

Members assess ACRL prior to the new millennium

Results of the 1997 member survey

by Althea H. Jenkins and Michael Godow

Every four years, ACRL surveys a sampling of its personal members in order to assess the membership profile, their needs, effectiveness of programs, and new trends. The most recent survey, conducted by Research USA, Inc. in the fall of 1997 is unique in two very important ways: it is the last survey to be taken in the 20th century, and it assesses the condition, attitudes, and needs of librarians, whose rapidly evolving profession has been transformed by information technology and the digital environment.

The profession of academic librarianship is no easier today than it was four years ago. Providing access to materials, adjusting to technology, dealing with tighter budgets, and preserving library materials are still major concerns within the profession. However, the advent of digital data has deluged librarians with new concerns about access to this information, organization of the material, its preservation, and the ramifications of copyright. While technology is simplifying library services in some areas, it is complicating them in many others.

Thus, the results of this survey are instrumental not only in assessing the needs and wants of academic librarians, but also

for planning future programs and services in response to those needs.

Methodology

The sample size for the survey was 900 members. These names were selected from the ACRL personal membership list on an *nth* name basis. On September 23, 1997, every name selected was mailed an advance-notice postcard from ACRL President W. Lee Hisle asking for member participation. A four-page questionnaire was mailed by Research USA to each name on September 30, 1997, with an ACRL cover letter, a one-dollar bill incentive, and a stamped return envelope. A second copy of the questionnaire, with a cover letter and stamped return envelope, was mailed to nonrespondents on October 21, 1997. The cover letter from Research USA thanked those who may have just responded and asked all others to please do so for the success of the survey. On December 5, Research USA began to tabulate the 546 completed questionnaires that were returned. Of the 900 questionnaires that were mailed, 22 were returned incomplete, 2 were undeliverable, and 6 were too late for tabulation. This resulted in a net effective mailing of 870, from which 546 ques-

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tionnaires were returned, for a net percentage return of 62.8%.

Results of the survey for the total membership are projectable within a range of plus or minus 4.3% with a confidence level of 95%.

The questionnaire consisted of 42 questions under six headings which included: about you and your organization; about you and ACRL; ACRL publications; ACRL and professional development; rating the association; and statistical information. Most questions were close-ended and several required respondents to rate items by level of importance.

Key findings

The typical ACRL member is Caucasian (91.9%), female (68%), 48 years old, and has been a member of ACRL for 11 years. She most likely works in a university (52%) and is a department head or supervisor who works in administration.

This year, in order to verify the accuracy of the survey sample, we checked the survey responses against the ALA database in the areas of position code, work code, and type of library and found the survey results to be within their projected tolerances. Specifically, 33% of our members are department heads or supervisors, 29% are non-supervisory, and 17% are directors. More than half of our membership works in administration or reference services. Most ACRL members work in a university library (52%), followed by comprehensive, 4-year, and 2-year institutions. These profiles have not changed dramatically from the 1993 survey,

but there are some subtle differences and trends worthy of note.

Membership is aging

The median age of our membership has increased from 43.9 years in 1989 to 48.2 years in 1997. Members 55 and older make up 25.1% of the membership base compared to 19.6% in 1993. However, membership in the age group 34 and under is also growing. This group made up 10.2% of our base compared to 8% in 1993.

The average length of membership in ACRL has also grown from 8.5 years in 1989 to 11.0 years in 1997. An encouraging sign for our association is that the category "new members with less than two years in ACRL" has grown from 11.8% in 1993 to 15.5% in 1997.

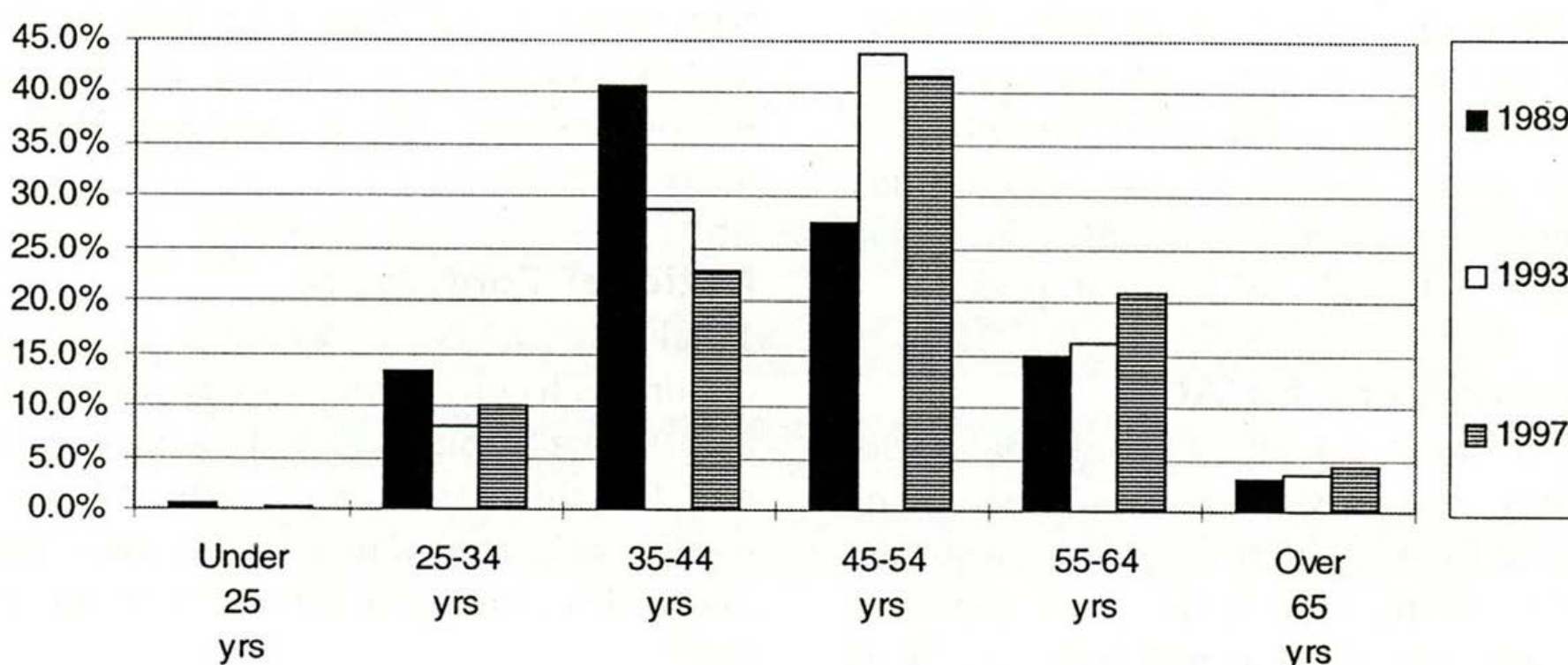
Participation in sections is down

In 1997, 74.4% of membership belonged to one or more sections. This is down from 80.7% in 1993. The three sections that have the most members are: University Libraries Section (ULS), Instruction Section (IS), and College Libraries Section (CLS). The English and American Literature (EALS) and Extended Campus Library Services (ECLSS) sections showed the largest percentage of growth since 1993.

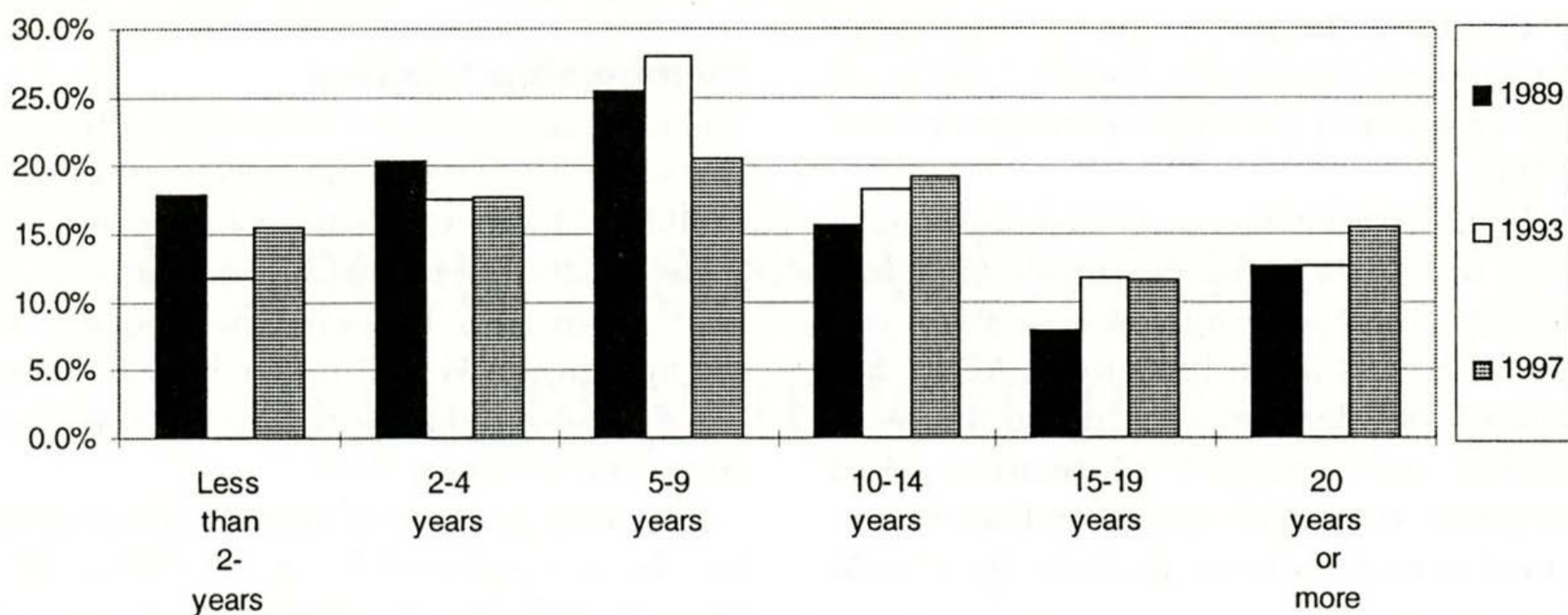
Adjusting to technology is the most critical issue facing members

Close to 39% of respondents highlighted "technological change" as the most critical issue they face as librarians. Some of the most common answers were: "Keeping abreast of changing technologies"; "Keep-

Age of membership



Length of membership in ACRL



ing up with the electronic revolution”; and “Keeping up with electronic resources and evaluating them for selection purposes.” This response was given nearly two-to-one over the next critical issue, which was “tight budgets” (18.1%), followed by “ability to provide information in multiple formats” and “staff development/training.”

Librarians also responded that providing information in multiple formats and adjusting to technology were the two main critical issues facing their profession. It is thus no surprise that academic librarians are seeking additional professional development opportunities to cope with the ever-changing digital environment. The next three most critical issues are: “tight budgets”; “staying relevant”; and “maintaining traditional print services.”

Members plan to participate in ACRL educational activities

More than 81% of the membership plans to participate in some ACRL educational activity. This is up from 78.4% in 1993. Respondents also told us that professional development (71.8%) is the most important of ACRL’s goals. Members overwhelmingly desire programs in developing and updating their technical and leadership skills.

New directions for ACRL

Members were asked to identify programs, activities, and services not currently being provided by ACRL that would be most beneficial to them. Out of the more than 100 responses, seven areas and topics surfaced

repeatedly. These were: diversity/ethnic programs, teleconference or videoconference programs, state and intrastate conferences, leadership training, more research on relevant library issues, better use of technology to support members’ work, and advocacy for librarians.

A growing desire for regional programs and teleconferencing

ALA Annual Conference, ACRL National Conference, and ACRL Chapter programs are still the most preferred delivery methods for ACRL’s product. However, members clearly indicated that they consider regional institutes/workshops and teleconferencing/distance learning to be up-and-coming contenders.

The survey indicated that 76.8% of respondents have teleconferencing or distance learning courses on their campus and that 71.4% would like to have ACRL programs teleconferenced to them.

No doubt the reason for this was indicated by the answer to another question, which told us that limited institutional funds and cost of travel or lodging are the major reasons given for not attending an ACRL National Conference.

National Conference

Total attendance at National Conference continues to grow, and survey respondents told us that “topics covered” is the main reason for this. ACRL members still desire conference frequency to be two years, about the same percentage as in the 1989 survey.

Members are becoming more active in ACRL offices and activities

Participation by members in one or more ACRL office or activities grew by 12%, compared to 1993. The most participated in are: Section Committee, Discussion Group, and Committee/Task Force. Participation in Discussion Groups grew by 9.3% over 1993.

ACRL publications are still preferred in print format

When offered the choice of paper or electronic versions of *C&RL News*, *C&RL*, and *RBML*, members preferred paper. The next most popular response for these publications was for both paper and electronic versions. The only publications preferred in electronic format are the section newsletters.

Academic focus most important reason for ACRL membership

Academic focus is the "most important" reason for keeping an ACRL membership. Excluding *C&RL News* and *C&RL* journal, the activities and programs judged to be of the "greatest value" are standards and guidelines, programs at ALA Conference, library statistics, National Conference, and job opportunity information.

Four-fifths of ACRL membership belongs to other organizations

State library association, ACRL chapter, and special library association (SLA) were the top three "other" associations mentioned in this survey. It is interesting to note that approximately 9.4% of the surveyed members belong to SLA. SLA did a member survey in 1996 that indicated some striking similarities with our membership.

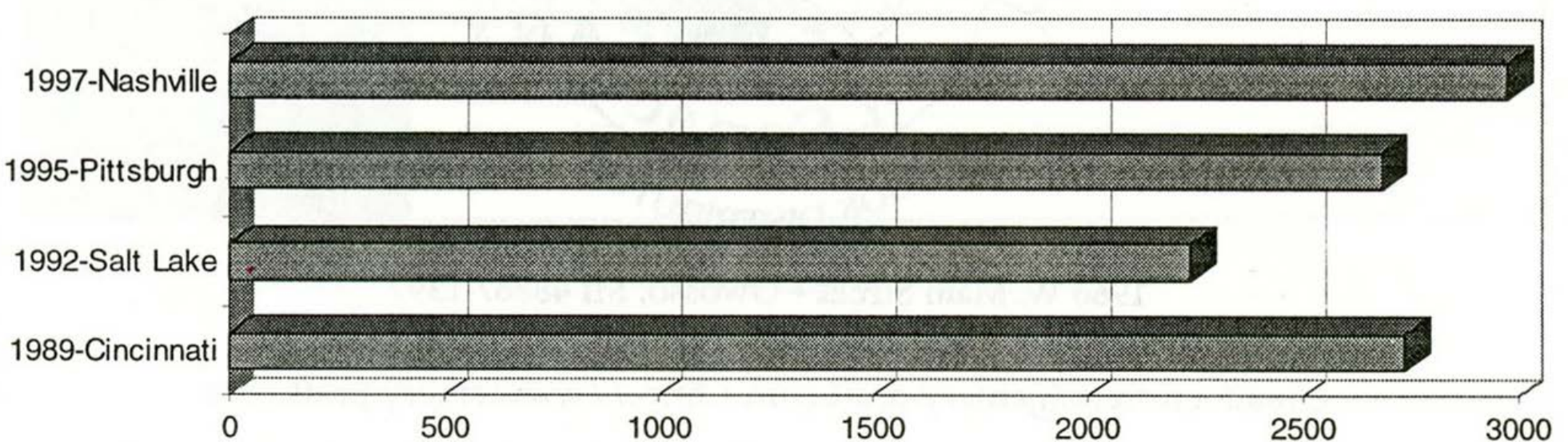
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Both ACRL and SLA members have a high level of technological accessibility, prefer print format for their publications, desire professional growth, and have an aging membership. But SLA and ACRL members differ in their reasons for attending Annual Conference. SLA members indicated "exhibits" to be the most important factor in influencing their decision to attend SLA Annual Conference. ACRL members indicated "Topics covered" as the most important factor influencing their attendance at National Conference.

Summary and conclusion

The success of an association is measured by the extent to which it meets the demands of its membership and strengthens their ability to provide superior services and resources. Thus, the member survey becomes one of our most important tools to gauge the extent to which these wants and needs are being fulfilled. The 1997 Membership Survey clearly indicated that ACRL's members consider information technology and its implications in academic libraries to be the force to be reckoned with now and into the next millennium. In order to contend with an evolving digital environment, members want ACRL to continue to provide professional development activities that improve their abil-

Attendance is growing at National Conference



ACRL's members consider information technology and its implications in academic libraries to be the force to be reckoned with now and into the next millennium.

ity to use and apply technology, as well as enhance their leadership and advocacy skills. Members whose institutions are undergoing budget constraints want ACRL to experiment with alternative delivery methods, such as regional institutes and distance learning.

ACRL is listening and responding to its membership by continuing to provide excellent programs, services, and products. The 1999 ACRL National Conference in Detroit, "Racing Toward Tomorrow," will provide over 250 program sessions on themes such as the changing environment, the expanding knowledge base, and life-long learning. ACRL also offered its first regional institute, April 30-May 1, 1998, on leadership. Another institute is under development and includes several other organizations in its planning.

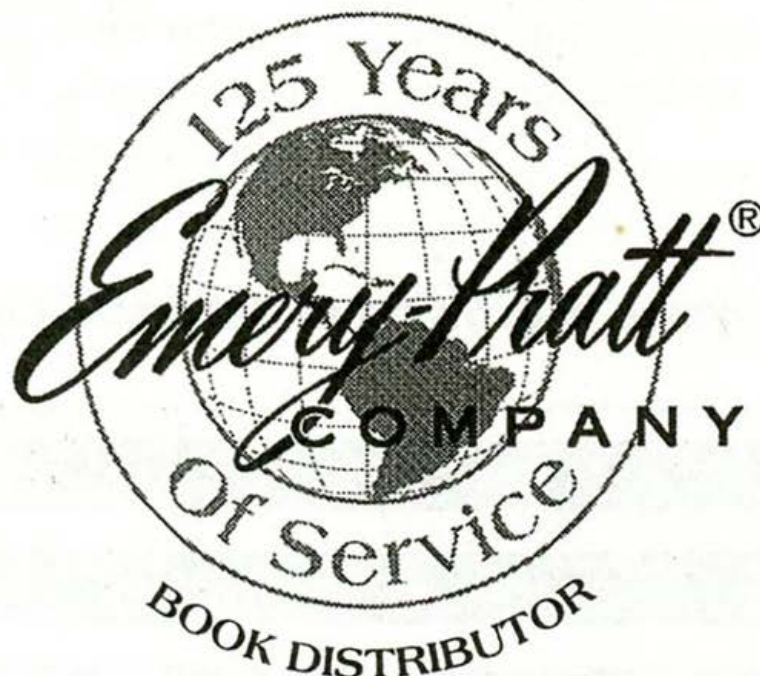
In the legislative arena, ACRL is advocating library issues to our congressional representatives that explain the academic librarian's point of view to ensure that our ability to provide information is not encumbered.

Members are ACRL's most valuable asset, and we are pleased that respondents felt that the association is meeting many of their needs and that programs and services are valued. ACRL will continue to track trends, assess the needs of the ACRL membership, and evaluate its programming so that we can continue to be responsive to membership with high-quality programs and services.

ACRL would also like to express its appreciation to the survey respondents who took time out of their busy schedules to complete this important assessment tool. This information will be used by the Board of Directors, its committees, sections, and chapters to review, update, and develop programs and products that meet the needs of our members.

The Board will continue to use the survey results in setting priorities and updating the Strategic Plan. ■

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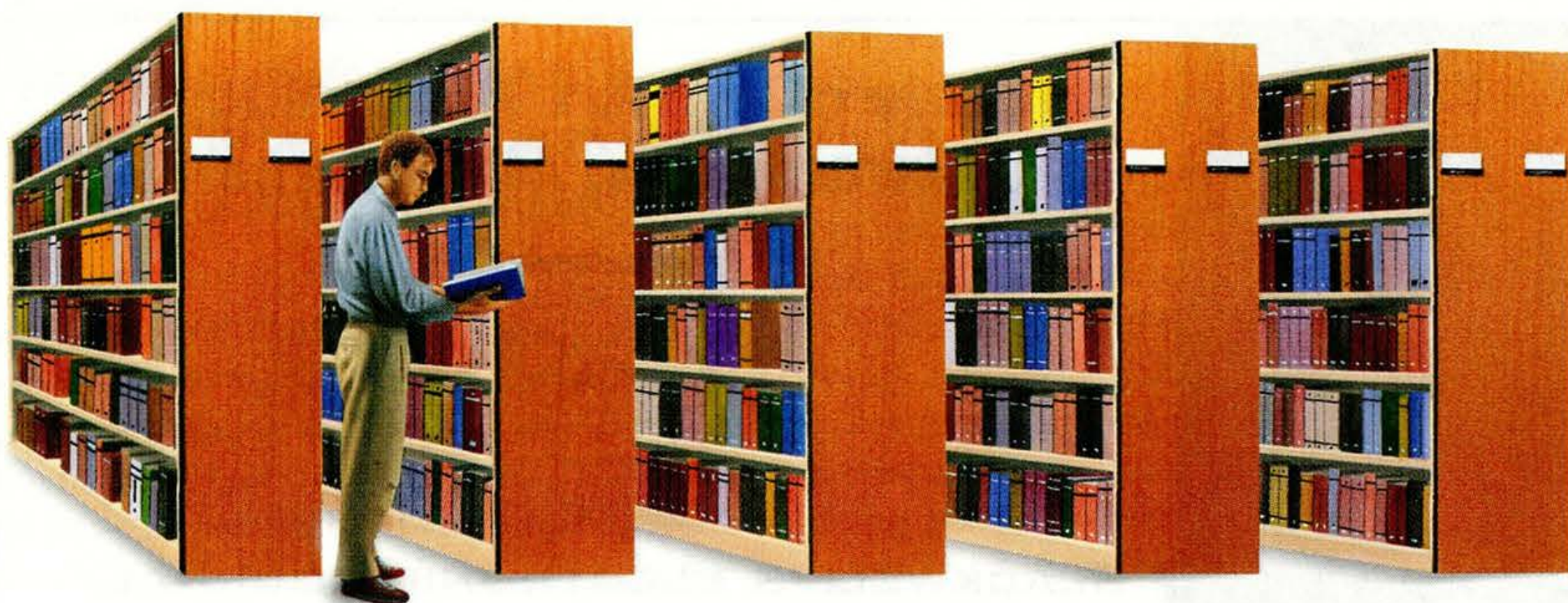
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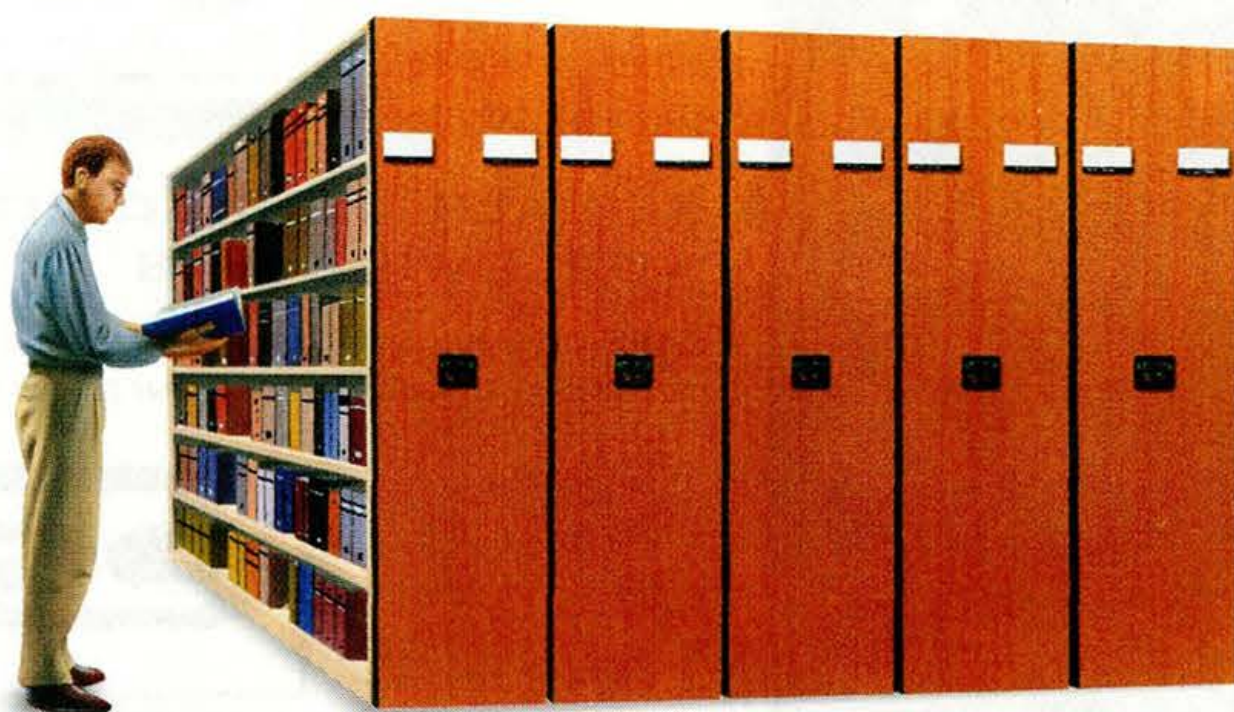
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