

SMALL SPECIAL LIBRARIES; AN ENDANGERED SPECIES? SOME MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL

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ABSTRACT

In an era where information is peddled and collected by everybody, the place of a special librarian in any organization is always perilous. It dare not follow the traditional more passive role of collection-building only, but must grapple with timeous provision of information, without the advantage of vast resources and adequate staffing. Things like cataloguing and classification and lending become less crucial where there is often a very small bookstock, and ingenious, cost-effective information provision become vital factors.

In considering the problems of management the above considerations must be held in tension with those common to any service organization, namely, what types of service are required, how they can be continuously expanded or altered or transformed to ensure its relevance and continued survival, and what means and manpower will be required. Crucial too, is a flexible attitude, and an ability to follow new trends in information gathering, retrieval and dissemination, and seeing where they can be used to advantage. Tailoring services to the needs of the individual or to special groups, and especially to those who will be called upon to defend one's continued survival, are especially important.

Topics to be dealt with are how to determine the type of service required, and the means, the money and manpower required to accomplish these goals

I was nearly fired the first week I went to work in a company library. I had never worked in a company library before, and replaced a lady who had left a month previously, leaving mysterious boxes of unfinished, unidentifiable work, who refused to tell me anything over the phone, maintaining I should know what to do as I was a qualified librarian! So, taking the bull by the horns, I rushed in and did the only thing I knew how to do well. I had come from a public library environment, where one of the main tasks was to ensure that all the books were returned to the sheepfold. I sent demand notices to all and sundry, to return

the books they had borrowed! Well! What a storm that unleashed! Most of the books were bought specifically for the people who kept them in their offices, and, to make matters worse, many of the people had bought the offending books out of their own budgets! I learnt the lesson that although one's previous training is a basis for one's work, one must adapt or die, as Pieter Dirk Uys has put it so succinctly.

I learnt managing a special library is a very different kettle of fish to a public library, although at the heart of any service function is the one important principle - FIND OUT YOUR USER'S NEEDS, AND MAKE THAT THE BASIS OF YOUR SERVICE. That is why each special library is so different, because each is called into being to provide a unique service, related to the organization to which it belongs. Thinking about that last sentence, I don't suppose it is unique to a special library - it is vital for any information service. It's just that a university library is not likely to be axed as being irrelevant to the organization!

The four most important aspects of survival for any library must surely be

- 1 Meeting increased demands with fewer resources
- 2 Meeting performance criteria for efficiency and effectiveness
- 3 Meeting the needs of employees, stakeholders and users
- 4 Meeting the challenges and opportunities of technology

(Bryson: Effective library and information centre management)

I will concentrate on hints on points 3 and 4, i.e. how to meet the needs of your users, and incidentally absorb the culture of your organization, and using technology effectively.

1. Have discussions, with your boss, and with present, and potential customers, **ON AN ONGOING BASIS**. Find out what they expect of you, and then work out how you're going to do it. Note that I don't say IF you can do it, the essence of survival is to find a way. If you don't, somebody else will, and then you'll never get a chance again.

To illustrate: For the first few years I was inflexibly a **librarian**, and didn't see myself in the role of selling anything, except to sell myself short! Then our name was changed to Information Service, as we're certainly not just a journal-circulating, book-buying department. A few years ago we began selling certain CIBA publications, and now sell so many that we were not even thought of in a round of retrenchments that occurred two years ago.

- 2 Rank the information you receive, and start with those projects that are the most important, or get the quickest results. Gone are the days of quietly doing your job without fanfare - make sure you make an impact on the organization, as soon as possible. Send in regular reports, to illustrate how you are meeting, and especially exceeding, expectations. Special librarianship is the an of the possible - and sometimes the impossible!
- 3 In between, try and **do** whatever is asked of you, even though your library or information service is not up and running yet (a word of warning: it never will be!), and try to accomplish some seemingly impossible task.

Example: Getting some important legislation as it came off the presses, by physically going to fetch it (before the days of faxes!), gave me and my assistant an immediate pay rise from my superior. We had vindicated his appointment of our position, and made him look good too.

always, **by the way** a plus factor for you, and one that needs to **be remembered**.

- 4 **Be a chameleon, and take on extra tasks**, not library-related, which will **make you** useful to a wider number of people, publicise your information service, and guarantee the goodwill of a larger number of people than your immediate boss. This may include sitting on committees to vet advertisements, becoming the local language expert, or the editor of the company magazine.
- 5 **Get by with a little help from your friends**, as the song has it. A special library relies heavily on external connections, whether informal or formal. I cannot stress this point too much, as

The **formal ones** may include SABINET, the State Library, and connections with Onderstepoort, if you're in SA, or whoever is closest to you in the rest of Africa, or connections all over the world. We established a medical ILL group within the local pharmaceutical companies. We have a list of each one's holdings, and can shortcut the often slow, tedious, and very expensive ILL system of the State Library.

The **informal ones** are contacts you make at conferences like these, professional contact groups like Medlig (Medical Libraries Interest Group), SLIS (Special Libraries) and SAILIS (South African Institute for Library and Information Science) and contacts within the group where you operate, who can save you an awful lot of time and trouble, **eg** within your organization there are many people who can be of assistance. At the last SAILIS conference I had lunch in a group which included a very friendly librarian from Cape Town, who very obligingly can give one the latest legislation as it comes from over the road at the Houses of Parliament! She has **turned** out to be a very valuable contact, as business people want information **as** it happens, and not in a week or two.

While on that subject, I would like to stress that a special library is especially vulnerable to being axed if it does not deliver the goods ASAP. There are too many people doing what we do to be able to afford the luxury of delays.

- 6 Remember to budget well in advance for what you're going to need. For the first few years I was at CDBA, I didn't have a clue how to do the budgeting, and thought, like a child, that I only had to ask, and the money would be forthcoming. Now I must know in August, how much money I'm going to need for the following year, and each quarter must explain why I have, or haven't used, the money I asked for, in the time frame I had planned.
- 7 Sell, or distribute, information you may have that may be unique, or hard to get hold of. In the BMJ of 10 June, page 1480, there is an editorial on the need for information from developing countries to the European, American and Asian world.
- 8 Don't waste time making formal collections of items which will be redundant in a short while. This is an especial headache, as the activities of indexing and collecting items of special interest for a time are extremely time-consuming, but are quickly replaced by some other flavour of the month topic. Have some informal, un-library-like arrangement that will serve the moment, and can be discarded, as needed. An example: Last year the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Program) was a feverish topic of interest amongst the decision makers, along with health management organizations. At this moment it is the restructuring of the national health system and disease management - next month, who knows?
- 9 A final point, one of many that could still be discussed, I'm sure, is the use of technology. I'm not sure if the latest technology is available, or affordable to all of you present, but try to be aware of all the possibilities for making your life

easier. Today there are library packages which are quite affordable, CD-ROM subscriptions which are not!, on-line searching, faxes, document delivery services, the Internet, SABINET, etc which all need to be investigated and tailored to your needs. Always be on the lookout for new solutions to old problems.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the day it is not technology, or even good management, that makes the difference. Management techniques can be learnt, but most important of all in any library or information centre, but especially in a special library, are the people who render the service that make the difference. Your ingenuity, ability to adapt, your enthusiasm, and commitment to the organization to which you belong, will make you a survivor in a world of endangered species. Thank you for the invitation to share some thoughts with you, and good luck in your fight for survival!

References

1. BRYSON, J., Effective Library and information centre management
2. Editorial: *British Medical Journal*, 10 June 1995, 1480