• As far as responsibilities, generally corporate libraries have smaller staffs and more time-intensive requests
  – Frequently the requests you receive in a corporate setting are related to money and the consequences can be far-reaching and immediate

• As far as available resources, smart corporations recognize the value of information/knowledge and will spend the necessary money to nurture and protect this material - whereas academic institutions can be limited by state economy, bureaucracy, etc (NJ now)
  – Of course budgets can be tough in corporate settings, too
Differences (cont.)

• Academic positions (at least at the low end) can be very ambiguous, pulling you in very different directions
  – potentially expanding your horizons

• Small industrial positions generally focus more on chemistry, with relatively minor pulling in other directions

• I think there’s greater freedom in industry to concentrate on your expertise and to be able to exploit your chemistry knowledge
A Day in the life...

- Answer voice mails and emails from the previous afternoon and evening
- Look through chem industry news websites for early news
- Perform quick search for a business person on a news item from Europe
- Check in and shelve new journals
- Start an involved search for a researcher
- Explain the Library’s resources to a new employee (and give SciFinder training)
A Day in the Life... (cont.)

• Make a few phone calls to initiate a microfilming project for lab notebooks
• Call or email a vendor regarding the latest pricing or service change
• Talk to IT dept about a new electronic tool that you need on the intranet
• Follow up on previous search and probably perform another
• Review book catalogs for new purchases
Other frequent activities

- Meetings about the state of the company, R&D, financial results, etc
- Casual meetings with colleagues regarding search requests, intranet tools, projects, etc
- Verifying presence of compounds on TSCA and other regulatory lists
- Updating Library website, writing procedures, communicating new tools to your users
- Planning future upgrades, creating new tools, investigating ideas, solving problems
- Working on reforecasting current-year and next year’s budgets (constant for managers)
How I’ve changed to fit the job

• Focus is now much more on electronic tools than traditional print-based reference work
• Now have more responsibility for knowledge management than I was taught
• Dealing with IT much more frequently
• Increasingly my decisions are based on anticipation rather than reaction
• Juggling many projects (time management)
• Reading about new tools and implementation
Future Directions

- Call it what you will, the position is evolving toward knowledge manager
- Incorporation of e-tools into the Library setting (don’t let someone else do it first)
- Librarians will need to become more adept at creating and maintaining e-tools
- Our Library is increasingly seen as a place for solutions - not a place to study quietly
- I see management of extra-Library resources in my future, expanding my role in R&D
Before making the switch

• Take a library/information-related course
  – Will give you an idea of whether you like solving information questions as much as bench work

• Talk to a few librarians (at school & in industry)
  – Generally they love to recruit new blood and they will give good ideas about their jobs and associated demands and rewards

• Ask yourself if you like 8-5 hours
  – Most lab chemists work longer and less-structured hours than librarians
  – But they do make more money...
Tips for you

• Take more computer-related courses
  – You’ll gain more acceptance if you show yourself to be wise in the ways of PCs and CD towers

• Promote yourself as a chemist to the scientists
  – Chemists love to talk to other chemists and will tell you more about their requests than they would to a non-scientist (and they’ll expect more)

• With a little effort on your part, you will be just as valued as other chemists
  – You’re not taking a “step down”
Conclusions

• If you love challenges - and you want to know you’ve helped make big $ decisions - this is it
  – I’m very satisfied with my work and the help I give to the businesses to make their decisions

• Potential Downsides
  – Limited career advancement opportunities in small companies/small libraries
  – Overcoming the “web has it all for free” mentality
  – Very infrequent exposure to the wonderful smells of the lab (acrylates, pyridine, etc)