

The X-Factor in Academic Libraries: The Demand for Soft Skills in
Library Employees

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Deposited 05/12/2021

Citation of published version:

Decker, E. (2020): The X-Factor in Academic Libraries: The Demand for Soft Skills in
Library Employees. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, Issue 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10691316.2020.1781725>

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Abstract

As the need for employees with technology skills and other expertise has increased within the contemporary academic library environment, so too has the need for employees with “soft skills.” Soft skills refer to personal, learnable attributes, such as emotional intelligence, communication aptitude, persuasion facility, storytelling ability, collegiality, and even woo. While academic libraries are ever-changing, it is critical to bear in mind the importance of the human component. This article considers the need for soft skills within the contemporary academic library environment. It will draw upon successful instances of soft skills development from outside the academic library environment to synthesize new ways of enhancing library employees’ soft skills.

Keywords: Soft skills; emotional intelligence; library employees; academic libraries; technical skills

Introduction

As the need for employees with technology skills and other expertise has increased within the contemporary academic library environment, so too has the need for employees with “soft skills.” Soft skills are considered here to be a type of emotional intelligence and refer to personal, learnable attributes, such as communication aptitude, persuasion facility, storytelling ability, collegiality, and even woo. The academic library digital environment has grown tremendously. While artificial intelligence, makerspaces, data visualization labs, gaming zones, and other technological hubs and services have popped up in academic libraries throughout the United States, it is critical that library employees, such as circulation staff, librarians, computer lab technicians, etc. know-how to effectively interact with users in the proper use of, instruction in, and even troubleshooting of, these technological elements and this ability to connect with the user is rooted in a basic command of soft skills.

While technology continues to transform libraries, it is critical to bear in mind the importance of soft skills or the human component as plans move forward and new technologies are brought into the ever-changing library environment. This article considers the need for soft skills within the contemporary academic library environment. It includes best practices for helping library employees cultivate soft skills and will draw upon successful instances of soft skills development strategies from outside the academic library environment in order to recommend new ways of enhancing library employees' soft skills.

Background

Before delving into a review of the current literature surrounding soft skills and how they pertain to technology in the academic library environment, it is worth noting that the phrase "soft skills" is, in itself, problematic. While there are generalizable terms that appear in numerous articles about soft skills, these skills and attributes are not singularly codified into an agreed-upon definition. A popular dictionary defines soft skills as being, "desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge: they include common sense, the ability to deal with people, and a positive flexible attitude" ("Soft Skills" 2018).

However, no formally agreed-upon, universal set of soft skills exists (Matteson, Anderson, and Boyden 2016). The corpus of literature spanning business, management, information technology, human resources, libraries, etc. (Matteson, Anderson, and Boyden 2016), focuses more upon skills and attributes such as "listening, communication, teamwork, time management, empathy, leadership, interpersonal skills, creativity, persuasiveness, optimism, resilience, etc." as being soft skills (Anthony and Garner 2016; Chakravarti and Chakraborty 2018; and Majid et al. 2019). The phrase "soft skills," therefore, has become a catch-all category that is ambiguous and difficult to measure (Majid et al. 2019). Most of the literature differentiates soft skills as being social in nature and separate to the "hard," technical skills related to any given field or profession (Anthony and Garner 2016).

Additionally, there is a gendered language problem in using the term “soft skills.” The ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ binary is related to the social constructs of masculinity and femininity which inform the perception that hardness is inherently masculine and softness inherently feminine (Matteson, Anderson, and Boyden 2016). This is particularly worrisome in a historically feminized field as is the case with library science. Of course, women can possess “hard” skills just as men can possess “soft” skills, so it becomes more of a sociological construct of who, normatively, is allowed to have these skills (Hong 2016). Professions that are overly feminized also tend to be viewed as less valuable in terms of payscale; jobs associated with management and finance tend to compensate employees at a higher rate than jobs associated with communication and empathy (Matteson, Anderson, and Boyden 2016). Similar to library science, the field of human resources, for example, has been plagued with being conceptualized as feminized due to the emotionality and caring associated with serving in such positions. Over the past decade, members of the human resources field have actively worked to shed the feminine image related to the field in favor of a more bottom-line-driven and quantitative approach to employee relations (Hong 2016). Getting popular perspectives to shift is difficult and takes many years as professionals in the realm of library science are well aware; crucial to contemporary academic librarians’ success is an ability to make data-driven decisions that come from statistical analysis, strong management choices, and other hard skills. Yet, the stereotype of the librarian with the glasses, cardigan, and bun persists (Seminelli 2016).

Since “soft skills” is a problematic term, what might be used in its place? While many have posited new phrasing, as of yet, a new term or phrase unfortunately has not subsumed the current term. Parlamis and Monnot (2019) offered CORE as an acronym that stands for Competence in Organizational and Relational Effectiveness. It successfully moves the language away from negative gender stereotyping, but appears on the surface just as likely to exist without an easily codified set of traits and attributes as does the current term, “soft skills.” Acronyms

tend to stick, though, and since the academic library environment is already comfortable with acronyms; perhaps CORE would be a natural fit. Ultimately, it is important that librarians have a way to discuss these attributes as it pertains to hiring in the realm of library technology because without soft skills, even highly trained candidates will prove deficient (Chakravarti and Chakraborty 2018). Soft skills have been proven to contribute more to career success than hard skills (Moreno-Luna and Barco-Alzate 2019) and that is a significant fact when considering library technology where skillsets are robust and varied among practicing professionals. The term “soft skills” needs to be reframed to a more appropriate term that represents their importance for workplace success and reflects the current thinking on the development of such skills (Parlami and Monnot 2019). However, since a new term has not yet become part of the accepted, recognizable lexicon surrounding this topic, for the purposes of this article, the term “soft skills” will persist in usage even though it is not free of semantic issues.

Literature Review

Soft skills are complicated to define, yet during the library interview process, managers are increasingly looking for candidates who possess attributes that many would consider to be soft skills (Gypin 2019). This sets up a conundrum that is difficult to solve. Further, many professions that rely heavily upon empathy or listening to the needs of others (i.e. soft skills) are also notorious for burn out or “compassion fatigue,” as this kind of work is exhausting and difficult to sustain day after day in the work environment (Waytz 2016). Strong interpersonal competencies are expected of all library professionals (Matteson, Anderson, and Boyden 2016), but the art of listening to and helping users discover what they need is not always as straightforward as it seems of the surface and, library work laden with the need for soft skills not surprisingly, can be an environment ripe for library employee burnout.

Why soft skills are important in the academic library context

In the present era, academic librarians need training in skills that help bridge the gaps between user preferences, satisfaction, and expectations, while ensuring a balance between user and librarian perspectives of the services (Mwaniki 2018). This requires that library employees pay attention not only to what they say, but how they say it as it relates to body language and tone of voice (Gypin 2019). Library employees also need to strengthen the libraries' capabilities to connect users with services in an increasingly technology-rich environment. At times, it seems that technology-enriched environments reduce the need for soft skills, but this is not the case, as information literacy is a core value of the library regardless as to it being a digital environment. Consider, for example, the need to assist users with discovering information in library catalogs and digital databases. Soft skills are necessary in this instance to ensure that information about usage and discovery is communicated clearly and in a way that makes the user feel confident to replicate future searches on their own. Beyond the user experience, some librarians will need to negotiate vendor contracts for aforementioned digital databases and this, too, requires fundamental soft skills such as deal brokering, seeing to the library's best financial interests, and establishing ongoing working relationships with vendors (Mwaniki 2018).

Librarians today and in the future also need to develop campus-wide outreach initiatives in order to facilitate ongoing involvement in the teaching and learning process with the goal being to improve student learning and research outcomes (Mwaniki 2018). This type of outreach is unlikely to be successful if the librarians are unable to communicate effectively with faculty about the importance of their participation as active nodes of the research lifecycle. For example, embedded librarianship requires a continuous conversation with teaching faculty to ensure that faculty and students conceptualize the librarian as a research partner (Cherinet 2018). Olesova and Melville (2017) demonstrated the importance of cooperation and collaboration between an embedded librarian and course instructor in their case study. Their cooperative approach to a graduate-level instructional design course not only enhanced student learning outcomes but also

provided both the librarian and the course instructor with a clear idea of how they could strategize together to create online content that considered the design, organization, and delivery of materials for the benefit of the students (Oelsova and Melville 2017). Without the successful employment of soft skills on the part of the librarian and instructor, the technology-mediated embedded librarianship experience may not have worked so smoothly. Sharing a digital teaching space, such as a Learning Management System (LMS), requires a careful conversation and mutual understanding of participation levels and spheres of influence in order to avoid misunderstanding.

Recently, some of the most successful hires in academic libraries have been persons who have a background in retail, waiting tables, or any role that requires strong interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence (Saunders 2015a; Decker, Givens, and Henson 2017). Whereas in previous eras, the hard skills, such as electronic database know-how or library management system experience, would be the most attractive skills to a hiring manager, these skills are, by their very nature, teachable so it is then in the best interest of the hiring manager to identify the job candidates who are the most able to interrelate with others and consider their potential to acquire hard job skills on an already well-developed foundation of “people skills” (Salisbury and Peseta 2018). That is, of course, assuming the candidates do possess an appropriate background and training in the skills minimally required by the job posting. However, across the board—in myriad fields—many employees are reported as being deficient in soft skills (Mitchell, Pritchett, and Skinner 2013). And, certainly, across the sub-fields of librarianship, trends linked to easy, disintermediated access, combined with the Open Access movement, all represent significant pressures on the library profession as it pertains to future job positions (Cox and Corral 2013).

Given these changes, it becomes essential that academic librarians hone their soft skills in order to serve in newly emphasized roles as ambassadors or guides for assisting users with accessing information. These new demands upon library employees, related to developments in

technology, also beget an increased need for librarians and library employees throughout the library to work together and collaborate (Gwyer 2015). Kang and Ritzhaupt (2015), studied educational technologist job advertisements extensively across the past several years and discovered that, in recent job postings, the most frequently listed skills requested are soft skills such as oral and written communication, collaboration, customer service, interpersonal communication, etc. While a successful Educational Technology professional must be competent in instructional design, project management, technical skills, and other hard skills (Kang and Ritzhaupt 2015), a shift in the job advertisements shows the emphasis on soft skills as essential to success in such a position. This is a similar trend to the one increasingly found in academic libraries, wherein a “pervasive requirement to communicate, be flexible, and keep abreast of the latest developments” is key to their success in a library position (Cox and Corral 2013).

Acquiring soft skills

Soft skills are necessary for success in the academic library environment, but acquiring those skills is a challenge for many (Anthony and Garner 2016). Librarians moving from passive to more active roles in relationship to the rapidly changing digital environment means that they need to be equipped with a variety of both hard and soft skills in order to stay relevant (Cherinet 2018).

Part of the frustration with the proverbial “moving target” of skill requirements stems from the notion that many programs of study, in this instance, Masters of Library and Information Sciences (MLIS) degree programs, do not always prepare their students for the actual work they will be doing on the job. Further complicating this phenomenon is the observation that recruiters tend to choose candidates that have “better personalities” despite lower hard skills competencies due to the fact that skills training is easier than forming character (Murniati 2018). Librarians may feel that their educations left them poorly trained for an environment where a nebulously defined sense of general likeability has more impact in hiring

decisions than any skills they may have studied to learn. Today's librarian needs both personal (communication) and professional (information knowledge) competencies in order to be successful (Cherinet 2018).

The ratio between hard and soft skills may be higher than expected. According to Majid et al. (2019), as much as 85% of success is soft skills and 15% is hard skills. Given this level of importance, and considering employers' complaints about employees lacking soft skills, it would be advantageous to hone both hard and soft skills while students are in their programs of study by adding soft skill development into the classroom curriculum (Murniati 2018; Majid et al. 2019). Soft skills are not natural to everyone, but they can be taught and should, therefore, be included in course training curricula (Chakravarti and Chakraborty 2018). If professional skills and technical skills are only sufficient for achieving goals and objectives (Majid, Eapen, Aung, and Oo 2019), but insufficient for building relationships and creating networks between humans, it stands to reason that soft skill training and development may help in bridging this skills gap. While there exist numerous pedagogical theories on the most effective methods of teaching, a few approaches have been especially successful in helping students acquire the ever-elusive set of soft skills to apply to their practices.

Three examples of soft skills training from case studies illuminate potential opportunities for integrating them as part of or as a supplement to an existing curriculum. Those explored in this article had in common that the students were all at the collegiate level.

In one instance, at the University of North Georgia, the students were in a required business communications course, typically offered to sophomores and juniors. The students were asked to complete a pre-test style self-analysis wherein they assessed their own soft skills, then they were asked to complete four additional activities including: interviewing their bosses about soft skills that are desirable for new hires, listening to a classroom guest speaker about his/her experiences with soft skills in the business world, reading a journal article about soft skills and,

finally, watching a video clip and discussing it afterward with the class (Anthony and Garner 2016). Upon completion of the activities, students reported their experiences via a questionnaire about the effectiveness of each of the aforementioned modes of teaching and, overwhelmingly, students reported the guest speaker to have been the most poignant because they found they could relate to the personal accounts and the speaker was engaging (Anthony and Garner 2016). It's worthwhile to note that this particular feedback about the guest speaker may also demonstrate the speaker's own modeling of soft skills by being someone the students wanted to listen to and found themselves relating to during the presentation.

In Colombia, at the Universidad de los Andes, first-year students partnered with advanced students in a peer-to-peer learning model focused on helping students develop soft skills such as effective communication, flexibility/adaptability, interpersonal skills, responsibility, teamwork, and work ethic, because soft skills are gaining importance in the academic, professional, and personal environments (Moreno-Luna and Barco-Alzate 2019). This "Accompanying Program" met for three hours per week and assisted students with programming and mathematics while emphasizing the need for honing of soft skills (Moreno-Luna and Barco-Alzate 2019). In addition to the peer-to-peer engagement, students in this case also filled out a pre- and post- survey to help course creators to implement continuous improvement to the soft skills training program with the expectation of it continuing year after year (Moreno-Luna and Barco-Alzate 2019). Students reported an increased awareness of soft skills and the importance of them to their own adaptation to the university environment.

Entrepreneurship Development at the "Plus 2" level might provide an effective venue in India for training students with a module on soft communication skills (Chakravarti and Chakraborty 2018). In this third case examined for the purposes of this article, soft skills training is proposed as being inserted into the course curriculum. It should be noted that the students involved were in a "Plus 2" system in India, which is "considered to be a bridge between school

and college” (Chakravarti, and Chakraborty 2018). Further, these courses should not just focus on enterprise building but also on developing a more socially-aware student who has facility for communication (Chakravarti and Chakraborty 2018). These courses—taught in an interactive manner, alter classroom settings and create opportunities for public speaking and group discussion—will all complement the hard skills the students are learning in their course of study.

These case studies show interesting trends that, taken together, could positively influence the acquisition of soft skills for students in MLIS programs. While the examples given related directly to college students, the graduate-level library and information science programs could certainly benefit from the findings of these studies as well. First, none of the cases reorganized the degree programs, they all created or envisioned models that added this element on top of the existing curriculum, via modules, working groups, or other additive-type events. Some suggested a seamless incorporation of soft skills training into the existing courses. This helps maintain the already regimented LIS course requirements that need to be kept to existing specifics for reasons of ALA-accreditation. From a practical application standpoint, class presentations that are part of the course assignments and group work (inherent to many MLIS programs) both offer opportunities for students to develop and hone their communication, teamwork, time management, and other relevant soft skills (Majid et al. 2019).

Second, the examples also emphasize the importance of interactive and peer-to-peer trainings. These not only add variety to the curriculum, but are particularly appropriate when considering the subject matter of developing soft skills. It would be relatively easy to invite guest speakers in from the library environment to not only describe their experiences on the job market as they pertain to soft skills but also their day-to-day activities and how the acquisition of soft skills has served them in their past and current roles. Finally, all of the soft skills training programs explored in this article emphasize the need to assess the efficacy of the trainings and to get student feedback toward new directions. Continuous improvement informed by assessment is

a strategy already well-known throughout academic libraries. These aspects make the addition of soft skills training appear feasible for the MLIS program setting.

While hard and technical skills and, it seems, even soft skills can be taught in the classroom, other venues for learning soft skills might include library conferences, campus career resource centers, and library leadership trainings (Yarbrough 2015). These other social settings may be effective in helping MLIS students acquire the soft skills needed in library environments. Hard skills and soft skills, taken together, lead to “strategic skills” wherein individuals, because of their technical and interpersonal skills, can parlay these abilities into the further acquisition of additional skills (Parente, Stephan, and Brown 2012). Also, a “time-space,” that is, a break in between each training session, allows students to apply and internalize what they have learned, preparing them for the next layer of soft skills acquisition (Ibrahim, Boerhannoeddin, and Bakare 2017).

Soft skills and library customer service

Unfortunately, as valuable as soft skills are, their usage in a customer service context still occupies a relatively subordinate position in the capitalist framework (Hong 2016). But librarianship is an inherently service-oriented profession. And, the American economy at large is shifting from production-based to service-driven and therefore these soft skills will continue to become increasingly important (Majid et al. 2019). While academic libraries may not follow the exact consumerist trends of the greater American economy, libraries do indeed respond to larger trends and often prioritize initiatives based on these emerging trends (Saunders 2015).

Furthermore, soft skills are critically important to the “front line” library employees who are dealing with patrons who are sometimes angry, upset, and aggressive; these professionals will need command of soft skills in order to remain calm, listen, and know when and how to request additional assistance when necessary without further alarming the patron (Saunders 2015a).

Listening skills are valued highly among employers (Vooren et al. 2019). It is a critical aspect to customer service. Many patrons will depend on library employees explaining database or peripheral usage to them and cannot be expected to understand the issues at the library employees' level. Library patrons who learn proper equipment usage, however, can become more empowered for using the library unaided in this capacity in the future (Windels, Mallia, and Broyles 2013).

Recommendations

Library instructors and guides

Technology enables research discovery it is evident what a difference it has made in the shift from the historical card catalog to the modern digital library management system. Knowing how to make effective use of the Library Management System is not inherent, however, and often requires the assistance of a friendly, knowledgeable, and helpful information guide. More recent technological advances such as virtual reality and makerspaces can ostensibly require even more engagement between users and library employees as newer technologies and equipment continue to infiltrate the library.

As it pertains to library instruction, not only does the librarian need soft skills in order to cultivate a good working relationship with the professor of record for any given instruction session, they also need soft skills for effective teaching of the class. A library classroom full of students is much more likely to respond favorably to an interesting and animated instructor, of course, than one who speaks in monotone and does not appear to want to be working with them. But, instructing librarians also have before them an opportunity to enhance students' soft skills acquisition by injecting minor training into their own library instruction sessions. The familiar "think, pair, share" strategy, for example, is one that allows students to interact briefly and strategize their report out to the class (Sormunen et al. 2014). This requires listening, a modicum of leadership, communication, and collaboration skills. This in-class activity thereby

accomplishes two things: students engage with the learning material of the lesson and they practice their soft skills within a dyad dynamic.

Fundraising and funding initiatives

Funding is critical to any academic library trying to keep abreast of enhancements to the library's environment. The library, by itself, will be unable to convince funding agencies (whether internal to campus or extramural) about its being an essential expenditure for the betterment of the library environment without there being an audience-targeted description of what it does and how it matters. Successful fundraising is largely contingent upon soft skills such as communication (Doan and Morris 2012). Shell and Moussa (2008) posit that the communication arts of storytelling and persuasion (woo), come into critical play. When performed by a knowledgeable and emotionally intelligent library employee, woo may convince the funders to invest in and even promote growth within the library environment.

Fundraising, like soft skills, is lacking in widespread, holistic training programs and would benefit from the incorporation of soft skills development as part of its own training curriculum (Counts and Jones 2019). If a library employee was able to develop soft skills, either via an MLIS course venue training or in a post-MLIS fundraising program training, they would have an opportunity to gain the skills necessary to gently persuade funders to invest in their technology endeavors.

One such method to attract potential funders would be for the library to host a "technology petting zoo." A technology petting zoo is a type of open house wherein potential funders would be able to visit the library, in a technology lab space, makerspace area, or digital center, in order to allow them to see, interact with, and learn about the current and desired library technologies (Hennig 2017). While a room filled with virtual reality headsets, 3D printers and lathes, and all manner of digital humanities software portals may be exciting for those familiar with the equipment and software, a group of potential funders or donors would probably be

completely dependent upon the library technologists to provide them with a guided tour in order to understand and appreciate the current offerings. A library employee, with well-honed communication skills, could describe the work that students have created with the 3D printers, invite the potential donor to watch as a 3D object is being printed, and discuss the programs and campus departments the library supports with this equipment and enthusiastically describe future plans pending funding that would give the potential donor a clearer picture of how their support would enhance the library's profile for the betterment of the user experience. With an interaction as delicate as setting the stage to make the "ask" for funding, it is critical that the librarians interacting with the potential donor have well-honed soft skills to smooth the path for the pending request.

Soft Skills and Library Leadership

While many in the library environment lack specific training in soft skills as it pertains to fundraising, leadership is another venue wherein soft skills come into play. Library leaders who are looking to create strategic plans benefit from demonstrating soft skills as well. A team leader who solicits the feedback of the team, works collaboratively in resolving technology predictions for the future, and who expresses a certain empathy toward colleagues will be one who enjoys more success in moving the team forward. No one person who moves up through the library hierarchy either at one academic library or through acquiring next-step positions at several different libraries is going to have experience with all library departments and all activities. However, those leaders who have acquired soft skills will be much better equipped to engage all library faculty and staff and to meet them at their point of concern and need and assist them in moving forward. While research has been conducted on which hard or technical skill sets library directors feel they have deficits in (Harris-Keith 2016), to date, little has been done to assess the particular soft skills current library directors feel they need to enhance to better serve them in their leadership roles.

Technological enhancements often bring with them changes to existing jobs. A team leader with developed soft skills will be better able to bring about effective change management within the library as the technology augments and in some instances changes or replaces jobs completely. This example is a particularly sensitive one as it involves employees' relationships with their jobs and, in some cases, impacts their identities. A leader who is a good listener, is empathetic, and who proactively engages those librarians and library staff for whom technological changes will most affect is going to have much more productive conversations than one who relies on email to communicate upcoming staffing or position changes. Corollary to this is the library director who actively engages the library employees by reaching out regarding new technologies and how they might benefit the library in the future. By keeping abreast of new technologies and actively seeking conversations with the library employees, the library director indicates a certain openness to exploring new ideas and thereby encourages the library employees to do the same. Modeling desired behavior is a soft skill that is particularly important to library leaders as it provides a seamless way to encourage the needed behaviors from the team.

In research conducted about public library leaders, the soft skills characteristics such as "dynamic," "enthusiastic," and "engaging," were desired attributes. However, a truly savvy library leader (in a public or academic venue) will need to possess an ability to bring people along with them under a cohesive vision, know-how to secure funding, will have to understand politics, and have the ability to adapt to ever-changing situations (Henricks and Henricks-Lepp 2014). Furthermore, great progress could be made by leadership conducting a periodic 360 review of themselves in their library leadership capacity. This practice requires a leader to face their own weaknesses head-on, become increasingly self-aware, and to demonstrate a commitment to their becoming emotionally intelligent to their team members, which also fosters good will.

Conclusion

This article has helped clear a path for deeper study and enhanced research on the topic of soft skills as it relates to the academic library environment. By presenting an overview of the current discourse on the topic of soft skills, outlining various soft skills training strategies employed in professional settings (outside the library), and by drawing attention to the issues inherent to the conversation and context surrounding the term “soft skills,” researchers may move forward with developing library training that emphasize the enhancement of soft skills as they continue to bolster and redefine library customer service in the digital age. Further, it is possible that a new, non-gender-biased term for this critical corpus of skills will emerge and represent a collective understanding of the importance of such attributes. Perhaps, finally, the conundrum of defining “soft skills” into a recognized, collective, singular definition can be resolved with the development of an all-encompassing denotation for the skills and attributes currently, but loosely, understood as being related to the term.

Taken together, these improvements to the discourse on “soft skills” as it is presently understood will not only help in targeting library technology training, but it will also function by allowing job recruiters and library HR professionals to be more precise in describing what is actually desired in future academic library job advertisements. While this article considered soft skills from the vantage point of their importance to instruction, fundraising, and leadership, future research can address other spheres of the library environment and consider how they may be enhanced by a revised and targeted understanding and application of soft skills. As information brokers and educators (Cherinet 2018), it is incumbent upon librarians to resolve these issues toward an enhanced understanding of the role of soft skills as they relate to the library field.

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Daily News. October 15.