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FRESH STARTS

Digital Archivists, Now in Demand

By CONRAD DE AENLLE

WHEN the world entered the digital age, a great majority of human historical records did not immediately make the trip.

Literature, film, scientific journals, newspapers, court records, corporate documents and other material, accumulated over centuries, needed to be adapted for computer databases. Once there, it had to be arranged — along with newer, born-digital material — in a way that would let people find what they needed and keep finding it well into the future.

The people entrusted to find a place for this wealth of information are known as digital asset managers, or sometimes as digital archivists and digital preservation officers. Whatever they are called, demand for them is expanding.

One of them is Jacob Nadal, the preservation officer at the University of California, Los Angeles. He does not use the “digital” modifier because his duties include safeguarding analog materials in U.C.L.A.’s collection, not just preparing them to cross the digital divide.

“I don’t think there’s any day where I would say I’m the digital guy,” he said. But he concedes that he’s not really an analog, ink-on-paper guy, either, and that is increasingly the case in his field. These days, he noted, “if you want to work in a library, you have to deal in electronic resources.”

Mr. Nadal and 10 or so colleagues at U.C.L.A. devote much of their effort to organizing and protecting material in digital form. Their duties include licensing and buying digital content from vendors, assigning identification markers called meta-tags so that material can be found easily, researching copyright matters and ensuring that files remain intact whenever new iterations of relevant software or hardware come along.

Befitting a nascent discipline like digital asset management, Mr. Nadal, 32, said he went into it almost by accident. Unsure of his career ambitions, he began work on various book-scanning and preservation projects as a student at [Indiana University](#), then took them over when the head of preservation left. After that, he said, it “took a year or two for me to realize my career in preservation had started a year or two past.”

He reckons that many of his peers have had similar experiences. “Among librarians, I think that happenstance may be a typical career path,” he said.

Some backgrounds are considered better than others for budding digital asset managers. Familiarity with information technology is necessary, but it is possible to have too much tech know-how, said Victoria

McCargar, a preservation consultant in Los Angeles and a lecturer at U.C.L.A. and San José State University.

“People with I.T. backgrounds tend to be wrong for the job,” she said. “They tend to focus on storage solutions: ‘We’ll just throw another 10 terabytes on that server.’” A result, she said, can be “waxy buildup” — a lot of useless files that make it hard to find the good stuff.

Ms. McCargar estimates that 20,000 people work in the field today — plus others in related areas — and she expects that to triple over the next decade, assuming that economic conditions stabilize before long.

Many work for public institutions, and businesses use them, too, said Deborah Schwarz, chief executive of Library Associates Companies, a consulting and headhunting firm. Especially big employers in this area are law firms, which need experts on digital copyright and other issues tied to the migration of legal documents from filing cabinets to databases.

One comparative advantage of private-sector jobs is the pay. Digital asset managers at public facilities would do well to make \$70,000 a year. Salaries for their corporate counterparts are generally higher.

“Compensation varies wildly because it’s an emerging area,” said Keith Gurtzweiler, vice president for recruiting at Library Associates. “Consultants who can make recommendations on systems can make \$150 an hour.” Those who “manage them once they’re up and running and maintain the machinery,” he said, make from the \$70,000’s up to \$100,000.

Michael Doane is an information management consultant at Ascentium, a consultancy in suburban Seattle that employs 100 to 150 digital asset managers in a staff of 500. He said that fresh graduates with master’s degrees in information systems management or a similar discipline could “easily expect \$80,000 to \$90,000 in consulting and a little less in the commercial world.”

As much as it might help his bank balance, Mr. Nadal cannot envision leaving U.C.L.A. for a corporate job. He finds the challenge of taming a vast collection of information for a major academic institution too appealing.

“We belong to the people of California and hold our collections in trust for them and for future generations of students, scholars and members of the public,” he said. “Public-sector institutions just strike me as far, far cooler. They have better collections, obviously, and they are innovative, connected and challenging in ways that seem more substantial to me.”

Fresh Starts is a monthly column about emerging jobs and job trends.

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