

Действительно ли нам нужны библиотекари?

Do We Really Need Librarians Anyway?

Чи дійсно нам потрібні бібліотекарі?

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Начав с традиционного библиотечного обслуживания, Служба поддержки знаний Научно-технической лаборатории обороны осуществляет гораздо более насыщенный спектр информационно-посреднических услуг и функций, содействуя ускорению процессу получения и распространения знаний. Испытывая недостаток в библиотечном персонале, обладающем определенными личностными и интеллектуальными качествами, Служба стала принимать на работу ученых, обладающих именно этими качествами, и целенаправленно обучать их пользоваться своими вновь обнаруженными талантами информационных работников.

В докладе рассматриваются преимущества и недостатки структуры, в которой в настоящий момент преобладают высоко квалифицированные менеджеры и специалисты, а количество профессиональных библиотекарей сведено к минимуму, так что они находятся в меньшинстве. Почему, по мнению автора, библиотекари будут востребованы в будущем и в чем ценность их профессиональной роли?

From providing conventional special library services, Dstl's Knowledge Services have moved to providing a far more comprehensive range of information intermediation services and functions in support of facilitating knowledge creation and knowledge sharing. Finding a shortage of Librarians in the UK with the personal and intellectual skills to meet this role, they have turned to recruiting scientists with those core skills and reinforcing their nascent information talents with focused training.

This paper discusses the advantages and disadvantages of moving from a service where most professionally qualified managers and staff were Librarians to one where they now form a minority. What does the author see the need for, and value of, Librarians in the future?

Розпочавши з традиційного бібліотечного обслуговування, Служба підтримки знань Науково-технічної лабораторії оборони здійснює куди більш насичений спектр інформаційно-посередницьких послуг і функцій, сприяючи прискоренню процесу отримання і поширення знань. Відчуваючи недостачу в бібліотечному персоналі, що володіє певними особистими і інтелектуальними якостями, Служба почала приймати на роботу вчених, що володіють потрібними якостями, і цілеспрямовано навчати їх користуватися своїми віднайденними талантами інформаційних робітників.

В доповіді розглядаються переваги і недоліки структури, в якій на даний момент переважають висококваліфіковані менеджери і спеціалісти, а кількість професійних бібліотекарів зведено до мінімуму, так що вони знаходяться в меншості. Чому, на думку автора, бібліотекарі будуть затребувані в майбутньому, і в чому цінність їх професійної ролі?

Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen. I should like to stress from the beginning that these are very much my personal views, and are based on a third of a century working among the UK Government's scientific and technical research Libraries. I currently work for the library and information services of what remains of the MoD's research community, The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory – Dstl. My current role is that of a senior library manager with responsibility for ensuring service quality and developing and introducing innovative concepts.

Meeting the information needs of a scientific and research community shouldn't differ greatly from from that of serving academic or public community. Everybody has information needs, and our main priority has to be how to meet those needs.

The information revolution over the last thirty years has meant a steady change in the way that we offer our clients the services they need. Sadly, many information professionals have failed to appreciate that

change until it was too late. The conventional library manager who ignored the changing environment suddenly found themselves out of a job, their library closed, their stock dispersed or destroyed. Those who were not quick or active enough were 'replaced' by electronic systems promoted by technologists who understood the mechanics of computers, but nothing about information organisation or the needs of the users.

I have personally found it very annoying to hear of 'solutions' being put forward by the technologists, solutions to problems that librarians had already solved in the last three or four hundred years. Metadata – it's cataloguing! Taxonomies – it's classification! The big problem though was that librarians were too slow to get involved, to shout it out, to put their expertise to the fore and make sure their voice was heard. They are doing it now, but for some libraries and their teams of skilled individuals it was too late. And, I'm afraid, I put a lot of this failure down to the abilities of the professional librarians available, their education, and their personal qualities.

Dstl

The UK's Defence Science and Technology Laboratory was created in 2001 following the division of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. Its primary functions are to carry out research considered best done within Government and to provide the UK's Ministry of Defence with impartial expert advice.

Knowledge Services was one of the first departments to be set up in the new organisation, Its primary function is to support the information requirements of the whole of Dstl, and support similar requirements throughout the Ministry of Defence and other Government Departments. The major problem that we faced was that although Dstl's 3,200 staff were scattered over 15 sites, we only inherited just one small library (at Porton Down) together with an office in Glasgow which housed the MOD's scientific and technical reports repository and a team information scientists and analysts (and no other Dstl staff!). How were we going to support the Dstl experts in their new role, and how must our preconceived notions and role change to meet this challenge?

We were given the rare opportunity to design and build a service from scratch; it allowed us to implement many new initiatives, without having too much baggage from the past to hold us back. The senior management in Dstl set the broad outlines of the organisation's philosophy and technical framework and gave us very much a free hand to create what was needed.

Now, we could have just attempted to recreate what we had built up in the ten years of DERA. The users told us that was what they wanted –their old DERA research libraries back with the same stock, budget and manning levels (for an Agency a quarter of the size). What they wanted, what they needed and what we could afford are all very different things! We spent quite a long time discovering the information needs of the members of staff of our new organisation, through a variety of ways including workshops, electronic news groups etc.

By deconstructing the results of these workshops etc., several things became apparent:

- Dstl had three very distinct user communities, with different information needs and information gathering habits.
- Two of the user communities were becoming very attuned to electronic information resources as primary sources.
- Although all our users wanted libraries, what they really needed was librarians – top rate approachable information experts who could help them out.
- Research Project teams were calling out for information specialists to be an integral part of their team.
- The high quality services and offerings from our Glasgow Information Scientists were virtually unknown, and if known were considered not be flexible or responsive enough for their immediate needs.

When the Department was created in 2001 we had a total of 52 staff. Today we have a maximum of 82, of whom just four of us were there at the start. Because of the nature of our new agency we have been able to recruit a whole range of new information professionals and not to be tied down to particular qualifications or experience. We now knew how we intended to meet our users' information needs. The question then became who did we need to implement the plan, and how to identify them.

The Plan – And The Staff Requirements

Libraries

The outline of the plan is quite simple. We had users on 15 sites, which were all connected by an intranet. We would provide an electronic library at the desktop, with as much in the way of resources as we could afford – but from the outset we knew that an electronic library is no substitute for real people. Furthermore, as you can imagine working for defence, there is a lot of material that cannot be made immediately available.

We had a small research library at Porton Down. This would be expanded to cope with a much larger user base – it was designed to cope with 5 or 600. The site is expanding and will eventually house about 1,500.

On three other major sites we would create small focussed collections, tiny libraries with just a couple of staff, a couple of thousand carefully selected books, 60 or so journals, newspapers, coffee machines etc. Comfortable, welcoming places to drop in for a chat, find out what's new, read up on latest developments.

Sites where we couldn't afford these small libraries, even those with them would have Tea-room collections. Most sites and buildings have break-out areas where staff can go and make a hot drink. By providing these areas with a small reference book stock and regular journal supplies, internet machines and perhaps comfortable seating we hoped to help meet some of the local requirements.

To man these «small focussed collections» we would need the best librarians we could get. Having virtually no resources to play with – no room, little stock etc., they would not only have to be expert professionally, get to know their users and relevant resources very quickly, have excellent inter-personal skills, drive, enthusiasm, foresight and the ability to work very hard. They would also be very much on their own. They would have part-time clerical support, but that was all. Consequently they would have to be very independent, capable of quick and accurate decision making, and be quite capable of working on their own for considerable stretches of time, be their own publicity manager, etc. Sadly, in my experience such Librarians are in very short supply.

Their part-time clerical support staff also needed to be selected carefully. Not only were they expected to have similar inter-personal skills, and in effect to be back-up Librarians – at least, in the eyes of their users. We expect hard work, intelligence and capability.

So far, so good. You will be saying to yourselves, «OK. They may be exceptional Librarians, but they are still librarians.» I agree. There are only four of these in our team.

Project support

For project support we needed a totally different solution. When I did real work for a living – before I was a manager – I used to try and avoid cataloguing and many of the other things that some Librarians seem to revel in. I discovered that sitting in a library was not much fun. In fact, it was extremely boring; so I would «walk the corridors» – visit customers in their offices – and chat to them about their current projects. It was through these chats that I gained an invaluable insight into the information gathering habits, and information needs of the scientist, but in addition to that I became involved in those projects not as a passive supplier of books, journals and reports, but as an active – if unofficial – member of the team.

What did I learn? Well, 1) my scientists were only too willing to talk to a friendly librarian, even if he knew nothing about science, 2) it was often possible to identify information needs which I could assist with, 3) many of these needs would never have been vocalised if I hadn't been there, 4) awareness of their interests enabled me to keep an eye open for anything new that might come through my hands, and 5) IT WAS FUN!

About ten years ago, finding that many of the libraries in DERA were losing touch with their potential users, I introduced the concept of Knowledge Agents, information specialists and intermediaries whose function was to go out to the users, rather than sitting back in the library waiting for them to come in – basically recreating the way I used to work twenty years before that. Originally I had tried – with some success – to get professional librarians for the posts, but almost by accident I discovered that it was possible to get scientists and engineers who had almost all of the skills we needed in the first place, and learnt the rest very quickly.

When looking for Knowledge Agents in Dstl we advertise not only in the information professional press, but primarily in «New Scientist», the popular UK science magazine. A single advert in New Scientist can get us over 150 applications. Our only problem lies in reducing that to a manageable number to interview.

So what do we look for. The official list of requirements is:

- Good Team Player
- An inquisitive mind
- Outgoing personality
- Confidence
- The ability to sell – but not oversell our services
- Understanding of the scientific method
- Awareness of the value of information
- Lateral thinking
- Interest in what is going on around them
- Good information gathering skills and/or good scientific qualification

I should stress that originally I would never have given any attention to scientists who wanted to work in what I considered then to be a Librarian only field. Any scientist who would be interested in this work was very suspect. Why give up a job like a scientist to do this sort of work? (The answer is that bench science can be very boring, and Knowledge Agent work different every day.)

If you look at that list though you'll not see much that relates to librarianship as such. A good scientific qualification (doctorate or MSc preferably) normally requires a scientist to develop excellent information gathering skills. Those skills can be honed and refined by a little in-house training. The most important parts on that list are personal attributes, not professional – it is the person we want to employ in this role, not just someone with appropriate paper qualifications. At the moment we currently have about 18 Knowledge Agents, of whom I think only two are librarians or other information professionals.

The scientific experience they bring with them is not always of direct relevance to their day to day work. Occasionally it is: one with a doctorate in chemistry not only carries out the information gathering duties for that team, but is also its resident inorganic chemist. In some areas, biochemistry, chemistry or law for example, specialist knowledge is absolutely essential and cannot be picked up easily. Information retrieval skills can be.

So what sorts of information work do the Knowledge Agents carry out. When we set the team up, we gave them a very simple remit – «There are people out there with information needs. Find out what they are and satisfy them!» As a consequence they have got involved in a very wide range of task and roles, and have developed a reputation for being prepared to tackle any job, any time, any where.

So, they now provide everything from a basic literature search (often presented as a searchable stand-alone Access database), to an organisation wide capability analysis; from identifying an obscure reference to an in-depth review of the literature; from facilitating meetings to applying data visualisation to technology tracking. They apply their skills to everything and anything.

Could I have just used Librarians? The answer is, possibly yes, except I doubt whether I could get together that number of excellent librarians at any one time, and I have only been prepared to employ the best. Furthermore, there is very little that just being a Librarian would add to the team.

The Information Scientist team

Our Information Scientists are either information scientists proper, or scientists we have trained in several techniques of information work. They are our true specialists, our experts in bibliometric analysis, patent analysis, data visualisation, technology roadmapping, etc., and their expertise is bought in when and where needed in support of specific pieces of work, either directly or in support of our generalists. The Information Scientists, and to a lesser extent the Knowledge Agents, analyse the information at their disposal, identifying research trends and developing technologies.

The work they do varies from compiling overviews and reviews of research in particular areas, writing articles, editing other documents, creating specialised databases etc.

Again, could we have just used Librarians or other information professionals. The answer again is yes, but I am certain that we would not have brought together such a wide range of eclectic skills talents and experience.

Management

Our current head of Department, the majority of rest of our management team are Librarians, but in all honesty this has probably been more by accident than by design. Since our days in DERA we have been promoting staff because of their abilities rather than their qualifications. The former head of our Library at Porton Down had been the inter-library loan clerk, but it was agreed that it would be better for the library if she managed the operation, rather than the senior librarian.

Of our various current team leaders only about half have library or information scientist qualifications. Two virtually lack any qualifications at all except experience, but their subsequent performance has been superb.

Where Then Do We Need Librarians?

You might be forgiven for coming to the conclusion that I think we no longer need librarians. In the world of the hybrid library, where physical paper collections are becoming a thing of the past, and we move towards greater electronic content, some of the older skills taught by Library Schools have become redundant. But it is equally apparent that some of those skills cross the borders of the conventional library into the realm of electronic information provision.

Electronic intranet content management, taxonomies for electronic document management systems, metadata selection and application for e-documents, are all areas where the conventional skills of librarians are in enormous demand. What librarians are skilled at is the organisation of and retrieval from massive information corpuses. But there is an equally dangerous trap to avoid: just because someone is a good librarian does not necessarily mean they are good managers, good leaders of teams, good decision-makers. Indeed, when I was trained we were given no education in any of these areas. It was assumed that we would either 'pick it up as we went along', would be trained if and when appropriate, or would never need to know how to do those tasks.

Many library functions no longer require library skills. Take training users in information retrieval from the resources that are on offer. That requires training skills, not librarian skills. Yes, you have to know what you are teaching, but that can be acquired in just a few hours and doesn't need formal Librarianship training. But can a librarian immediately become a trainer? Some can, but many can't and should never even try.

Conclusions

For supporting a research library's community of users I have found that it is easier to recruit scientists with an information bent than enough experienced librarians with a scientific bent. In managing those libraries I have found that librarians may or may not make good managers. Only in a few roles do I feel that the traditional skills taught in Library schools are essential.