

Soft Skills for Technical Services Professionals in the Academic Library

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The stereotype of the “behind the scenes” technical services librarian lends credence to the idea that librarians working in cataloging, acquisitions, collection development, etc., work alone and independently, never to face the patron or engage with their colleagues. Though that exaggerated typecast may still live on in the minds of some, the more contemporary and holistic approach to library organization, where librarians in all subfields benefit from a cross-sectional skillset, has necessitated that all librarians master the soft skills needed to work well with the patron and with others. This study examines both the frequency with which librarians in technical services interact with others in the course of their job duties as well as the nature and importance of soft skills in the academic library technical services workplace.

Historically, librarians have been perceived as being part of a binary coupling in which one belonged to either a group that communicates with and directly assists the patron or, conversely, a group that grapples with bibliographic principles and data, perhaps ensconced in the recesses of the building. The differences between library public services and library technical services could be summed up in this perceived division of duties, and since the 1970s, librarians have written and opined about this division. In 1979, Gorman argued that libraries should rethink the “primal division” between the two roles and proposed a new method for library organization going into the 1980s to break the dichotomy between the two groups.¹ In 2015, Hiatt echoed that this “false dichotomy” of public services and the contrary technical services still existed despite the rapid evolution of library services by reiterating that “technical services *is* public services,” though staff still like to separate those who work “with patrons” and those who “do ‘back office’ work” into the groups.²

Though discussions of breaking down the siloes that exist between public services and technical services has endured over time, the rise of electronic resources and the digital tools to access them now allow for and necessitate a more holistic approach to library services in which all librarians benefit from a skill set that crosses the technical services/public services divide. Specifically soft skills, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “abilities which enable effective communication and social interaction with other people,” have been shown to be desirable and in demand for all librarians through studies of position announcements, hiring practices, and surveys of practicing professionals.³ Specific to technical services, institutions have shown an increasing desire to hire librarians who demonstrate a mastery of soft skills beneficial for a collaborative work environment in addition to the necessary technical or domain-specific skills of the technical services librarian.⁴

Even so, the literature has not established to what extent librarians in technical services roles typically interact or collaborate with others, which soft skills are of the most importance to their work, or what training they have had to acquire or hone these types of skills. To this end, the author sought to understand the presence and nature of soft skills in the technical services workplace and created a questionnaire to distribute to current librarians working in the technical services subfield in academic or research libraries. Through this questionnaire, the author hoped to answer the following research questions:

- What level of interaction or collaboration do librarians in technical services roles have with patrons, colleagues, consortia members, and others?
- What level of importance do library professionals in technical services place on certain soft skills, and where do those soft skills come into play in the course of their regular job duties?
- To what extent have librarians in technical services had experience and/or training to help acquire or hone soft skills?

Literature Review

Defining Soft Skills

Authors in the discipline have either crafted their own definitions of soft skills or provided more nebulous descriptions or definitions of soft skills for librarians. Some coined these types of skills as emotional intelligence or interpersonal skills, but perhaps Baril and Donley, in their study of academic librarian job descriptions, elucidated the definition most concisely in noting that “by and large, soft skills are the most commonly referenced term for non-technical skills, which is perhaps the most simplistic definition.”⁵ Unfortunately, there is no concrete or agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a soft skill, but rather, instead, what Decker called “generalizable terms that appear in numerous articles” and what Cobb, Meixelsperger, and Seitz called skills that are “ineffable and difficult to measure.”⁶ Matteson, Anderson, and Boyden likewise described soft skills as a “catchy but ambiguous” phrase, with “little agreement on meaning.”⁷

Teaching and Learning

Interestingly, articles on professional development and in-house employee training to hone soft skills are few and far between, likely due at least in part to the imprecise definition of a soft skill and the difficulty of measuring outcomes. In a focus group conducted by Saunders, participants

posited that “trying to teach interpersonal skills on the job is challenging,” with one participant in the study noting that those with the most successful library employees were typically those that had worked in other service positions in the past, such as retail or food service, and those that “learned to deal with customers.”⁸

Likewise, some authors have noted that soft skills are not taught or should be taught in library and information science (LIS) programs.⁹ Matteson et al. asks if soft skills “are not clearly articulated, and if targeted training to develop them is rare, how are librarians to reach their fullest potential in offering high quality service?”¹⁰ Some solutions have been offered wherein library professionals can be trained in soft skills, such as professional workshops, cross-training, or other development opportunities, but many also see it as the job of LIS education programs to prepare students with the skills needed for the workforce. Saunders suggests that for any skill, on-the-job training in libraries is rare, and that LIS students and employers rely on LIS programs to prepare students for the workforce.¹¹ However, Saunders goes on to state that LIS faculty would need to make a dedicated effort to adapt curricula to meet the needs of both employers and students, and that faculty would need to think creatively to incorporate soft skills into the curricula, as they can be quite difficult to teach.¹² Matteson et al. also noted the need for LIS coursework to have instructional materials that help develop soft skills, offering an idea for a modular course.¹³ Outside of one’s formal education, Cobb et al. posited that soft skills “might be developed before students enter the workforce through participation in an active professional student organization.”¹⁴ Mullins, in a study of hiring practices of library deans and directors, found that those interviewed conceded that the general preparation of LIS program graduates varied greatly depending on the school, and that participants in the study indicated the need for an investment in training for new librarians, whether that be formal training, mentorship, or simply investment in professional development opportunities.¹⁵

Core Competencies and Job Skills

Though many authors have agreed that soft skills are vague or immeasurable, they are still desired or required by hiring managers looking to fill library positions and codified in many core competencies documents. The American Library Association (ALA) finalized the Core Competencies of Librarianship in 2009 to codify the basic knowledge and skills that all librarians should possess. Other core competencies pertaining to librarians in subfields such as cataloging, acquisitions, and electronic resources management exist supplementary to the broader competencies outlined by ALA in 2009, and in many of these can be found reference to soft skills necessary for the effective professional

librarian. For instance, the Core Competencies for Cataloging and Metadata Professional Librarians, finalized in 2017, highlights the need for professionals to have knowledge and skills related to interpersonal communication as well as a “public service orientation,” described as one who “recognizes multiple cultures and diverse populations,” “prioritizes user needs,” and “values diverse viewpoints and ways of doing things.”¹⁶ Further, the Core Competencies for Electronic Resources Librarians, codified by NASIG, likewise highlights the need for electronic resources librarians who demonstrate effective communication skills by “communicating effectively, promptly, and consistently, verbally and in writing, with a broad range of internal and external audiences.”¹⁷ These core competencies likewise call for librarians who can provide “excellent customer service to a diverse population of users through a variety of communication methods.”¹⁸

Aside from the codified competencies of professional organizations, a wealth of literature has been written on the skills and proficiencies needed, desired, or possessed by professional librarians. Gibson notes that “In the past, many technical services departments placed a greater emphasis on the hard or technical skills rather than soft skills” and goes on to elucidate that this practice is not sustainable, and it is soft skills that are needed to “develop effective working relationships that allow for the anticipation of user needs rather than reacting to a question or inquiry.”¹⁹ Moreover, in a survey of over 2,400 library professionals, soft skills such as interpersonal communication skills as well as customer service skills were identified by academic librarians as core to the profession, with 89 percent and 67 percent of librarians identifying them as such, respectively.²⁰ Other skills based in communication, such as “interacting with diverse communities” and “reference interview/question negotiation” also ranked highly as core to the profession by academic librarians in Saunders’s study.²¹ Similarly, Zhu found that in technical services departments, communication skills and interpersonal/human relations skills ranked first and sixth, respectively, out of the ten most frequently required skills for professional positions.²² Hall-Ellis also found that, among entry-level position announcements for metadata or cataloging librarians in university libraries, 45.7 percent of employers required “excellent” verbal and written communication skills and 27 percent required “excellent” interpersonal skills.²³

More specifically, Davis’s study on technical services functions in large research university libraries indicated that while “hard skills” like programming or data management were among the most desirable skills in technical services, a number of “soft skills,” like interpersonal skills and communication skills, were also highly desired.²⁴ Davis notes that “In the past, certain soft skills—for example, the ability to work independently—were required in technical

services, but today there are a larger number and a wider variety of soft skills that are desirable.”²⁵ Davis goes on to assert that there exists a skill gap between those that currently work in technical services and skills “that are needed for new and emerging technical services functions.”²⁶ In short, librarians in technical services functions are increasingly expected to work as a team rather than independently, as they may have done in the past.

Moreover, Partridge, Lee, and Munro conducted focus group sessions with library and information science professionals and identified prevalent themes that flowed throughout the discussions about what skills the “Librarian 2.0” would need to be successful. Soft skills like communication, collaboration and teamwork, a user focus, and specific personal traits were identified as key issues that permeated the participants’ discussions.²⁷ Likewise, Han and Hswe found that communication skills as well as collaboration and teamwork were the most prevalent performance-related skills listed as “required” on position announcements for both metadata librarians and cataloging librarians.²⁸ Finally, Boydston and Leysen note that participants in their study indicated future catalogers will need “flexibility and the willingness to adapt to a changing collaborative environment” as well as the “ability to learn and adjust quickly to new arenas.”²⁹

Furthermore, there is no dearth of studies in library literature examining library job advertisements either broadly or specific to certain job roles, and many of those studies focus on the skills required for applicants and include, at least tangentially, those skills that could be considered soft skills. For instance, in a study of job advertisements for metadata and cataloging positions, Hall-Ellis noted that “The 21st century participatory, team environment in technical services departments, and bibliographic control divisions support employers’ requirements for individuals who have above average interpersonal relationships with colleagues.”³⁰ Promís examined job advertisements posted in 2005–2006 with the specific goal of determining the prevalence of soft skills in job advertisements, finding that soft skills that were once valued primarily in leadership positions “are now essential at all levels of the professional workforce.”³¹ Dieckman, in a study of job advertisements for serials catalogers, found that 71 percent of advertisements either required or preferred that applicants have interpersonal/communication skills and 64 percent either required or preferred applicants had teamwork/collaboration skills.³² Further, Han and Hswe’s study of cataloging librarian and metadata librarian job announcements noted that communication skills, teamwork skills, interpersonal skills, organizational skills, and flexibility were among the soft skills noted in the job advertisements studied.³³ Geckle and Nelson in examining job ads for cataloging or metadata services used the term “evaluative adjectives” to refer to

characteristics such as “collaborative, knowledgeable, service-oriented, dynamic, creative, energetic, self-motivated, [and] enthusiastic.”³⁴ While not a job ad analysis, similar to the studies mentioned here, Mullins conducted interviews with library administrators (deans, directors, or university librarians) about hiring practices, finding that most were looking to fill new positions with applicants that had curiosity, adaptability, flexibility, and confidence, among other skills.³⁵

Soft Skills vs. Emotional Intelligence

Though the phrase “soft skills” lacks formal definition or codification, some articles have equated the concept of emotional intelligence to soft skills for librarians. For example, Promís found that most job advertisements examined were created to attract applicants with certain “hard skills” rather than individuals with a high degree of emotional intelligence.³⁶ Herson and Rossiter’s study of job advertisements and accompanying survey of library directors examined a wide scope of traits related to emotional intelligence and leadership, how job advertisements portray them, and how library directors acquire those skills or intelligences.³⁷ Likewise, Lucas examined hiring practices, training, change management, and more as it pertained to emotional intelligence and soft skills for librarians, positing that librarians looking to expand their knowledge of emotional intelligence and library leadership must look toward the business literature in addition to the library literature to move forward.³⁸ Klare, Behney, and Kenney also touched on the subject of library literature and emotional intelligence, suggesting that the library literature is “limited in scope” and only focuses on emotional intelligence as it pertains to library leadership while largely ignoring emotional intelligence as it pertains to entry-level or non-leadership library positions.³⁹ Indeed, much of the library literature dedicated to emotional intelligence pertains specifically to its relationship with leadership rather than to non-leadership or management positions.

Soft Skills and Technical Services in the Literature

Literature specifically pertaining to soft skills and librarians in technical services is sparse, and most discussion of the topic takes place as part of a larger study or as a tangential narrative to the study of organizational structures of traditional technical services departments or skill sets in general. For instance, Zhu studied skills and roles of paraprofessionals in library technical services departments, and while the study revealed frequently required skills and training needed by both professionals and paraprofessionals, as well as incentives for professional development for these skills, little differentiation or discussion was made to

address soft skills specifically.⁴⁰ Davis’s study tangentially addressed hard skills and soft skills for technical services staff as a part of a larger study on technical services functions and organizational structures.⁴¹ Further, Gibson, in an article about emerging roles for librarians in technical services, briefly asserted the need for soft skills in the technical services workplace in a larger context wherein they outlined the shift of library services from “problem solvers to solution creators.”⁴²

Methodology

The scholarly study of soft skills, in general, is complicated by the lack of a formal definition of the phrase. Therefore, to study the nature and presence of soft skills in the technical services workplace, and in the absence of an agreed-upon definition or taxonomy, the author chose to undertake the study using the seven soft skills identified as “core” to the library profession in a 2020 study by Saunders as the foundation for examining soft skills in the technical services subfield of librarianship. Saunders’s study identified ten “knowledge, skills, and abilities” (or KSAs) that more than 50 percent of respondents indicated were “core” to the library profession, seven of which Saunders noted could be considered soft skills rather than domain specific or technical.⁴³ Those “core” skills are

1. reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion;
2. interacting with diverse communities;
3. cultural competence;
4. customer service skills;
5. teamwork;
6. writing; and
7. interpersonal communication.⁴⁴

To gather a sample of respondents, the author sought to target participants for the study who worked in libraries in technical services roles. Instead of pre-identifying which job duties or titles were considered part of technical services, respondents were permitted to self-identify as working in a technical services role and given the opportunity in the survey to further identify what roles and duties they were assigned. Moreover, the questionnaire was not limited to participants with the job title of “librarian,” but rather was open to any person working in a library technical services environment, regardless of their role. However, for clarity’s sake, the author uses the term “librarian” here as meaning any person employed in a library setting regardless of role.

After study approval from the University of Alabama Internal Review Board, the author built the questionnaire in Qualtrics and distributed a call for participants to various professional discussion lists and forums identified by

the author as appropriate for targeting potential participants, i.e., those librarians working in academic or research libraries in the technical services subfield. Distribution of the call for participants included posts on electronic discussion lists for members of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Technical Services Interest Group, the American Library Association's (ALA) Core member discussion forum, as well as four, e-mail-based discussion lists: SERIALST, Electronic Resources in Libraries (ERIL), OCLC CAT, and OCLC ILL. To maintain confidentiality of participants, no identifying data were collected, and participants were encouraged to refrain from entering any identifiable information in any free-text field of the survey. See the appendix for full text of the questionnaire.

After distribution, the survey was open for responses from October 7 to October 20, 2021, with no further responses collected after the closing date. After the questionnaire was closed, all responses that were less than 85 percent complete were removed from the sample. The final sample size of 220 responses provided a confidence level of 95 percent with a confidence interval of ± 6.61 . Except for two demographic questions, every question in the survey was optional. Therefore the total number of responses to each question varies slightly and may not capture 100 percent of the full sample.

Results

Demographics

An overwhelming number of responses in the survey were from participants identifying as female at 86 percent. Nontenure-track librarians made up 44 percent ($n = 96$) of the sample followed by library staff at 32 percent ($n = 71$) and tenured/tenure-track librarians (24 percent or $n = 52$). Likewise, most respondents (66 percent or $n = 146$) were employed by a doctoral granting college or university. Further, respondents represented a thorough cross-section of years spent in the profession with between 14 percent and 16 percent of the sample being represented in each category with a slightly higher percentage of participants indicating twenty-five or more years spent in the profession (25 percent or $n = 56$).

A cross-section of primary job duties was also indicated in the sample, and participants could select more than one to accommodate professionals who may have multiple areas of responsibility within technical services. Thirty-eight percent ($n = 84$) selected only one primary job duty of fourteen and a further 27 percent selected two. Eighteen (8 percent) respondents reported more than four primary job duties with one person selecting nine out of fourteen options.

Table 1. Primary Job Duty, $N = 220$

	<i>n</i> =	%
Cataloging and Metadata Management	120	55
Electronic Resources Management and/or Licensing	81	37
Acquisitions/Collection Development	79	36
Receiving and/or physical processing of materials	40	18
Department Head	39	18
Discovery	32	15
ILL and Document Delivery	28	13
Systems and/or Web Services	26	12
Assessment	16	7
Administration	14	6
Government Documents	12	5
Other	10	5
Institutional Repository	9	4
Scholarly Communication/Copyright	5	2

More than half of respondents indicated a primary job duty of cataloging and metadata management (55 percent or $n = 120$) followed by over one-third of respondents indicating electronic resources management/licensing (37 percent or $n = 81$) and acquisitions and/or collection development (36 percent or $n = 79$). See table 1. The number of students served by institution ranged widely from 100 to 200,000, while 38 percent ($n = 84$) of respondents indicated employment with an institution that is a part of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL).

Interacting and Collaborating with Others

The respondents' frequency with which they interact with library patrons skews slightly toward rare or occasional interactions, while a smaller portion (26 percent or $n = 57$), indicated that they frequently or very frequently interact with library patrons. Conversely, collaborating with other librarians and staff appears to be quite common, as 74 percent ($n = 163$) of respondents reported collaborating either frequently or very frequently with other librarians and staff. In fact, zero respondents indicated that they never collaborate with others and only eleven respondents (5 percent) indicated that they rarely collaborate. Furthermore, the frequency with which respondents work or interact with vendors, colleagues outside of the institution, or consortia members varied, with 46 percent ($n = 101$) of participants indicating that this occurs frequently or very frequently and only 3 percent ($n = 6$) indicating that interaction with vendors, consortia members, or outside colleagues never occurs. See table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of interaction with different groups by job duty, N = 220

Job Duty	n =	Patrons					Employees					Vendors or Colleagues				
		N	R	O	F	VF	N	R	O	F	VF	N	R	O	F	VF
Cataloging and/or Metadata Management	120	8%	48%	20%	18%	7%	0%	4%	25%	44%	27%	5%	20%	46%	22%	8%
Acquisitions and/or Collection Development	79	1%	38%	37%	19%	5%	0%	5%	15%	53%	27%	0%	6%	24%	41%	29%
Receiving and/or physical processing of materials	40	3%	35%	23%	30%	10%	0%	10%	18%	45%	28%	0%	20%	45%	20%	15%
Electronic Resources Management and/or Licensing	81	3%	32%	40%	22%	4%	0%	6%	14%	41%	40%	0%	5%	26%	38%	31%
Discovery	32	0%	44%	31%	22%	3%	0%	6%	16%	38%	41%	0%	0%	31%	44%	25%
Systems and/or Web Services	26	0%	39%	31%	23%	8%	0%	12%	15%	42%	31%	0%	4%	50%	31%	15%
ILL and/or Document Delivery	28	4%	14%	25%	39%	18%	0%	11%	25%	36%	29%	0%	29%	32%	36%	4%
Institutional Repository	9	0%	44%	33%	22%	0%	0%	0%	22%	44%	33%	11%	33%	22%	33%	0%
Scholarly Communication /Copyright	5	0%	40%	20%	20%	20%	0%	0%	40%	20%	40%	0%	80%	0%	20%	0%
Assessment	16	0%	50%	38%	6%	6%	0%	6%	13%	38%	44%	0%	0%	25%	50%	25%
Government Documents	12	0%	33%	33%	33%	0%	0%	0%	33%	42%	25%	0%	33%	33%	17%	17%
Department Head	39	5%	36%	39%	18%	3%	0%	0%	5%	28%	67%	0%	0%	21%	51%	28%
Administration	14	7%	14%	29%	43%	7%	0%	0%	7%	29%	64%	0%	7%	7%	57%	29%
Other	10	20%	40%	30%	10%	0%	0%	0%	30%	60%	10%	0%	20%	20%	30%	30%

Participants were permitted to select more than one job duty resulting in N=551 total responses

Percentages calculated within n value of each job duty

N: Never, R: Rarely, O: Occasionally, F: Frequently, VF: Very Frequently

Table 3. Importance of Soft Skills, N = 220

Soft Skills	Not at all important		Slightly important		Moderately important		Very important		Extremely important	
	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%
Ability to interact with diverse communities	2	1%	21	10%	38	17%	91	41%	68	31%
Cultural Competence	5	2%	18	8%	47	21%	83	38%	67	30%
Customer Service	3	1%	19	9%	33	15%	73	33%	92	42%
Teamwork	0	0%	2	1%	20	9%	77	35%	120	55%
Writing	0	0%	9	4%	38	17%	102	47%	70	32%
Interpersonal Communication Skills	0	0%	3	1%	10	5%	88	40%	119	54%
Ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion	12	5%	21	10%	49	22%	79	36%	59	27%

Importance of the Seven Soft Skills

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the seven soft skills identified by Saunders as it pertains to their respective job duties. Interpersonal communication skills and teamwork skills were shown to be of greatest importance to respondents, with 94 percent (n = 207) of respondents rating interpersonal communication skills and 90 percent (n = 157) rating teamwork skills as very important or extremely important. No respondents indicated that interpersonal

communication, writing, and teamwork skills were not at all important, though 5 percent of respondents (n = 12) did indicate that the ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion was not at all important. See table 3.

Training

An average of 46 percent of respondents had received workplace training for at least one of the soft skills being

Table 4. Where would you say you likely acquired the soft skills listed below? N = 220

Soft Skills	My Education		Previous Job Experience		Personal Experience		Professional Development or Formal Training		Other		Unsure/ Not Applicable	
	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%
Ability to interact with diverse communities	57	26%	110	50%	175	80%	96	44%	13	6%	8	4%
Cultural Competence	68	31%	79	36%	165	75%	80	36%	13	6%	14	6%
Customer Service	20	9%	175	80%	113	51%	55	25%	7	3%	4	2%
Teamwork	92	42%	155	70%	152	69%	63	29%	6	3%	3	1%
Writing	183	83%	73	33%	116	53%	35	16%	8	4%	2	1%
Interpersonal Communication Skills	85	39%	148	67%	191	87%	62	28%	14	6%	3	1%
Ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion	45	20%	49	22%	123	56%	97	44%	17	8%	41	19%

studied. A majority of respondents had received training associated with interacting with diverse communities (66 percent or $n = 146$) and just over half (54 percent or $n = 119$) reported receiving training in the ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion. Conversely, 84 percent ($n = 185$) of respondents indicated that they had never received on-the-job training to hone writing skills, and only half (50 percent or $n = 110$) indicated having received on-the-job training in teamwork skills. Likewise, a little under half had received training in customer service skills (47 percent or $n = 113$). See table 4.

Education and Soft Skills

Seventy-three percent ($n = 160$) of respondents indicated that their formal education contributed “a great deal” or “a significant amount” to their mastery of writing skills, but for the other soft skills, responses were not so positive. Only 14 percent ($n = 31$) of respondents indicated that their formal education helped them master skills in customer service either “a great deal” or “a significant amount.” Likewise, 58 percent ($n = 126$) indicated that their education contributed “only slightly” or “not at all” to their mastery of the ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion. See table 5. Participants were also asked where they acquired each of the soft skills being measured and were permitted to select more than one answer. Of note in the results, the highest percentage of respondents indicated that each of the seven soft skills was acquired through personal experience, with more than 50 percent of respondents indicating as such for every soft skill.

Open-Ended Questions

Participants were asked two open-ended questions, the

first of which aimed to ascertain which of the seven soft skills being studied was considered of most importance or “paramount” to job success. Of the 195 respondents that answered this question, more than 120 indicated that interpersonal communication skills are of paramount importance to their job success. Ninety-two respondents indicated that teamwork skills were also of paramount importance, followed by customer service skills wherein seventy respondents indicated a high degree of importance. Only three respondents indicated that none of the soft skills were important, and twelve respondents indicated that all of them were paramount.

The second open-ended question asked participants what soft skills, other than the ones being studied, were “core” or important to respondents’ individual job duties. For this question, the author inductively created a coding schema of key words and phrases mentioned in the free text provided by participants to classify answers, resulting in thirty-three different categories of soft skills. Within the 180 responses to this question, the most frequently mentioned soft skills considered “core” were empathy, time management, and flexibility/adaptability. Problem solving, emotional intelligence, and listening skills were also mentioned frequently. Interestingly, twelve respondents indicated that listening skills were “core” or important to their job duties. One respondent said “presentation and listening skills are also incredibly important for a technical services job. Though many positions in TS [technical services] do not actively engage in teaching information literacy to students, we do have to present out work to stakeholders to establish the importance of our work and advocate for our departments.” Other respondents specifically reiterated that active listening or constructive listening was important for making sure that others feel heard and being certain that one has taken the time to fully understand the information being

Table 5. To what extent did your formal, post-secondary education (Bachelor’s Degree, Master’s Degree, PhD or other) contribute to your mastery of the following soft skills? N = 220

Soft Skills	A Great Deal		A Significant Amount		Somewhat		Only slightly		Not at all		Unsure	
	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%	n =	%
Ability to interact with diverse communities	20	9%	40	18%	59	27%	42	19%	52	24%	5	2%
Cultural Competence	17	8%	43	20%	64	29%	35	16%	54	25%	5	2%
Customer Service	8	4%	23	10%	64	29%	58	26%	63	29%	1	0%
Teamwork	19	9%	57	26%	76	35%	40	18%	22	10%	4	2%
Writing	75	34%	85	39%	38	17%	11	5%	10	5%	0	0%
Interpersonal Communication Skills	23	10%	51	23%	85	39%	34	15%	24	11%	1	0%
Ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion	12	5%	36	16%	36	16%	49	22%	77	35%	9	4%

conveyed so that appropriate action can be taken. Some participants did repeat the importance of the soft skills being studied as “core” to job duties, but these were not classified in the coding schema. Some respondents to this question did point out that a few soft skills mentioned could be subsumed by ones already mentioned in the study that were broader such as interpersonal communication skills. Indeed, there exists a lot of overlap in definition of each skill, making analysis more difficult. One respondent noted that all soft skills “form a pyramid that supports the goal of ‘excellent customer service.’”

Discussion

The results of this study highlight the frequent interactions and high rate of collaboration that occurs in the course of technical services work, despite the notion that technical services work necessitates a solitary job setting with the requirement that a professional work very independently. Respondents reported frequent work with those outside of their institution, including vendors, peer colleagues, or consortia members in addition to frequent collaboration or interaction with colleagues. Interestingly, many respondents indicated a blending of primary job responsibilities across the library, some of which were duties outside of the traditional technical services scope such as reference or instruction. While the sample size is too small to accurately determine when and how often professionals with certain job duties interact with patrons, vendors, or colleagues, the results provide an interesting foundation for further study to see which job duties require the most and least interaction or collaboration with others.

Moreover, the importance placed on teamwork skills by respondents in this study correlates with the high rate of collaboration reported between technical services professionals and colleagues and corroborates the findings

of other studies. It further underscores the necessity and desirability of this skill for those working in technical services and confirms the importance of the ability to work well in a team environment as other studies have indicated.⁴⁵ Indeed, technical services work has become very team-based over time, making the ability to collaborate effectively and work as a team increasingly desirable. Dieckman’s study of job ads for serials catalogers validates the results here, demonstrating that 64 percent of job ads studied included requirements or preferences for a candidate to possess skills in teamwork/collaboration.⁴⁶ Hall-Ellis also indicated that 64 percent of job descriptions studied for entry-level metadata positions indicated that new hires are expected to have the ability to work in teams.⁴⁷ Davis’s study on technical services functions also illuminated the collaborative work needed to perform the complex tasks associated with acquiring and managing library materials as library collections and functions have evolved.⁴⁸ Indeed, excellent teamwork skills seem to be a highly desired trait for those employed or looking to be employed in library technical services.

All seven soft skills studied were rated as very important or extremely important by over half of respondents, with very few participants indicating that any of these soft skills was not important or only somewhat important. These results further underscore the findings of Saunders’s broader study on core skills for librarians and put the priorities of technical services professionals in perspective to others in other subfields. For example, interpersonal communication skills were ranked highest in importance in both Saunders’s study and the present study. In effect, though, the phrase “interpersonal communication skills” could encompass a broader scope of applicable skills than others such as writing and teamwork. In fact, the phrase could be construed as encompassing writing, teamwork, and other soft skills, which may account for the high percentage of respondents who deemed this skill of utmost importance.

Customer service skills were also rated quite highly by participants as either very important or extremely important. This result coupled with the result that 69 percent of respondents reported only rarely or occasionally interacting with patrons, brings some interesting ideas to light. The author posits that even though the frequency with which technical services professionals interact with patrons tends towards rare or occasional, the importance respondents place on those interactions is very high. Likewise, one could use “customer service skills” with other groups like colleagues, consortia members, etc. Indeed, librarianship is, at its core, a service profession, and from the results of this study, even “behind the scenes” librarians place high regard on the ability to exhibit good customer service skills, even if those interactions are only occasional.

The results also demonstrate the high level of importance placed on the skills related to diversity, equity, and inclusion: cultural competence, the ability to interact with diverse communities, and the ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion. These are the skills that must be highly regarded by librarians to maintain an inclusive and diverse environment for all patrons. Indeed, diversity, inclusion, and cultural competence are not limited to the domain of those in public services or face-to-face interactions. Work done in technical services departments, such as collection development, website design, and cataloging and subject description, also has a large and important role to play. If libraries are to address systemic problems while working toward more diverse and inclusive environments, it must be done throughout every corner of library operations, including “behind the scenes.” The output of work created by technical services professionals is utilized by patrons each day, and it is beholden to the discipline to ensure that output represents the values of diversity, equity, inclusivity, and social justice wherever possible.

Moreover, a large portion of respondents indicated that those soft skills related to diversity were acquired either through previous job experience or personal experience. This finding closely mimics the findings of Adkins, Virden, and Yier who found that 91 percent of respondents reported learning about diversity through life experience and 85 percent through work experience.⁴⁹ All things considered, though, while personal and job experience seem to be a common way in which respondents learn about diversity, equity, and inclusion, other methods of learning are still used and should not be discounted. If nothing else, participants demonstrated that these skills rooted in diversity, equity, and inclusion are learned through multiple pathways.

Interestingly, the results indicate that formal education is not the primary place wherein participants acquired any of the soft skills studied, with the exception of writing

skills. More than 50 percent of respondents indicated that each of the soft skills was gained, at least in part, due to personal experience rather than any other method, except for customer service skills which were primarily gained through previous job experience. In fact, one participant in Saunders’s study similarly noted that successful library hires often had previous experience in jobs focusing heavily on customer service, such as retail and food service, noting that those jobs might have contributed to a professional’s ability “to deal with customers.”⁵⁰ Indeed, it stands to reason that prior experience in a customer service-oriented position would lend great experience to the library profession, as a service-oriented profession.

Furthermore, the results of this question regarding where soft skills are acquired further underscores what many other authors have touched upon in the past: library science education programs prioritize the development of “hard skills” more so than any soft skills. Many authors have argued for library and information science programs to innovatively prepare students for the workforce by honing the soft skills necessary to work in a library environment but likewise note that such preparation is not common. In fact, Saunders indicated that some soft skills “can be extremely difficult to teach and assess.”⁵¹ Cobb et al. posited in 2015 that students in LIS programs might develop soft skills through professional student organizations, noting that “some characteristics which are essential for traditional classroom education are not necessarily conducive to fostering soft skills.”⁵² Moreover, specific to those soft skills grounded in diversity and inclusion, only 46 percent of respondents in Adkins, Virden, and Yier’s study indicated having learned about diversity in their graduate school curriculum, and that participants expressed in an open-ended question the desire for such courses compared with the lack of course offerings.⁵³

In an open-ended question, respondents indicated that the most important or “paramount” soft skill to job success was interpersonal communication skills, followed by teamwork skills and customer service skills. The results here closely mimic the results of an earlier question in the study wherein participants ranked the importance of each soft skill and further underscores the importance of interpersonal communication as the most important or desirable of the seven “core” skills. When participants were asked what soft skills outside of those being studied were also “core” or important to job duties, the most frequently mentioned soft skills were empathy, time management, and flexibility or adaptability. Indeed, while empathy could be construed as a part of the broader skill of interpersonal communication that ranked highly among participants, the frequently mentioned skills of time management and flexibility or adaptability make for an interesting analysis. Time management skills are important for any job, and the work of

technical services librarians can be nonlinear, variable, rapidly changing, and can require a certain level of creativity and triage. As new or strange problems inevitably arise with both electronic and print collections, librarians in technical services must meet those challenges with a certain level of prioritization and flexibility to meet the needs of patrons. Along the same line, problem-solving skills ranked quite highly in this question as well. Time management, flexibility/adaptability, as well as problem-solving together paint a picture of what kind of work is expected in a technical services environment and underscore the variable and ever-changing nature of the work.

Finally, the presence of listening skills commonly cited as being “core” to job duties warrants further examination. One respondent pointed out that listening skills were “perhaps subsumed under some of the listed skills [in the survey],” and indeed, one could argue that listening skills could fall under interpersonal communication skills, empathy, or even skills related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Even so, as twelve respondents recognized, communication is reciprocal. Though soft skill development and research may focus heavily on effective verbal, nonverbal, or written communications, the importance of one’s ability to receive and act upon information appropriately and effectively cannot be overstated as a necessary soft skill in the technical services workplace. In fact, one cannot adequately use many other soft skills without the ability to engage in active or constructive listening, as doing so is instrumental to empathy, effectual interpersonal communication, cultural competence, successful teamwork, and many more soft skills. Indeed, the skill of active listening is intertwined with many others but still largely unexplored in the literature.

Limitations

The results of this study are limited in a few ways. First, a larger sample size and response rate would result in a higher confidence level and lower confidence interval. While the study collected meaningful data to generalize about the nature of soft skills with librarians in technical services, a larger sample size would allow for a better, more reliable analysis. Second, the study is limited in scope to only academic library professionals, as responses from those working in public, K-12, or special libraries were not collected or studied. Therefore no claims about library professionals serving in a technical services capacity outside of academic institutions can be made from this data. Further, the author recognizes the difficulty and ambiguity associated with defining “technical services,” “soft skills,” and even the named, specific soft skills examined in this study. Interpretations and definitions of these concepts were largely left to the respondents. In fact, the questionnaire assumed

that respondents would have their own, general idea of the definition of soft skills. A few respondents commented that they had not heard the term “soft skills” before taking the survey, and a few others even identified what one might call “hard skills” or “technical skills” in the open-ended questions. By and large, the author expects that if definitions for these concepts had been provided, results of the survey may have differed.

Conclusion and Further Directions

Though the study population here consisted of technical services professionals in academic libraries rather than encompassing all areas of librarianship, the findings suggest that the soft skills used and valued by technical services professionals are very similar to that of other subfields of librarianship, despite the notion of fundamental differences existing between different areas of concentration. The results also indicate that library professionals in technical services are highly collaborative and service oriented, and the skills learned to succeed at the job are learned largely through personal and job experience rather than through any formal education.

In particular, the author found great interest in the work of Cobb et al. who posited that soft skills for LIS students could be honed through activity in professional student organizations prior to graduation, and future research might examine more closely in what capacities LIS programs help students with the mastery of these and other soft skills.⁵⁴ Considering the results of this study, it is the opinion of the author that more experience in the library workplace through internships, apprenticeships, or the like prior to completion of an LIS degree might be the most significant way that students could gain mastery of important or “core” soft skills. As a majority of respondents indicated that soft skills were gained through personal experience, it seems that LIS programs could capitalize on the benefits of real-world experiences for students by offering such opportunities to complement a regular course of study. A study of current classroom or extracurricular activities geared at developing soft skills would be a great addition to the literature.

One important takeaway from this study is the high degree of importance technical services librarians place on soft skills related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, i.e., cultural competence, ability to interact with diverse communities, and the ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion. Indeed, addressing systemic bias and injustice is not limited to patron-facing positions. Work done by catalogers, collection developers, web developers, and others has just as an important role to play in fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion in library spaces and the

access to information. It is clear from the results of the study that many technical services librarians recognize that important role. Like the author's previous assertion, the author opines that LIS programs have the opportunity to facilitate the honing of these soft skills in students by offering opportunities for students to face and grapple with real-world scenarios to broaden student skill sets in these areas. Likewise, an investigation of what types of diversity training are offered in LIS programs would make for an interesting study.

The library workplace likewise has a unique opportunity to help develop the soft skills of library staff as they move through their careers by prioritizing and funding continuing education and professional development opportunities. Professional organizations can also provide development opportunities for librarians to work on soft skills through workshops, seminars, or professional conferences.

The challenge may be designing such development opportunities, as the mastery and application of these skills may be difficult to define, mimic, and measure. However, considering the importance placed on soft skills by the respondents, the author posits that creating professional development specifically focused on the mastery of soft skills for technical services professionals is a worthwhile endeavor for employers and professional organizations alike. As the world of technical services continues to rapidly evolve, new opportunities for studying, mastering, and even re-defining important soft skills in the subfield may emerge, and as libraries continue to demonstrate an increased desire for librarians to possess a skill set that crosses the public services and technical services divide, more work must be done to provide support for the training and development of library professionals to master those skills.

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Appendix

Q1 I am employed in an academic or research library and consider my primary job duties to be “technical services” duties:

1. Agree
2. Disagree

Q2 Please select your gender identity:

1. Male
2. Female
3. Non-binary / third gender
4. Prefer not to say

Q3 Please select your current job role:

1. Tenured or tenure-track librarian
2. Non tenure-track librarian
3. Library staff

Q4 Approximately how many students does your library serve?

Q5 Type of institution at which you are employed:

1. Two year college (Community College, Junior College, Vocational, etc.)
2. Four year college or university, non-doctoral granting

- 3. Doctoral granting college or university
- 4. Other (Please specify)

Q6 Is your library a member of the Association of Research Libraries?

- 1. Yes
- 2. No
- 3. Unsure

Q7 Approximately how long have you been in the profession?

- 1. 0–5 years
- 2. 6–10 years
- 3. 11–15 years
- 4. 16–20 years
- 5. 21–25 years
- 6. 25+ years

Q8 Which of the following best describes your primary job duties? You may select more than one.

- 1. Cataloging and/or Metadata Management
- 2. Acquisitions and/or Collection Development
- 3. Receiving and/or physical processing of materials
- 4. Electronic Resources Management, and/or Licensing
- 5. Discovery
- 6. Systems and/or Web Services
- 7. ILL and/or Document Delivery
- 8. Institutional Repository
- 9. Scholarly Communication/Copyright
- 10. Assessment
- 11. Government Documents
- 12. Department Head
- 13. Administration
- 14. Other (please specify)

Q9 About how often do you interact with library patrons (faculty, students, etc.) in the course of your regular job duties?

- 1. Never
- 2. Rarely
- 3. Occasionally
- 4. Frequently
- 5. Very Frequently

Q10 About how often do you collaborate with other librarians or staff to complete projects or perform your regular job duties?

- 1. Never
- 2. Rarely
- 3. Occasionally
- 4. Frequently
- 5. Very Frequently

Q11 About how often do you work or interact with vendors, colleagues at other institutions, or consortia members in the course of your regular job duties?

- 1. Never
- 2. Rarely
- 3. Occasionally
- 4. Frequently
- 5. Very Frequently

Q12 The following questions pertain to the use and utility of certain soft skills for those working primarily in a technical services capacity. There is no concrete or codified definition of the phrase “soft skills.” Therefore, the skills listed in the questions below were identified as “core” to the library profession from a previous study by Saunders, the full citation of which you may find below:

Saunders, L. (2020). “Core Knowledge and Specialized Skills in Academic Libraries,” *College & Research Libraries*, 81: 288-311. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.81.2.288>.

Q13 In order to perform your job duties effectively, how important is it to have each of these skills listed below?

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Ability to interact with diverse communities					
Cultural competence					
Customer service skills					
Teamwork skills					
Writing skills					
Interpersonal communication skills					
Ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion					

Q14 Have you ever received any on-the-job training for the skills listed below while employed at an academic or research library?

	Never received training	Received some training	Unsure
Interacting with diverse communities			
Cultural competence			
Customer service skills			
Teamwork skills			
Writing skills			
Interpersonal communication skills			
Ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion			

Q15 To what extent did your formal, post-secondary education (Bachelor’s Degree, Master’s Degree, PhD or other) contribute to your mastery of the following soft skills?

	A great deal	A significant amount	Somewhat	Only Slightly	Not at all	Unsure
Ability to interact with diverse communities						
Cultural competence						
Customer service skills						
Teamwork skills						
Writing skills						
Interpersonal communication skills						
Ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion						

Q16 Where would you say you likely acquired the soft skills listed below? You may select more than one option.

	Through my education	Through previous job experience	Through personal experience	Through professional development or formal training	Other	Unsure/ Not Applicable
Ability to interact with diverse communities						
Cultural competence						
Customer service skills						
Teamwork skills						
Writing skills						
Interpersonal communication skills						
Ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion						

Q17 To answer the following questions, consider the seven soft skills listed here as they pertain to your particular job duties:

1. Ability to interact with diverse communities
2. Cultural competence
3. Customer service skills
4. Teamwork skills
5. Writing skills
6. Interpersonal communication skills

7. Ability to engage in reflective practice grounded in diversity and inclusion

Q18 Of the seven soft skills listed here, do any stand out as being paramount to your job success? Which ones and why?

Q19 Aside from those listed here, what other soft skills might you consider as “core” or important to your job duties and why?