Six Months in a Leaky Boat: Issues for Australian and New Zealand Law Librarians[1]

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"I just spent six months in a leaky boat - lucky just to stay afloat" - these are the words of a New Zealand band that formed in the 1970's and echo the feelings of most New Zealand and Australian law librarians. There is so much to do and so little time in which to do it that sometimes it feels like the boat is leaking, but it is in absolutely no danger of sinking. The band was Split Enz. They went on to become hugely successful after re-engineering themselves into Crowded House. Law librarians are also very successful at re-engineering.

In a climate of constant change, economic rationalisation and competitive edge, the value that the information professional can add to an organisation is unlimited. Organisations are now investing serious money in the management of their information and knowledge, and the time has never been better for librarians to be right in the middle of this dynamic and exciting change.

The issues for Australian and New Zealand law librarians are really no different to those faced by librarians anywhere else in the world. We are one profession, located at different points around the globe.

PARADIGM

The next five years will be the most challenging and confusing that information professionals have ever faced. We are seeing a shifting paradigm. The very nature of all work is changing. Many employers are already grappling with the contradiction of slashing overheads and at the same time trying to capture the best talent available. On one hand we have salary restraint and staff reductions. On the other, we have a dramatic increase in the availability and value of information and the need for specialist skills to facilitate access.

In the words of Microsoft's Bill Gates, "A lot of people will be pushed out of their comfort zones, but that doesn't mean that what they already know won't still be valuable. It does mean that people and companies will have to be open to reinventing themselves - possibly more than once. Companies and governments can help train workers, but the individual must ultimately bear the principal responsibility for their own re-education."

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

In the current climate, the need for rapid access to and delivery of accurate and relevant information is critical. The need for quality information will only increase. Yet sometimes I wonder how we as a profession are harnessing this change. Are we in the middle of it all

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or are we on the edge? Are we the ones suffering salary restraint and staff reductions when our colleagues in other areas seem to be getting everything they ask for? Have we re-engineered ourselves to compete in today's market place?

As preparation for this address, I conducted a survey of Australian and New Zealand law libraries. The results are still very preliminary, but with returns from 80 libraries collated, the issues are becoming clearer.

CHANGE IMPERATIVES

Many of us who have been in the information game for some time probably selected this career because we had some affinity with books and other printed sources, enjoyed working with people, and preferred the concept of service to that of sales. That is now changing. There are a number of issues that are forcing us to change the way we think and work as information professionals. The key factors are:
* technology;
* alternative information sources;
* the library as a place;
* client service; and
* business service.

Technology

The only statement that can be made unequivocally about technology is that it is here to stay. Nobody gets a vote on whether we want technology and nobody can stop the effect that it will have on our lives. We need to make it work for us and to maximise the opportunity, not forestall it.

Many information professionals have in the past, feared the impact of technology on their libraries and their careers. The major fear was that print would be replaced and that librarians would no longer be required. As recent history has shown, this concern is misconceived. Despite the hype from information technology professionals and some publishers, we should not fear full replacement of hard copy because it probably will not happen in our lifetimes. It is not a choice between hard copy and electronic. We must strike a balance and our organisations need our help to achieve this balance.

It used to be said that knowledge was power. But as technology facilitates the spread of information, the next source of power will not be information itself, but the ability to access, collate, interpret and leverage information. Who better to facilitate that access and collation than librarians? The seamless flow of information in our libraries is a myth. We are now more labour intensive than we have ever been, our users are more confused than they have ever been, and our organisations are still not realising a return on their information investment. The real effect that technology has had on information professionals is that many have not moved with it, partly because the technology is not yet good enough.

In the survey, we found that the vast majority of law librarians would consider undertaking further study in IT over any other discipline. I personally think that we have missed the boat. Technology is merely becoming an enabler in most organisations. I know that the large management consultancies are no longer placing as much emphasis on IT solutions

as they have previously, because they realise that information technology is only one piece in the jigsaw. Marketing, management, HRD and training may be the better course to navigate here.

Alternative Information Sources

Perhaps as a by-product of the introduction of technology, we are seeing a massive increase in the ability and desire of our clients to choose from an enormous array of communication and information sources, both formal and informal, external and internal. Libraries are facing real competition in areas where we thought we had a natural monopoly.

We are fooling ourselves if we think that our users come to the library as the first port of call for their information needs. In numerous information needs analyses that we have conducted for our clients, we have found that the major source of information is through informal networks or direct from the source. The media, word of mouth, coffee breaks, email, direct access to the Internet and online information sources continue to be stated as the major sources of information in both the public and the private sector. Libraries are no longer the first place people go for information.

The Library as a Place

Is the library a mechanism or a place? For most people, including librarians, the library is a place where people go for information, both hard copy and electronic. In our consultancies we continue to see that people are very protective of their libraries - that is, the physical place of the library. They like the comfort and cosiness of the library, they are reminded of nice people and better times, when research was enjoyable and not everything was driven by the almighty dollar.

Our consulting experience is showing that people are now less interested in retaining the library as a place. This is a result of information becoming available at the desktop; organisations identifying their core business and moving to a just in time mode of operation in favour of just in case; and libraries reducing in size because of the enormous overheads they present to an organisation.

We are seeing that many organisations, especially in the corporate sector, are refurbishing their offices to remove the walls and facilitate an environment of openness, information sharing and teamwork. Yet many libraries are still closeted by walls, away from the major users, occupying a large amount of very expensive space and where library staff are often not viewed as an integral part of the team. This is a major challenge for librarians, and I suspect that it is only a matter of time before this trend hits the legal environment.

Client Service

As librarians, we pride ourselves on customer service. Yet I am surprised that in many client surveys and information audits conducted during our consultancies, one of the most significant criticisms is the lack of client service that exists in special libraries. If clients do not receive the service that they expect, or information in the format that they want, they now have a myriad of other choices rather than utilising the library's services. These include commercial information services, databases and their informal sources.

You can be sure that if a client is dissatisfied with the library, the library staff will probably be the last to know As clients are protective of the physical library, so too are they protective of the staff. Rather than cause any problems through complaint, many users will simply walk away and not say anything Whether they come back, however, is a different issue.

I think that probably the biggest deficiency in libraries is the "know your clients' business" rule. Too many librarians only have a basic understanding of their clients' business. Unfortunately, partners often do not provide critical information about the business, such as financial information and strategic plans, which makes the task of acquiring this information very difficult

It is imperative to identify the true information requirements of your clients and provide an appropriate range of services to meet those needs, rather than trotting out the same services that have been in your arsenal for years The need for the continual information audit is becoming very clear. Do not take your clients for granted. As nice as they are to you, they have budgets and conflicting priorities, and the library is not always on the top of their list

Law librarians are mostly service oriented and few have, or would consider undertaking, business qualifications. Yet much of the library manager's time is actually spent running the business of the library This requires a different approach and mentality, and helping everyone will not always produce the best outcome We need to become a little smarter and tougher about running our businesses, and we probably should not be quite so accepting of what our clients say.

EMERGING TRENDS

From my perspective, the three major trends in business, apart from technology, which are likely to affect law libraries include:
* the learning organisation;
* knowledge management; and
* knowledge capital.

The Learning Organisation

We are seeing a major trend toward the learning organisation, both in the public and private sector As continuous improvement programs have developed, as organisations strive to improve themselves and gain a competitive edge, the same organisations have developed a commitment to learning After all, how can an organisation improve without first learning something new?

We are now seeing many organisations seeking out and using information in ways rarely seen before. They are finally understanding that the more information they have, the more they can learn, and therefore the more of a competitive edge they gain. The effect of this trend on the information professional is enormous. We now have whole organisational structures that are receptive to actively acquiring information for the ultimate purpose of capital gain. Suddenly information is no longer an overhead, but an asset

Knowledge Management

Knowledge management has been brought to the forefront by organisations that are particularly knowledge intensive, such as companies in the high technology, pharmaceutical industries and more recently financial service organisations and management consultancies. Knowledge organisations recognise that knowledge based on information and experience is their core competency. They also acknowledge that reinventing the wheel is costly, that too much of what is 'known' in an organisation is not always available to everyone who needs it and that available information is not always readily accessible.

Law is one of the most knowledge intensive professions. Curiously, the initiatives in the area of knowledge management have rarely, if at all, stemmed from the library. However, when we look at the sorts of projects that are typically performed within these initiatives, we see:

- creation of knowledge databases, such as best practices, expert directories and market intelligence;
- process management of knowledge gathering, storing and classifying;
- development of knowledge centres - focal points for knowledge skills and facilitating knowledge flow;
- introduction of collaborative technologies such as intranets or groupware for enhanced information access; and
- knowledge webs - networks of experts who collaborate across and beyond an organisation's functional and geographic boundaries.

Sound familiar?

The change imperative necessitated by the advent of knowledge management is obvious. As information professionals we must seize the opportunity to be part of the future. If we get this one wrong, we run the risk of being marginalised forever. Knowledge management projects are typically only 20% technology based and 80% information based. Surely it is time for us as information professionals to take an active role in knowledge management and ensure that information, not technology, is the prime mover for such initiatives.

Many librarians say that knowledge management is consultants' hype - a fad, a buzz word for something we have always done. I say yes and no. Knowledge management is the glue that links together information, technology, people effectiveness and client loyalty. As librarians, we have done part of it for years, but we have not usually broken through the organisational barriers of management to sell the message from a whole of business perspective.

We now have the chance to take a lead role in this "fad" that management is openly supporting. So why resist it?

Knowledge Capital

Organisations who are now investing real money in the capture and management of their information resources are consciously turning their intellectual assets into competitive advantage and are seeking new ways of valuing their information.

Knowledge capital differentiates the tangibles of normal assets and the intangibles of knowledge and staff competencies. Microsoft is valued at 200 times the value of its tangible assets because of the value that they have placed on their knowledge. Similarly, IBM recently purchased Lotus for $3.5bn, seven times the book value of Lotus.

Clearly, valuing information will be a major trend. Once we can assign a book value to information and knowledge we will see a major change in the way an organisation views its information professionals. I am currently doing some very exciting work with a global organisation on this issue and am confident that it will make a big difference in time.

WHO IS THE INFORMATION PROFESSIONAL OF THE FUTURE?

There is absolutely no doubt that there is an exciting future role for information professionals. In parallel with the survey of law librarians, some 30 CEOs and key decision makers were informally asked to identify what it is that they are really seeking from their information professionals. The issues were identified as follows:

Key Attributes That Need To Go

- **Overcome the 'hard done by' syndrome** - understanding that the library is no different to any other service area in the organisation and is not being actively targeted.
- **Paranoia** - outsourcing can be a good thing. It does not necessarily mean that you are in danger of being closed down. Keep resisting and you probably will be.
- **Jargon** - stop using it. What is SDI anyway?
- **Image** - get out of the library and into the business where the real work is done.

These views may possibly be unfair, but all perceptions (whether good or bad) need to be managed.

Key Attributes That Need to be Consolidated

- **Open Mindedness**
- **Teamwork**
- **Professionalism**
- **Competitiveness**
- **Networking**

Key Attributes That Need to be Developed

- **Entrepreneurship** - the creative use of change, involving the bringing about of innovation. This is different from management which is about preservation rather than change.
- **Business focus** - preparing sound business cases for capital expenditure rather than just asking for something because people think they need it.
- **Knowing the business** (1)- seeking out and understanding the core business of the organisation and providing information services relevant to that business.
- **Knowing the business** (2) - identifying the core business of the library. Stop trying to be all things to all people. It is OK to say no!

- **Flexibility** - being able to move quickly to take advantage of new opportunities without complaining of being under-resourced.
- **Knowledge management** - taking an active role in assisting with the management of information outside of the library.

In terms of the likely role for librarians over the next three years, the survey was quite illuminating. The three key functions identified by law librarians were:
- information manager
- electronic searcher
- trainer

From the CEOs' perspective, the librarian was already seen as an information manager, and the functions were identified as:
- facilitating access to information;
- guiding and navigating staff through the information maze;
- training; and
- obtaining access to external information.

There really is nothing new there, but in my view we are still not performing our jobs in a way that the decision makers can appreciate

CONCLUSION

The key issues for Australian and New Zealand law librarians appear to be:
- technology
- budgets
- survival

There is no room for the traditional librarian in tomorrow's law libraries. Anyone who tells you what things are going to be like in five years time does not understand the issues. But the writing is certainly on the wall.

It can be said with some certainty that if we do not change the perceptions and realise the trends we will probably be out of business. The learning organisation is a reality and the push for knowledge management is happening now and is not a fad.

I believe that our future is very exciting and that we now have our best opportunity to cement a role within our organisations. As a profession we have made enormous progress over the years, and we now have the opportunity to do what it is that we have always said we have wanted to do. That is to be integral to the management of information within our organisations.

So six months in a leaky boat is a comparatively short period of time on stormy seas for such a wonderful opportunity, and I know that my colleagues in Australia and New Zealand recognise the issues and are well on the way to smooth sailing.