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Moving Up the Value Chain

Some believe that we are now entering the Internet’s second phase, one in which people stop using it as a tool in support of historically defined functions and begin to rethink the approaches themselves. This is when established institutions must stake out a niche, evolve, or die — a very tricky time for both organizations and individuals.

If you are trying to navigate this maelstrom of change, and especially if you want to influence the outcome, you need to get creative. While university degrees, association workshops, and vendor training sessions are worthwhile as a way to learn about new technology, you also need to explore unconventional educational methods. In this article, I’ll discuss how a three-pronged approach can help corporate librarians redefine their mission and find new niches when content collections “go virtual.”

To see how and why it works, I’ll look at:

- how corporate libraries have been evolving over the last decade;
- the underlying causes and effects of change;
- the limitations of conventional forms of professional education;
- unconventional tips for finding and exploiting opportunities.

The evolution of corporate libraries

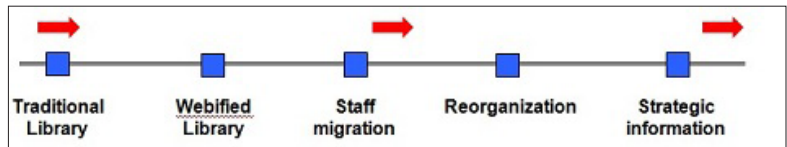
Contrary to some predictions, libraries have not disappeared with the proliferation of ubiquitous access to electronic information. In fact, many public libraries are busier than ever. Although school librarian positions are being cut due to state and local budget problems, the libraries themselves are protected by accreditation requirements. Not so for corporate libraries. When the books go, the librarians often go with them, and the physical space is re-purposed.

The problem is that book-related services, library science degree programs, and professional associations created for library staff are all based on the concept of a physical asset — or its electronic surrogate. By “electronic surrogate” I mean the electronic equivalent of the printed Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature or a book ordered online and read on an electronic device, such as the iPad. The electronic surrogate preserves the conceptual if not the physical integrity of the object. In the case of a book, this consists of a sequential narrative by a vetted author targeted to a specific audience and includes a table of contents, consistent and complete metadata, and often an A - Z index.

Electronic book surrogates can still be managed within the traditional library paradigm, but in today’s business environment, we’re way past that stage. The idea of a corporate library dedicated to preserving key historical documents and momentos may still make sense, but the information that employees need to do their jobs comes from a bewildering array of (mostly) electronic sources in formats we couldn’t have dreamed of a decade ago.

Corporate librarians have three choices when the library’s physical assets are replaced by electronic services. They can get a job with a public or academic library. They can deploy their professional skills in another department or business unit, or they can evolve the library from a repository to a service organization.

Corporate libraries are more apt to evolve than suddenly disappear. The evolution process, influenced by organizational inertia and conventional sources of education, tends to follow a common path (see below).



In the first evolutionary stage, the library creates a Web site, begins to jettison books, and may be represented on the organization's intranet team. In the second stage, some library staff collaborate with or migrate to another organizational unit (often IT). There they work on content management, knowledge management, taxonomy development, or enterprise search selection and management. Most of our members are at this stage.

In the third stage, the organization gains experience with the technologies and skills necessary to integrate new information formats into business processes. Multiple rounds of reorganization occur, grouping and regrouping such functions as content creation and editing, metadata management, training, communications, information lifecycle management, and information policy. The library may be broken into smaller units, such as archives and information help desk, while the remaining staff members float among the other functions. A few of our members are at this stage.

In the fourth stage, former library staff actively participate in creating new information services, targeted to internal staff, business partners, and/or the public. Libraries in knowledge-intensive organizations like consulting firms and media companies tend to evolve further and faster.

Causes and effects

The most obvious cause of corporate library evolution is technological change — easy to see due to vendor promotional efforts. But there are other not-so-obvious causes and trends, such as:

- *Feature convergence.* This means one software application acquires features commonly available in another application. Examples include collaboration technology with database and search features (SharePoint), full text search engines with fielded search capabilities (Endeca), and telephones with mapping and database features (iPhone). It's easy for organizations to unwittingly duplicate functions and metadata because vendors find it

easier to sell products that are targeted to specific industries or corporate business units. An efficient information infrastructure to minimize costs and normalize data becomes a high priority.

- *Commoditization of physical and financial capital.* The migration of design, research, and production services to lower cost countries encourages companies to lean more heavily on intellectual capital to achieve competitive advantage. This means not only having an efficient information infrastructure, but also implementing methods of discovering new opportunities and exploiting all kinds of intellectual assets — employees, contractors, customers, business partners, proprietary information, and technology.

- *End-user development.* Simpler user interfaces, more sophisticated technology, and direct access to all kinds of information give non-programmers the ability to design or customize their own applications. Many users opt for simple, inexpensive applications that lack the complex features needed by specialists. While this can increase employee and team productivity, it can also raise issues of reliability, security, and data consistency.

- *User-generated content.* Simpler authoring programs and ubiquitous search services enable do-it-yourself publishing, thereby reducing the cost and increasing the currency of information. One downside is the difficulty of finding information, validating author credentials, assessing information quality, and making apples-to-apples comparisons. Another is the acceptance of quick, superficial answers instead of comprehensive research and careful analysis.

Limitations of conventional educational methods

Librarians have four conventional options for coping with the driving forces that affect their job performance and career paths:

1. *Professional graduate degree programs*, including library science

and newer offerings such as knowledge management. Because of the lengthy curriculum approval process, degree programs can lag 5 - 10 years behind market innovation. Moreover, the course content often reflects historic professional biases, such as too much emphasis on technology and content and not enough on strategy, user behavior, and services. However, degree programs excel at credentialing — assuring prospective employers that a person has the motivation, intelligence, and discipline to complete an academic course of study.

2. *Association-sponsored workshops.* These mini-courses, ranging in length from 4 hours to five days, offer a wide range of topics targeted to a specific group of professionals, such as corporate librarians, competitive intelligence researchers, or indexers. Because many are taught by practitioners and vendor staff, they tend to be more current and practical than university courses (not to mention less time-consuming). But because they are targeted to members of a profession, they too tend to reflect historic biases and traditional information ecosystems.

3. *Technology-focused workshops.* These workshops and short courses are targeted to developers and early-adopters of new tools and techniques, such as the Semantic Web. They offer the most current information and attract an eclectic audience, but the content is often more theoretical than practical. The vocabulary and concepts presented may be hard for the layman to understand, and it's difficult to assess the pros and cons of the technology discussed.

4. *Vendor workshops and training.* Vendor marketing workshops showcase the latest technology and present features in a business context that executive decision-makers can understand. Vendors that target an existing market (e.g. legal departments, library managers, regulatory and compliance officers) tend to showcase evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, products and services. The vocabulary used in these

presentations may be confusing, and make it harder to compare competing offerings. Vendor post-sale training is highly practical, but typically ignores or gives short shrift to compatibility with other applications and the impact on enterprise information architecture.

Conventional education resources are useful but have limited value for proactive information professionals who want to leapfrog nodes on the evolutionary path and become a strategic partner in the development of new services and the supporting infrastructure. In short, they are too time-consuming, too theoretical, and too limited in scope.

Unconventional tips

To implement the evolution of the corporate library from a physical repository to purveyor of strategic information services, three things are especially useful:

1. a wide-ranging and eclectic information hunting and gathering system;
2. strategies for updating and implementing the vision;
3. a lab for prototyping new products and services and demonstrating their impact on productivity and profitability.

Information hunting and gathering tips

It isn't enough to read general business publications, industry "rags," and professional literature. The reason? They tend to be trailing, not leading, indicators, and they usually reflect the biases of the status quo. The following information hunting and gathering tips come from my own experience and from Peter Schwartz's book *The Art of the Long View*.

- *Imagine yourself in a specific role* (e.g. logistics manager, Chief Information Officer, top sales person), and ask, "What information would I pay attention to?"

Select a wide range of information targets, drawing on science and technology, perception-shaping events (e.g. the financial crisis of 2009), music and art, and fringe happenings (e.g. the

Woodstock gathering in 1969).

Don't be afraid to cold call experts, such as conference presenters, university professors, and authors. You'll be surprised at how often they respond to thoughtful inquiries. Remember that you probably have some information they'd be interested in. For academics, it may be your real world experience. For your peers in other organizations, it could be the chance to compare notes and share war stories. For experts in other disciplines, it could be your professional experience.

- *Mine your own experience as a consumer and business person.* When you encounter a problem or glitch, ask why and how it could happen.

Track the career moves of people in your field that you admire. It's likely that these people will see opportunities but can't implement them in their current employment situation. A good example is Eric Miller, who left OCLC to start a semantic web company.

- *Follow the money.* Philanthropists like Bill Gates and entrepreneurs like Richard Branson are hungry for new opportunities and innovative, yet practical solutions. Keep tabs on their activities by becoming a contributor or stockholder.

- *Immerse yourself in challenging environments.* Volunteer for challenging assignments outside your comfort zones and area of expertise.

Strategies

It takes more than information and insightful observation to move the needle on the evolutionary scale. Here are some strategies to help implement your ideas.

1. *Decide where you want to go.* In most organizations, it's easier to move from one evolutionary stage to the next one than it is to leapfrog from one end of the scale to another. Use your knowledge of the organization's culture and gage the strength of your alliances to decide how far and how fast to go. If you're really impatient, think about leaving the organization for a smaller,

more nimble company.

2. *Focus on problems, not solutions.* Don't let vendors steer you into "solutions" that tend to reinforce the current information ecosystem and discourage out-of-the-box thinking. Problems, on the other hand, usually impact multiple departments, require the skills of different disciplines, and have an obvious impact on the bottom line. Look for opportunities in the "white space." As an example, see *Managing the "triple bottom line"*.

3. *Decide how you want to be measured.* Choose metrics that are tied directly to your problem objective and that show a clear impact on the bottom line (i.e. reduce costs, increase revenue, reduce risk). Since most information management functions are classified as overhead, this means looking for problems in those areas with a more direct relationship to cost and revenue (e.g. customer service, sales, R&D, distribution).

4. *Form alliances and explore dual reporting relationships.* You'll need them to gather information and prototype new services. Know what you bring to the bargaining table before you start (e.g. data that your business unit collects, knowledge of internal and external experts, familiarity with metadata and how it affects usability, interviewing skills, experience in negotiating content licenses).

5. *Design and showcase prototype products and services.* Then expand the successes. Showing is always better than telling. One successful demo is worth 10 position papers or proposals. Using end-user development tools that require minimal programmer input, just do it. Talk it up, and expand it based on the feedback you receive.

6. *Operationalize new services* and repeat steps 3 - 5. If you're good at this, you'll be bored with the operational phase. Once a new service is ready for regular operations, leave it to someone else and move on.

Keep in mind that when the objective is to expand the boundaries of your career or business unit, benchmarking has limited value. You may get some ideas from looking at what others do, but in general benchmarking is backward looking — more valuable for followers than leaders. Look for peers outside your professional home base — people working on similar problems but in different settings or reporting relationships.

Lab

A prototyping lab that lets you experiment with new information products and services is almost a necessity. We use a general purpose database (Filemaker) that can be customized without the aid of a programmer and offers endless possibilities for product development.

Choose prototyping tools that are:

- inexpensive but scalable (i.e. software that can be purchased in a single user version for prototyping but is also available in an enterprise version that can scale up to production requirements);
- needs minimal, if any, programmer involvement;
- offers easy publishing in both Web and PDF formats;
- is easy to interface with other applications (at minimum, has export/import, http query, and XML export capabilities).

The whole point of the lab is to get end users and business stakeholders involved early in the game. Don't use the traditional "waterfall" method of software development. It's too cumbersome and time-consuming. By the time you get everyone to agree on the specification, the opportunity may be lost.

Conclusion

Professions based on a physical entity, such as library science, face an identity crisis when the objects managed are converted to electronic format. Corporate libraries and the

people who staff them cope by evolving their skills and services. During this period, they look to university degree programs, workshops sponsored by their professional associations, and training sessions offered by vendors. However, proactive professionals that want to influence — not just respond to — opportunities find these educational resources too time-consuming, too theoretical, and too limited in scope. Those who want to leapfrog nodes on the evolutionary path, we recommend a three-prong approach consisting of unconventional research methods, externally focused strategies that include problem seeking and alliances, and an end-user development for prototyping and demonstrations.

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