2021 NDSA Staffing Survey

Digital Preservation Intent vs Reality

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**Abstract – The 2021 Staffing Survey represents the third iteration of an expansive staffing survey to be carried out by the NDSA. The survey and its findings offer a unique perspective on digital preservation staffing provision and issues experienced. This panel aims to share key findings from the survey with an international audience, to place these in the context of the real-world experience of the expert panel, and to encourage attendees to engage in a dialogue around digital preservation staffing, organizational support, and workforce development within the field.**

**Keywords – staffing, organization, resources, skills, training**

**Conference Topics – community; exchange**

1. Introduction

In 2012 the National Digital Stewardship Alliance (NDSA) surveyed [1] organizations worldwide about how they address digital preservation staffing and related issues. The survey provided a useful snapshot of the digital preservation landscape and insight into how its practitioners viewed the effectiveness of their organizational structures. A version of the survey was conducted again in 2017 [2], thereby establishing the only corpus of detailed longitudinal data that touches on how the field is staffed and organized. In 2021 a Staffing Survey Working Group was convened to gather new data on staffing practices and organizational trends [3].

The Working Group was co-chaired by Elizabeth England and Lauren Work and included 13 members from the United States and the United Kingdom. Building from the 2012 and 2017 iterations, the Working Group extensively redesigned the 2021 NDSA Staffing Survey to incorporate new areas for data collection. The redesign was prompted by findings from the 2017 survey and developments in the field over the last decade. One of the most significant changes was that, in contrast to previous surveys, the 2021 survey was designed to be answered by individuals, not organizations, and there was no limit on the number of individual respondents per organization. Participation was open to any individual worldwide with current digital preservation responsibilities at their organization, ranging from practitioners to department managers to senior leadership, and membership in NDSA was not required for participation.

The survey was sent out via listservs in early November, 2021, and was open for a period of 32 days. During this time 269 individuals from 16 countries completed the survey, continuing a trend of increasing global participation in each iteration of the NDSA Staffing Survey. Data analysis was completed between January and March, 2022, with a written report to follow in the Fall of 2022. The survey findings will build on the body of Staffing Survey data already collected, which the digital preservation community can use to identify organizational and staffing trends within the field.

1. 2021 Survey Findings

Analysis of the 2021 survey data has revealed a number of themes across individual perspectives and organizations of varying sizes and types: sustained funding and staffing levels for digital preservation are major challenges; staff with digital preservation responsibilities often have competing non-digital preservation responsibilities; and decision-making about digital preservation lacks coordination throughout organizations. These barriers to successful digital preservation programs are contrasted with the majority of survey respondents indicating agreement with the statement, “Digital preservation is a high priority for my organization,” and suggests a strong disconnect between organizational intent and practitioner reality and resourcing.

Additional findings of interest are evident when cross-analyzing respondents’ demographic data with their responses to questions about how digital preservation work is organized, prioritized, and understood within organizational structures. For example, respondents identified generic, non-digital preservation specific skills/abilities such as communication, collaboration, and analytical skills as important for digital preservationists, while specialized skills/abilities such as system or software procurement/maintenance, managing continued improvement (maturity modeling/ certification), and managing budgets were the most often identified as not important or applicable. When cross-analyzing this data with the roles of the respondents, senior staff were found to prioritize “big picture” skills such as developing policies and preservation planning, while practitioners were more likely to identify targeted skills such as workflow development/implementation and experience using digital preservation tools as important.

Another key finding shows that positionality within organizational structures affects opinions on adequate levels of administrative/executive support for digital preservation. For example, the level of disagreement with the statement, “My organization has the senior-level administrative/executive support needed to manage the content we steward” correlated with the organizational positioning of respondents. Those at an administrative/executive level tended to have low levels of disagreement with the statement, while respondents with digital preservation coordination, development, or activity responsibilities had higher levels of disagreement.

The disconnect between the outlook and responses of those with more positional or organizational power vs. those with less is revealing, and suggests possibilities for higher education, training, and advocacy opportunities that are specifically geared toward bridging this divide.

1. Panel Objectives

The panel will share key findings from the Staffing Survey that will be of interest to the international audience of digital preservation practitioners, educators, researchers, and leaders of organizations with digital preservation responsibilities that will be in attendance at iPres 2022. In response to prompts posed by the session chair, including main survey themes around digital preservation staffing, training, organization, and activities, panelists will provide commentary and reflect on results from the Staffing Survey, informed by their differing roles and experiences of staffing, education, and workforce development in digital preservation. The audience will be invited to participate in the discussion through live polling on the issues addressed during the panel, as well as short question and answer opportunities.

This panel will serve as the first sharing of NDSA Staffing Survey results at an iPres conference and will provide a unique opportunity to draw on the findings to spark robust discussions around staffing issues and trends at a global conference.

1. Contributors

Lauren Work, Digital Preservation Librarian at the University of Virginia and co-chair of the 2021 NDSA Staffing Survey Working Group, will chair the session.

Elizabeth England, Digital Preservation Specialist at the US National Archives and Records Administration and co-chair of the 2021 NDSA Staffing Survey Working Group, will represent the work of the survey group.

Sharon McMeekin, Head of Workforce Development at the Digital Preservation Coalition and member of the 2021 NDSA Staffing Survey Working Group, will represent a professional development and workforce training perspective.

Shira Peltzman, Digital Archivist for Library Special Collections at the University of California, Los Angeles and member of the 2021 NDSA Staffing Survey Working Group, will represent a practitioner's perspective.

Juana Suárez, Associate Arts Professor and Director of the Moving Image Archiving and Preservation program at New York University and Latin American Media Scholar, will represent a higher education perspective.

The 2021 NDSA Staffing Survey Working Group members are Rachel Appel, Brenna Edwards, Elizabeth England (co-chair), Heather Heckman, Déirdre Joyce, Margaret Kidd, Julia Kim, Sharon McMeekin, Krista Oldham, Shira Peltzman, Jessica Venlet, Hannah Wang, and Lauren Work (co-chair).

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