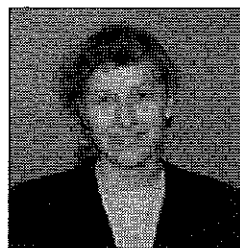


The Virtual Library: Future or Fantasy?



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The Environment of Change

There are many factors which initiate sudden change within the corporate world. Ultimately, they come down to two issues; money and resources.

The decision to convert the Library of the Australian Securities Commission New South Wales Regional Office to the "virtual library of the future" was no different. The change in Federal government during 1996 brought serious funding implications for many Federal government departments. Law enforcement agencies such as the ASC were among those affected. Part of Management's strategy to reduce operational costs involved the rationalising of CBD accommodation, that is bringing staff from another office into the King Street ASC Centre. This strategy depended on a total restructure of staff and floor space, incorporating dramatic changes to library accommodation and services

Commitment

Library services within the ASC had always been well respected and utilised. Heavily dependent on commercial online databases, the Internet, and a core of networked CD-ROM, the libraries in each office aimed to deliver an efficient and accurate information service. Each library was well supported by a hard copy collection comprising law reports, legal and accounting texts, management, fraud, and white collar crime texts and looseleaf services, along with other financial and corporate resources. The collection of the NSW Regional Office was one of the larger collections within the network, staffed by four full time people, and servicing approximately 240 staff from a variety of professions - legal, accounting, finance, law enforcement, managerial, and corporate regulation.

The need to maintain a vital and responsive information service was recognised by Management yet, when presented with the dilemma of accommodating additional staff within the existing King Street Centre, they were forced to consider the option of reducing the existing library collection and accommodation area. This is similar to scenarios encountered by academic institutions and other corporate entities faced with the challenge of providing access to information without actually possessing hard copy, in a bid to reduce escalating subscription and accommodation costs.

The Challenge for Strategy

It was at this stage of decision making that library staff were consulted and presented with the need to develop a strategy that would enable the essential changes to take place. The parameters to be set were:

- reduce collection and accommodation space by 50%.
- reduce maintenance and collection costs by 50%
- reduce staffing numbers by 50%.

BUT continue to maintain a responsive, efficient and focused information service.

Time was limited as accommodation issues such as subletting, removals and office fitouts were, of necessity, dictating the time schedule. Each step in the change process would require careful consideration and planning

The option put forward to Management, in the face of existing limitations, was to embrace fully the concept of the virtual library and exploit the benefits of available technology

The Virtual Library

The term "virtual library" is used increasingly to refer to "the vast amount of information available in electronic form which is accessed either as an online service, CD-ROM, or other database, using a PC. You have access to information when you want it, rather than owning information in a tangible form". (S. Ellaby, 1996 p6) It is part of a growing trend in recognition of the need for libraries to change their philosophy from "just-in- case, to just-in-time", to use the terminology adopted by Terret. (See A. Terret, 1995). The emphasis is the change from paper ownership and its inherent costs to accessibility of information "Virtual denotes that which is apparent rather than real. A virtual library is not an actual physical facility, but a collection of books, articles and other texts, in electronic format, which in essence constitute a library." (J Kibbee 1994, p100).

The initial strategy considered conversion, wherever possible, of hardcopy research tools to electronic format, exercising a disposal plan for hardcopy duplicates, and minimising space requirements. The objective was to continue to provide access to the same information wherever possible, while reducing the need for physical space. A detailed budget was drawn up, calculated and approved, comparing savings in reduced subscription costs and maintenance, alongside the required investment in additional electronic resources, supporting hardware and estimated resale value for collection disposal.

The Process

a) Collection Development: The existing guidelines, originally compiled as a co-operative document within the ASC Library Network were discarded. Existing subscriptions were examined and reviewed in the light of the following:

- Was the information available in electronic format? (Internet, online or CD-ROM?)
- Was the information readily available from another ASC Library?
- Were there duplicate subscriptions of the same titles?
- How heavily/regularly was a subscription used within the Regional Office?

b) Liaison: Keeping both Management and staff informed of planning was a challenge. Management showed great support for the suggested changes throughout the entire procedure, offering resources and opportunity for discussion wherever required, confirming the concept put forward by Byrne, that “it is crucial that information systems and services within an organisation must be driven by the objective of supporting key business and to do this senior managers must be involved as sponsors and actively support the library and information services development plan.” (D. Byrne, 1995 p424).

Staff, on the other hand, always strongly supportive of their library, showed every sign of entering a grieving process. Denial, aggression, resistance to the change, all reflected not only their appreciation of the collection but also of the service they had been used to receiving.

A series of open forums were held over the transition period to keep staff informed of changes and to provide an opportunity for feedback. Ideally, prior to any changes taking place, a marketing plan and supporting strategies would have been created for implementation, and this would have contributed towards a wider acceptance of the proposals. Unfortunately the change process was reactive. The advantage of holding these forums was that it enabled specific client groups opportunities to express their views, to ask questions and highlight issues relevant to their needs, and subsequently participate in the change. It gave them some ownership. Each meeting was documented to ensure that all issues raised were addressed.

In addition to meeting with specific client groups, a number of articles were published and distributed through the staff newsletter, the *Regional Office News*, informing them of the latest developments.

c) Dismantling the Collection: This phase in the procedure is probably the most painful from the viewpoint of a professional librarian. After years of developing a hardcopy collection, it was difficult actively to dismantle it in order to begin again using a different medium. The major focus of this process was the disposal of law reports, serials and looseleaf services.

The law reports, due to their comprehensiveness, their relevance to the legal profession as working tools, and their potential resale value, offered an opportunity to recoup costs which could then be rechannelled into the establishment of the virtual library. This involved the valuation of the reports - calculated on the basis of the accepted formula for resale of second hand reference material in good condition, (5/8 of current value), advertisement of the sale, clarification of procedures for rechanneling sale value back into the operational budget of the library, and storage of material in an appropriate environment pending sale.

The serial collection was broken up and transferred across the ASC Library Network. Some subscriptions were allowed to expire while others were formally cancelled. Short runs of serials of little or no significant resale value were disposed of according to Australian Public Service Disposal Guidelines

A minimum of one representative copy of all looseleaf services was maintained within the Reference collection, while the majority of duplicate subscriptions were cancelled. Where a particular client group could put forward a legitimate case for maintaining additional subscriptions these titles were considered for retention on a case by case basis

d) Rebuilding the Collection: A core collection of hardcopy resources remains, comprising the following material:

- the textbook collection
- the legislation collection
- a reference collection, including representative titles of all necessary looseleaf services

The hardcopy collection occupies a total of thirty-one bays of shelving, representing a reduction from an initial sixty-six. There is little physical facility for subsequent development/expansion of the hardcopy collection. This fulfils one of the original requirements of Management to reduce the collection size by 50 percent.

The focus of future collection development in the short to medium term will move towards dependence on CD-ROM resources. "Clients expect to be able to access information quickly and easily, so if the aim of collection development is to satisfy the needs of the user, then collection development will be a mix of electronic and print based resources, until most clients find it easier to browse online databases than shelves. The challenge is to make it as easy for the client to stumble across something they need in the virtual library, as it is for them to stumble across it on the shelf" (C. Moffat, 1996 p210). There is a potential role to be considered here for future developments, with library staff actively contributing to intranet developments through menu access and design and content selection on behalf of the organisation.

Why CD-ROM? CD products are finally at a point where they provide choice of product, subject material, and some consistency of search procedure. For the ASC, networked CD-ROM's had been in place for a number of years, providing some degree of familiarity to staff and an existing network structure. It also solved the problem of providing multiple access to a single product simultaneously, after duplicate looseleaf service subscriptions had been cancelled.

Suppliers proved most helpful at this stage of the process, taking an interest in our approach and volunteering information and support concerning their products. One supplier in particular is to be commended for its foresight implementing a conversion program of looseleaf services to CD-ROM equivalents.

CDs provide the additional advantage of bringing the information to the desktop in a format that is increasingly targeting the end user. Unlike commercial online databases, the majority of which continue to focus on specialised command language and incur a time generated fee, CD-ROMs provide the opportunity for the end user to experiment in search techniques and other CD facilities without the pressures of time and cost.

Why not the Internet? This question was raised within the ASC during the change process, and it was crucial that it was addressed. While network Internet access is scheduled for implementation across the ASC in 1997, stringent security requirements demand careful planning and management. While the initial funding and accommodation problem required an immediate response, Internet technology within the ASC was not yet at a point where network access could be guaranteed or relied upon.

The alternative of stand alone Internet access was considered but was not thought sufficient to cope with the demand that would be generated by the disposal of hard copy material. In addition, issues such as reliability of Internet connections, download time, and the scope of subject material required, was thought at present to be insufficient compared to service levels previously achieved with hardcopy material or networked CD-ROMs.

e) Staffing: Any demand to reduce staffing levels by 50% and yet maintain service levels of an information centre, represents achieving the impossible for any manager. Personalities aside, it requires an objective approach coupled with a clear analysis of essential tasks and roles

Prior to any changes, staffing for the NSW Regional Office Library was as follows:

Library Manager	Senior Professional Officer-C Level
Reference Librarian	Professional Officer-Grade Two
Library Assistant	Administrative Service Officer-Level Three
Library Assistant	Administrative Service Officer-Level Two

Selection criteria and duty statements required identification of essential tasks and a number of staffing options were subsequently considered. The final recommendation approved was the retention of the Library Manager position and the upgrading of the Administrative Service Officer-Level Three to a Level Four position. The retention of the Manager's position was to maintain the level of professionalism and ability to continue planning, reporting and representing NSW Regional Office information needs within the ASC Library Network, as well as to deliver high level reference and research support.

Upgrading of the Library Assistant position was designed to reflect both the high level technical responsibilities required along with additional responsibilities of reference support and reporting requirements. A decision to outsource filing and accessioning was designed to minimise the costs and maintenance of the collection.

Two staff not retained by the library were redeployed to other areas of the ASC, with the position Reference Librarian being transferred to the Sydney Chairman's Office Library.

Issues

Not all issues were obvious when strategies were first implemented, although a number of them quickly became so.

a) Transition Period: There was a period of delay between the time when the Library moved to a smaller location, requiring immediate deployment of the law reports for sale, and full functioning of the replacement CD-ROM Network.

This resulted in the Library service effectively having to effectively close for a month to facilitate networking and re-establishment of the collection at the new site. As this proceeded, the existing CD hardware proved to be inadequate, lacking power to sustain the range of extended products across the network.

b) Networking Hardware: New configurations, along with new Winframe software are now being trialed for CD Networking purposes within the NSW Regional Office. Not only will the new configuration support a range of disks, numbering between thirty-five and forty products, it will enable multiple users to access reliably a number of different disks simultaneously. If this trial proves successful within the Regional Office context, the software will be extended to run across the ASC's Wide Area Network, allowing significant savings nationally in subscription costs. Regional network hardware will then be used to supplement a core national service, with specialised CD products relevant to Regional Office needs.

c) Training and Marketing: Given the time constraints to strategic planning of this project, and the inability to fully design and implement a market plan, this issue will need to be addressed retrospectively, to promote acceptance of the new products and methods. Part of the key to acceptance of increased reliance on technology lies with timely staff training. Suppliers have been slow to acknowledge this, with only one major supplier of legal electronic services having committed itself to employing more than one full time trainer at the time of writing this article.

Delays in hardware networking have resulted in delays in accessibility to the new products, and consequently to training and familiarisation. Differences in supplier software means that staff are required to master several methods of information retrieval. This requires a significant time commitment. It means also that staff will need to access the resources regularly in order to retain their knowledge, while library staff will need to become rapid experts in all products, develop refresher courses and provide adequate client support. Moffat identifies these issues as: "increased demand on librarians to research information sources and educate clients about access possibilities, as well as establishing new information access points." (C. Moffat, 1996 p 211)

d) Document Delivery: Reducing access to hardcopy material within the NSW Regional Office was successful in that it readily achieved savings in physical accommodation, and allowed for savings of two staff positions. However, it was clear that a need for hardcopy information still exists. Questions such as the following still remain unanswered:

- “How do I comfortably read and comprehend a sixty-five page judgment from my computer screen?”
- “How efficient is it for five staff to print the same copy of legislation from the CD-ROM service?”
- “How do I manage when I require an authorised copy of a law report for court purposes?”
- “How can I take a copy of legislation with me for briefing counsel, when it is only available on CD-ROM or the Internet?”
- “How can I access information after core business hours, if both library staff and the collection are unavailable?”
- “What alternatives are in place for information retrieval if the CD-ROM Network crashes?”

David Byrne, in his Synergy 95 paper, identifies six unresolved issues of access. They are:

“confidentiality and security, confirmation of receipt of information, establishing authenticity of original documents, quality assurance of data, copyright, and file compatibility and conversion”. (D. Byrne, 1995 p421)

A document delivery service is being implemented currently between the NSW Regional Office and the Sydney Office of the Chairman, which still maintains an extensive hard copy collection. Without its support, and the assistance of the wider ASC Library Network, it would be highly inefficient, not to mention costly, to support the “virtual library” of the future based on the needs of the legal practice clients alone! Increased costs of commercial document delivery such as those offered by online services and/or the established fast track inter-library loan services would also need to be recalculated. Similar research projects, such as that conducted by the University of Western Australia, which examined issues of electronic document delivery, (the IRIS project), have determined it as a feasible option, but have “yet to determine if it is cost effective when the needs of users are taken into account.” (A. Ellis, 1994 p74).

e) Usage: Careful monitoring of services, at strategic times over the next year is vital to evaluating these changes. New CD products will need to be examined for the adequacy of licensing arrangements. Clients will need to be consulted regularly regarding service levels and reliability of access. Co-operation and reliance on the service and resources of surrounding libraries, including those within the ASC Library Network, will also need to be evaluated before any transfer of rationale could be applied more widely across the ASC

Conclusion

The decision to convert the NSW Regional Office Library to a fully automated, virtual library of the future was radical. Although it measures success already in terms of accommodation and staffing savings, it will not be apparent for some time whether it has also been successful in overall reduction of maintenance and collection costs.

Hard copy subscription costs may have been reduced. However, support of electronic products quickly replaced the responsibility. Establishment of new CD products actually exceeded the costs of maintaining the existing hardcopy collection. Management decided that this investment was necessary to generating future savings.

Resale of discarded collection items promised some offset of costs. However, a combination of oversupply on the secondhand market, discounts on new materials offered by suppliers, plus required outlay on advertising and storage costs, contributed to a reduction in benefit.

Finally, the critical objective to library staff, that of maintaining a responsive, efficient and focused information service, remains to be realised. The challenge is to recreate instantly with new technology, a highly regarded information service that was established over six years. The key to its success lies in committed library staff, continued commitment by Management to see the concept through and ongoing education and marketing of the technology to staff.

As long as the Library operates within its network context, it possesses the necessary hard copy support to sustain its service levels. An overview of the literature in this area confirms a continuance of information in both print and electronic formats. Any further expansion of the virtual library scenario across the ASC network involving continued downsizing of hardcopy collections would deliver occasional convenience, but fail to provide "responsive, efficient and focused information" on demand.

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