

The Career Paths of Assessment Librarians: An Exploration of Professional Growth

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Abstract

Purpose

As the ability to gather, analyze, and use evidence to inform decision-making, as well as articulate the impact of library programs and services, has emerged as a key leadership and management competency for library administrators, assessment librarians may be ideal candidates for higher-level administrative roles. This study explores the career paths of Library Assessment Conference attendees from 2008 through late 2017. It questions whether there is a typical career pattern for assessment librarians by examining the education and experiences of individuals solely tasked with library assessment, or with assessment included within their job titles. Specifically, the study explores three questions:

- Do assessment librarians have a common educational background beyond the MLS?
- Is assessment a role typically assumed by entry-level or mid-career librarians?
- Do assessment librarians progress to higher-level administrative or leadership roles?

Design/Methodology/Approach

This study updated methodology used for a previous study of associate library directors by Moran, Leonard, and Zellers (2009), which relied on information gleaned from the *American Library Directory*, as well as methodology used for a study of academic law library directors by Slinger and Slinger (2015), which utilized CVs harvested online. This study focused on publically available LinkedIn profiles after finding that nearly 70% of LAC attendees since 2008 had complete profiles which met study criteria. Select data from these profiles was harvested over a two-week period in August 2017 and arranged for analysis following procedures outlined by Koch, Forgues, and Monties (2017).

Findings

By 2016, 63.1% of LAC attendees had job titles which indicated they were solely responsible for assessment. The educational backgrounds of the 194 individuals either solely tasked with assessment or who had assessment included within their job titles varied widely, from several undergraduate and graduate degrees in English to graduate degrees in public and business administration in addition to the MLS. While the average number of years of work experience between earning a professional library degree and assuming an assessment librarian role was 7.4 years for those working for doctoral institutions and 12.7 years for master's degree institutions, a visual distribution of the number of years of experience before an individual became an assessment librarian revealed that most LAC attendees recently joined the profession. More than 107 had fewer than 5 years of experience.

Practical Implications or Value

Results indicated that librarians tasked with assessment do not have a common educational background beyond the MLS. As a greater number of librarians are assuming the role of assessment librarian post-graduation from library school, it may be too early to determine whether assessment librarians are moving into management roles. Since the majority of assessment librarians included in this study were new to the field, more work is needed to determine both the skills and experiences these individuals bring to the job and whether the skills and experiences they obtain on the job help them mature and grow into higher-level leadership and administrative roles. Research on the career paths of academic librarians typically focuses on the education, skills, and experiences an individual must acquire to competitively position oneself to become a library director.¹ The parity of women in these highest-level leadership roles has been of particular interest.² Until recently, women's representation at the highest leadership ranks of the profession failed to reflect their overall workforce numbers.³ Oft-cited reasons for this discrepancy include a lack of geographic

mobility, career interruptions, and “the extra effort needed to develop a career within the male parameters.”⁴ What if other structural barriers within the profession impede natural career progression, hindering the ability of talented library leaders to attain the experiences needed to mature and grow into a higher-level leadership role? This question is of significant interest as the profession becomes increasingly specialized.

Assessment is a relatively new specialization for academic librarians, and the journey of individuals into assessment librarian roles is broad and varied.⁵ Some individuals are tasked solely with assessing the value of the library and its impact on students and researchers, while others have assessment appended to other core responsibilities such as teaching or public services. The assessment role does differ significantly from other library positions, requiring an ability to execute difficult tasks and complete complex projects either alone or in collaboration with varied individuals and units both within and outside of the library. Thus, it is important to consider when recruiting or reassigning librarians to assessment whether the individual will “lose any responsibilities, such as supervising others, that may adversely affect his or her professional growth or future employment opportunities?”⁶

Individual librarian career development is already constrained by vertical stratification, which limits an individual’s efforts to move between academic, public, and special libraries.⁷ As the academic library profession continues to specialize, funneling librarians into positions requiring higher levels of technical skills and finesse—such as assessment, digital humanities, or GIS—could other cultural and structural barriers be challenging or preventing individuals from growing into or assuming leadership roles? If the “ability to demonstrate and effectively articulate the impact of library programs and services on the larger community is emerging as a key competency for library administrators,” a key competency that requires an ability to gather, critically assess, and use data, assessment librarians may be ideal candidates for higher-level administrative roles. With their specialization, however, are assessment librarians offered experiences and growth opportunities that may facilitate their career progression?⁸

This exploratory study examined the career progression of all librarians who attended the 2008 through 2016 Library Assessment Conferences (LAC). A broad array of individuals with varied portfolio responsibilities, from library directors, assistant directors, department heads, and dedicated assessment professionals, participate in this biennial conference, which is dedicated to building “a vibrant library assessment community by bringing together interested practitioners and researchers who have responsibility or interest in the broad field of library assessment.”⁹ Thus, all attendees presumably have an interest in assessment and nurturing their assessment skills. The study reviewed at a high aggregate level the types of institutions where LAC attendees are employed, and whether attendees solely specialized in assessment, or had assessment responsibilities included in addition to other responsibilities in their job title. The education and experience of attendees solely tasked with assessment or who had assessment included in their job titles was then examined to determine whether there is a typical career pattern for assessment librarians. Do assessment librarians have a common educational background? Is assessment a role typically reserved for mid-career librarians and do assessment librarians progress to higher-level leadership roles?

Methods

Previous studies of the career trajectories of academic librarians have primarily used surveys which directly ask participants to self-disclose their education and experiences leading to their present position.¹⁰ Barbara Moran, Elisabeth Leonard, and Jessica Zellers took a different approach, updating Moran’s 1983 survey using information gleaned from the *American Library Directory*.¹¹ Michael J. Slinger and Sarah C. Slinger utilized the curriculum vitae of academic law library directors, locating the bulk of directors’ CVs online and soliciting the remaining CVs directly via email.¹² As social networking has evolved, online resources such as LinkedIn offer a wealth of readily available information to study individual’s career paths. A study of LinkedIn profiles of Georgia Southern University’s information systems alumni, for example, offered insight into the overall career progress of program graduates, providing data on the types of entry-level positions graduates secured immediately after graduation, and whether alumni transitioned from technical to

managerial roles within fifteen years of graduation.¹³ Daniel J. Mazzola, Robert D. St. Louis, and Mohan R. Tanniru analyzed the career profiles of over 100 CIOs on *The Wall Street Journal's 2014 CIO Network Membership List* to identify “the defining career experiences and educational characteristics of the rungs of the CIO ladder to provide insight for both the firms that hire CIOs and the IT professionals who aspire to be CIOs.”¹⁴

To examine the career paths of LAC participants, the author first downloaded the list of attendees for the 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016 Library Assessment Conferences. These lists were then culled to remove individuals working at institutions outside of the United States, library and information science educators, and vendors. To determine study feasibility, the author then searched for the remaining 1,443 attendees on LinkedIn and determined that 1,006 (69.7%) had complete publically available LinkedIn profiles which met study criteria. To meet study criteria, the attendee had to have earned an ALA-accredited master's degree and his or her profile had to have no employment history gaps greater than 5 years. The author then harvested information contained within these profiles over a two-week period in August 2017 and created a dataset following a model outlined by Michael Koch, Bernard Forgues, and Vanessa Monties for a study of Fortune 100 CEO career patterns.¹⁵ To facilitate analysis, the data was shaped in long format, with each row representing one year in the LAC participant's employment history. In instances where an individual changed jobs during the year, the number of months the individual served in each job was calculated and the position with the greatest number of months was assigned. If the switch occurred in June or July of the calendar year, the position the individual held in the second half of the year was assigned. Data entered into columns included the year of employment, the full name of the LAC participant, his or her title during the corresponding year of employment, and his or her employer. The year the individual earned his or her MLS, MLIS, or similar ALA accredited degree, was also recorded, along with the institution where the MLS was earned. If the individual earned a second or third master's degree or a PhD, the year the degree was earned, along with the degree itself, and subject of the degree was recorded. The last columns recorded the year and field of the undergraduate degree and the years the individuals attended the Library Assessment Conference.

The name of the institution of employment was then cleaned to match the institution name listed in the 2015 Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education Data File.¹⁶ This allowed the author to quickly enhance the dataset by adding the Carnegie 2015 Basic Classification Code, as well as the city and state of the employing institution to each row using a Microsoft Access database. Lastly, the author coded each position using the instructions for the 2017–2018 ARL Annual Salary Survey as a guide.¹⁷ To facilitate analysis, the ARL codes were condensed into six categories, with a list of the types of titles included in each category:

- Director—Director, Dean of Library, University Librarian, Vice Provost of Libraries, and other equivalent titles, as well as Head of Medical Library or Head of Law Library;
- Associate—Associate Dean or Director, Assistant Dean or Director;
- Head Branch/Unit—except Head of Medical Library or Head of Law Library;
- Specialist—all positions classified as Digital Specialist, Functional Specialist, or Subject Specialist, except those coded for assessment;
- Assessment—Assessment, Management Information Systems, Planning, as well as Analyst and User Experience titles;
- Generalist—all other job codes listed in the instructions.

Since the instructions for the salary survey indicate that only one job code may be selected per appointment, if any of the titles listed for the assessment category were present in the job title, the assessment code was assigned. The titles for positions coded assessment were then further coded to parse out whether individuals were solely responsible for assessment, or assessment was an additional responsibility.

The final dataset was then connected to Tableau for visualization and analysis.¹⁸ To explore potential career patterns of assessment librarians, level of detail (LOD) calculations were used to determine the number of years an individual worked in libraries after earning their library degree and before assuming a position with assessment responsibilities. LOD calculations were also used to explore mobility both within employers and

between employers before the individual's first assessment position, as both internal and geographic mobility is recognized as a factor relevant to advancement on the professional career ladder.¹⁹ The educational backgrounds of assessment librarians were examined to determine the presence of additional graduate degrees beyond the MLS and the relation of an individual's undergraduate and graduate degrees to assessment. To explore whether assessment librarians grow into or assume leadership roles over time, a Sankey diagram showing the career paths of LAC attendees from 2008 to 2016 was constructed using SankeyMATIC, a d3.js-based open source tool, and the rough hierarchy of positions outlined by the ARL Salary Survey instructions.²⁰ Sankey diagrams are a useful visual tool for displaying the proportional quantity of flow from one category to another. They have historically been used to depict energy flows, and have many potential practical applications for the library profession.

Results

A profile of LAC participants since 2008 reveals that, before 2016, more library directors, associate directors, and heads of branch libraries or library units attended the conference than library assessment specialists (Table 1). This shift was particularly noted among doctoral-granting institutions, where attendance by higher-level administrators and middle managers in relation to assessment specialists fell from roughly 70.0% in 2008 to just 45.1% (n=204) in 2016. This may reflect the targeted hiring of assessment specialists by ARL institutions during this period and the ongoing growth of assessment as a specialized area of academic librarianship.²¹ Of individuals classified as assessment specialists, by 2016, 63.1% (n=89) had job titles which indicated they were solely responsible for assessment (Table 2).

A view of the 194 assessment specialists whose LinkedIn profiles met the study criteria revealed a kaleidoscope of educational backgrounds, with English (n=32), history (n=9), psychology (n=9), and art (n=7) as the top undergraduate degrees and education (n=10), English (n=8), history (n=8), public administration (n=8), and business administration (n=7) as the top graduate degrees (Figures 1–2). Of these 194 assessment librarians, 7.2% (n=14) earned a PhD and 35.6% (n=69) earned one or more graduate degrees in addition to the MLS. When looking at the number of years individuals had in the library profession before assuming their first assessment position, experience ranged from the first job following graduation from library school to 41 years in various library positions (Table 3). The average number of years of work experience between earning a professional degree and assuming an assessment librarian role was 7.4 years for doctoral institutions and 12.7 years for master's-granting institutions. When looking at a visual of the distribution of the number of years of experience before an individual became an assessment librarian, however, it is clear that most assessment specialists recently joined the profession, with 107 having less than 5 years of experience (Figure 3).

Across all Carnegie classifications, assessment specialists worked for an average of 1.7 to 2.0 employers and held an average of 1.4 to 1.6 positions with each employer before assuming their role (Table 4). The majority of all assessment specialists only had one employer and one position with their employer (Figure 4). The Sankey diagram illustrates little movement for assessment specialists who first attended LAC in 2008 to other roles. A small number have shifted into associate director roles and a few have assumed generalist positions. Some generalists and heads of branches or units have moved into assessment roles.

Discussion

As the ability to gather, analyze, and use evidence to inform decision-making and articulate the impact of library programs and services has emerged as a key leadership and management competency, assessment librarians may be ideal candidates for higher-level administrative roles. Much political skill and finesse is required to rally librarians and staff to gather data, analyze it, and then either apply what they have learned to improve a program or service, or communicate the value of a library program or service to a broader group of stakeholders. Until recently, however, assessment has mainly been the purview of higher-level academic library administrators. Before 2016, more library directors, associate directors, and heads of library units attended LAC than individuals singularly tasked with assessment. The majority of assessment librarians attending LAC are relatively new to the field. Ideally this allows them "to put into immediate practice the research and assessment methods learned as a graduate student."²² Still, it is of interest to know whether

assessment librarians with less than five years of experience feel positioned to be successful in their new roles. Have they acquired the soft skills necessary to advocate for change? Are they appropriately included in change initiatives so that their work is not in vain? Can they see the results of their assessment efforts? Are they viewed as individuals with leadership and management potential, or technical experts responsible for collecting and analyzing data? Since the bulk of individuals included in this study are new to assessment, it may be too early to determine whether assessment librarians are moving into higher-level leadership and management roles. Follow-up studies may be needed to answer these questions.

Overall, the lack of movement between categories suggests that more experienced librarians included in this study are not progressing in large numbers to higher-level leadership and management roles. Several theories and much speculation abounds as to why librarians, women in particular, either opt out or do not progress to higher-levels of leadership within academic libraries. Researchers cite barriers such as geographic mobility, career interruptions, and a lack of appropriate degrees, certifications, and experiences.²³ Some employers are biased against promoting internal talent, preferring to “[look] for ‘new blood’ to infuse an organization with fresh experiences and enthusiasm.”²⁴ Other talent may be stymied by structural barriers, which prevent individuals from obtaining the necessary experiences and opportunities needed for career growth.²⁵ These factors alone, however, do not influence an individual’s career trajectory. A major limitation of this study is that it assumes a traditional career, where individuals progress vertically through a series of entry-level through high-level administrative leadership roles, was a desired aspiration of LAC participants. It fails to consider a whole-life approach to career development, which recognizes that “professional development does not occur in isolation but in the context of the employee’s personal and family needs, which change over the life course.”²⁶ Valuable context, such as whether an individual is part of a dual-career couple, parent of a young child, caregiver, and more cannot be harvested from LinkedIn profiles nor represented by a Sankey diagram. A further study limitation is that newer librarians may be more likely to construct a complete LinkedIn profile and thus are overrepresented in the sample. Assessment librarians who have not attended a Library Assessment Conference were also not included.

A typical career pattern for assessment librarians remains difficult to discern. With an exception for psychology, the top undergraduate degrees were in the humanities. The humanities also dominated the subjects in which assessment librarians earned an additional graduate degree; however, business administration and public administration were present in the top five. Since the majority of assessment librarians included in this study were new to the field, more work is needed to determine both the skills and experiences these individuals both bring to the job, and whether the skills and experiences they obtain on the job help them mature and grow into higher-level leadership and management roles. With mentoring, training, and coaching of peers to support assessment listed as a key proficiency for assessment librarians and coordinators, assessment librarians may be well positioned to assume leadership and management roles, as long as care is taken to ensure that they are exposed to a full range of experiences that nurture their professional growth.

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Notes

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Table 1. Profile of Library Assessment Conference Attendees, 2008–2016, by Carnegie Classification of Employing Institution

<u>Conference Year</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>2014</u>	<u>2016</u>
Total Attendance	377	474	560	611	645
US Academic Librarians only	278	340	435	445	505
Meets Study Criteria	161	212	280	296	348
(% US Academic Librarians)	(57.9)	(62.4)	(64.4)	(66.5)	(68.9)
<u>All</u>					
Director	33	37	56	43	46
Associate Director	48	62	76	68	61
Head Branch/Unit	37	45	51	64	55
Specialist (including assessment)	105	139	168	182	230
-assessment only	45	62	85	103	141
Generalist	55	57	84	88	113
<u>Doctoral</u>					
Director	15	16	19	13	14
Associate Director	32	54	60	51	46
Head Branch/Unit	24	32	39	39	32
Specialist (including assessment)	80	107	137	144	172
-assessment only	35	53	77	86	112
Generalist	33	29	47	46	58
<u>Master's</u>					
Director	8	12	18	18	18
Associate Director	10	5	11	10	11
Head Branch/Unit	8	10	10	22	14
Specialist (including assessment)	17	22	23	28	35
-assessment only	5	5	6	11	17
Generalist	8	19	23	28	27
<u>Baccalaureate/Associate's/Other</u>					
Director	10	9	19	12	13
Associate Director	6	3	5	7	4
Head Branch/Unit	5	3	2	3	9
Specialist (including assessment)	8	10	8	10	23

Conference Year	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016
-assessment only	5	4	2	6	12
Generalist	14	9	14	14	28

Table 2. Number of 2008–2016 Library Assessment Conference Attendees Classified as Assessment Specialists, with Only Assessment in their Position Titles

Conference Year	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016
Total Number of Assessment Specialists	45	62	85	103	141
Assessment Duties Only	25	30	54	65	89
(% Assessment Specialist with Assessment Duties Only)	(55.6)	(48.4)	(63.5)	(63.1)	(63.1)
Remain in Assessment, 2017	8	19	26	42	78

Table 3. Number of Years in the Library Profession before First Assessment Position, by Carnegie Classification of Institution of First Assessment Position

Carnegie Classification	n=	Average # Years	Median	Range
Doctoral	151	7.4	6.0	0–35
Master’s	24	12.7	9.0	1–41
Baccalaureate/Associate’s/Other	19	5.3	3.0	0–31

Table 4. Average Number of Employers and Average Number of Positions with Each Employer before First Assessment Position, by Carnegie Classification of Institution of First Assessment Position

Carnegie Classification	n=	Average	Range
Average Number of Employers			
Doctoral	150	1.7	1–7
Master’s	23	2.0	1–6
Baccalaureate/Associate’s/Other	1.8	1.9	1–5
Average Number of Positions with Each Employer			
Doctoral	150	1.6	1–4
Master’s	23	1.4	1–3
Baccalaureate/Associate’s/Other	19	1.6	1–6

Figure 2. Graduate Degrees of Assessment Specialists Who Attended the Library Assessment Conference, 2008–2016



Figure 3. Histogram Showing Number of Years in the Library Profession before First Assessment Position, by Carnegie Classification of Institution of First Assessment Position

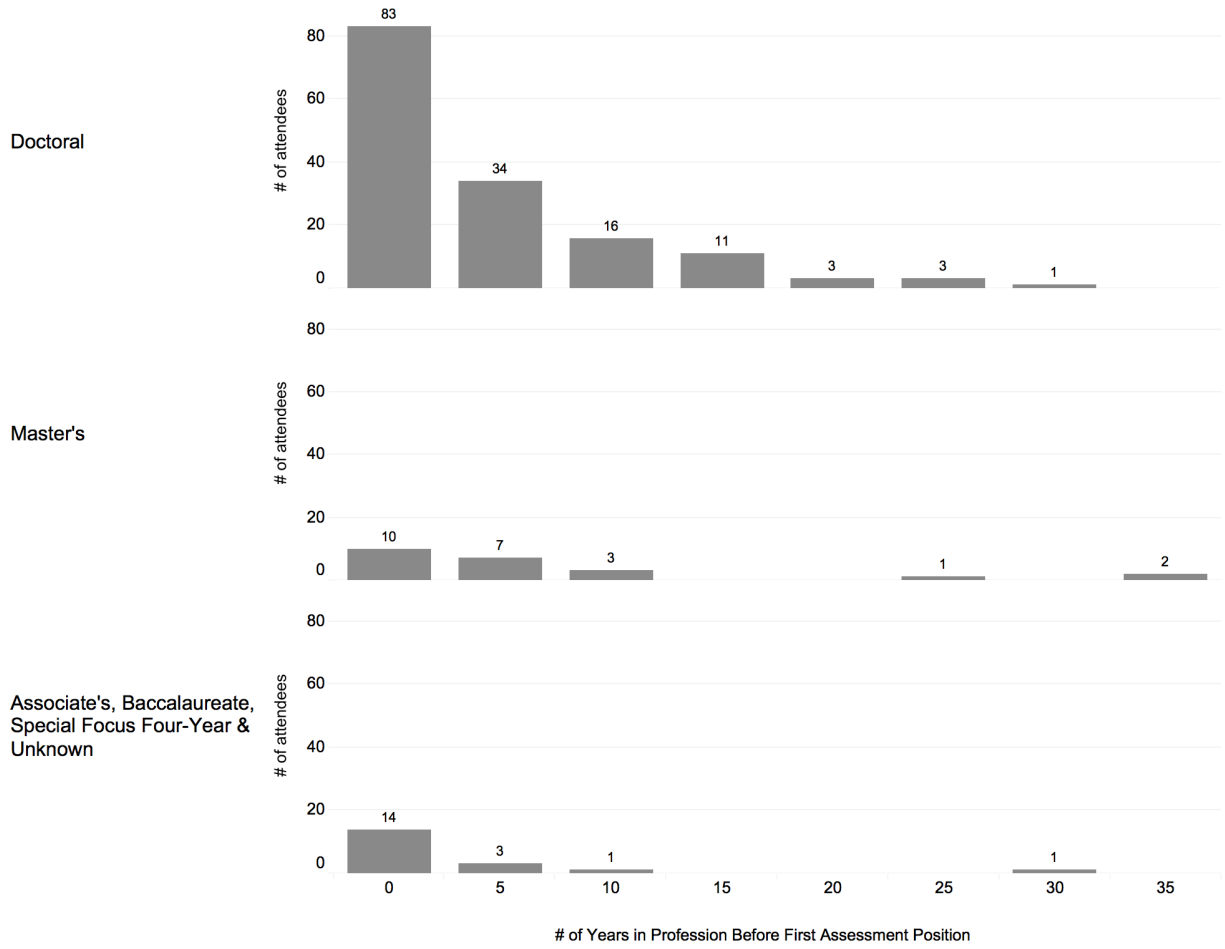


Figure 4. Number of Job Spells between Employers and within Employers for 2008–2016 Library Assessment Conference Attendees

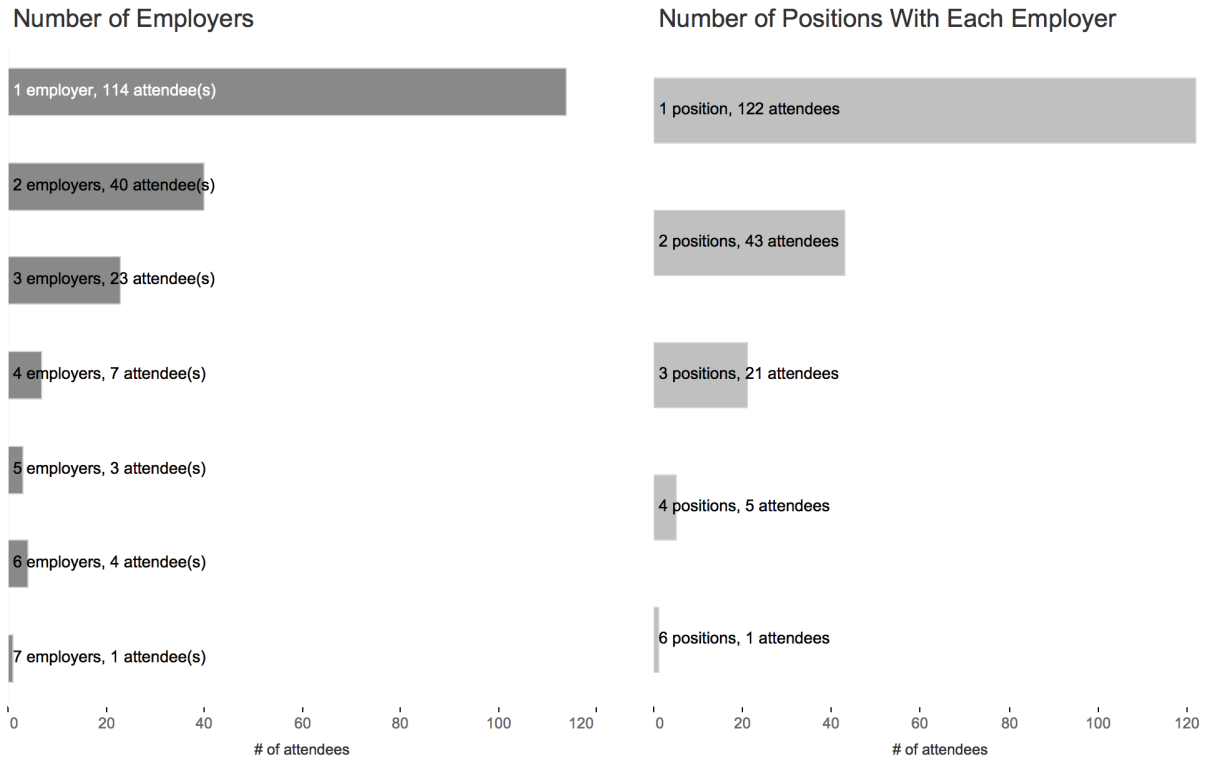


Figure 5. Career Progression of Library Assessment Conference Attendees, 2008–2016

