

Will you still need me when I'm 64?

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Libraries have faced many challenges in the twentieth century. They have developed new skills, changed services and radically changed collections. The twenty first century is shaping up to be the setting for a totally new and different library — some postulate a totally electronic 'virtual library'; some a devolved series of small libraries working closely with clients operating as 'information scouts', and others suggest that we cannot yet see the whole new information service which will emerge to seamlessly manage and deliver all organisational information.

Whatever scenario turns out to be true, libraries and librarians are in very exciting and challenging times. In the late 1990's the Internet is a major development providing opportunities to flex our new information, services and muscles. The strategies librarians need to develop with Internet technologies are a sign of those which will emerge in the twenty first century for the library to become a flexible, fully functioning information hub. The changes faced by libraries are not unique or specially formulated in the library context. Rather they are broad changes affecting all organisations and reflecting the complexities of life in the late twentieth century.

Business and economic changes can be seen in the pressures for better returns for the dollar, for smaller government and for more streamlined processes. New technology has increased the ability of libraries to deliver services, matching the increasing complexity of information resources. The new technologies continue to expand, requiring the development of skills in searching and delivery as a core competency for librarians.

Information has in itself become more complex. Librarians now develop better information management practices including the protocols which enable the ready use of information, based on timeliness and relevance. Knowledge management has emerged as the opportunity for organisations to access their corporate knowledge at levels beyond mere words and bytes. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our client's needs and expectations have changed.

With such an overwhelming panorama of change on the library landscape a re-evaluation of the nature, role and future of libraries is a millennium must. How does a library develop a role for a modern 'information centred' organisation efficiently and effectively? This is the challenge of the 21st century!

What do our clients want?

Traditionally libraries have been distinguished by the size of their collection, their buildings or physical location, and their helpful library staff. While many small special libraries have not had large or imposing collections or premises it is fair

to say that clients have associated libraries with a physical presence (and continuing expenditure).

Matarazzo and Prusak (1995) have investigated American corporate library use, with surveys in 1991 and 1994. The wealth of data produced in their report confirms that the value of librarians is in their business and technical knowledge of the organisation they work for. The next most valuable competency is the knowledge of information sources and then the ability to interpret and respond quickly to requests. Corporations surveyed then valued the libraries' alignment with the corporation (or what some refer to as the companies strategy or business objectives) as well as the client services. The 20th century corporate library is successful in delivering a service based on knowledge of the corporate needs from electronic and printed material.

In November 1996 the Benton Foundation published *Buildings, books and bytes*. Many key library organisations in the United States contributed to this report. The study found:

'Library leaders want the library of the future to be a hybrid institution that contains both digital and book collections. And they assume that it will be the librarian 'navigator' who will guide library users to the most useful sources, unlocking the information contained in the vast annals of the 'information superhighway'. (Executive summary)

Of the Australian community, approximately one half of one per cent have desktop access to the Internet or CD-ROM's. While many Commonwealth Government libraries, and some public libraries, have Internet access, it is not universal and the charges for access limit its use as a basic library tool. Government publishing is also still primarily in print.

If access to electronic information, and electronic publishing itself, is undeveloped in Australia, libraries have the opportunity to establish new roles, services and skills. For example, in order to successfully use the Internet, librarians must be able to effectively and efficiently find resources. Such a service can provide a better, more cost effective service, and can increase the contribution of the library to the business of any organisation.

Libraries in the 21st century

Librarians bring a range of skills and interests to the 21st century: a knowledge of the needs of clients — both in terms of information requirements and technological ability; a knowledge of the range of information resources, the complexity and uses of particularly public information; and an ability to use a vast range of new technologies for information management and retrieval, both from a user's perspective and as a database developer with library catalogues and bibliographic databases.

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This is an abridged version of the paper delivered by Roxanne Missingham at *Information Online and On Disc 97*, the 8th Australasian Conference and Exhibition. Reproduced with the permission of the author. The *Information Online and On Disc 97* proceedings can be found at <http://www.csu.edu.au/special/online97/>

In using new technologies these skills can be seen in the following Internet activities:

1. the development of technical skills to use new technology;
2. a critical eye which enables selection of the best and most cost effective information source;
3. development of 'resource discovery' or finding skills;
4. an ability to assist those clients who wish to use the Internet and indexes themselves, and to assist them to be effective, or to undertake searches for those who do not have time; and
5. actually developing special indexes or assisting in the development of major indexes.

What competencies will be needed in the 21st century to best deal with these challenges? Jackson and Shirley (1996) have suggested the following:

'Competences of information professionals towards 2000:

1. *Think globally and be aware*
2. *Communicate*
3. *Conquer techno-fear*
4. *Be competitive*
5. *Develop specialisation*
6. *Exemplify professionalism*
7. *Maximise your ability'*

Libraries can establish a valuable position past the millennium by building on these skills and services, and reviewing new technology, client expectations and business changes. While use of new resources such as the Internet is limited, at the moment, libraries can assist in the adoption and use of this technology to position themselves to be the 'new' library of the 21st century

The client's desire for more, better and faster information is an opportunity for all libraries and other information technologists. Print will never die, and librarians need to ensure that they develop services based on knowledge and the needs of their particular client group.

Conclusions

New technology, in particular the Internet, resembles jelly in its constantly moving contents and systems. Information and networks are changing quickly. The information structure libraries relied on twenty years ago is not sufficient to meet the needs of new technology. While our clients do not want to see libraries on the 'bleeding edge' of technology, nor see them spending money wastefully on computer or database solutions which are speculative or unproven, we can develop our knowledge and skills carefully. Above all librarians need to develop new competencies and communication strategies to tackle the emerging roles, not 'pins'

to hold the jelly to the wall.

The Global information society is distinguished by its: connectivity (the global market); unparalleled access to information (both from the desktop and by libraries); a vast increase in the amount of information; and an increase in use of information for all activities — business, society and recreation.

All aspects of this society offer opportunities and challenges for libraries. To grasp opportunities in the Information age a number of principles need to be acknowledged:

Information is not free. Electronic publications often require subscriptions or pay-on-use. Hidden charges for the time required to use the service are also significant for all users.

Change will be constant. It will not be possible to learn everything about Internet searching, for instance, and to work successfully without keeping up with changes in the indexes, tools and client expectations.

Clients expectations have changed and fundamentally affect the direction of our services. For organisations and clients to capitalise on the skills of librarians we need to *communicate* our knowledge and services.

Content, or the actual information, is important. The best search tool in the world is only as useful as the information it can retrieve.

Knowledge capital is a new economic and information concept. Librarians need to work with information technologists, clients and developers to enable these new technologies to be the best for all our information uses and needs.

Economies and efficiencies remain crucial aspects of our services. Cost efficiency is a principle to be applied to all services, together with a *questioning* of the need for each aspect of library services.

Libraries and librarianship have undergone a 'sea of changes' as new technologies have emerged. Other perspectives on change — business/economic/management, changes in information itself and the expectations of our clients need to be incorporated into our ongoing review of role and services. This will enable the profession to ensure that you will 'still need me when I'm 64'. ■

Above all librarians need to develop new competencies and communication strategies to tackle the emerging roles...

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