Best practice: the NT approach

Staff members at the NT University Library had long been concerned about its capacity to adequately support research. The library has had marked success in acquiring formed collections of monographs and back-sets of journals.

In common with all other university libraries in Australia, it has begun to take advantage of new technology to access a wider range of databases, order documents electronically, search library catalogues overseas and search worldwide networked information services.

But the staff felt that research information services could be improved more dramatically, so the library's project focuses on developing best practice in research information delivery. It aims to take a lead in providing relevant, prompt and cost-efficient research information with its main objective continuous improvement in the quality, effectiveness and cost efficiency of research information delivery.

It shifts the paradigm for information services in support of research from a 'just in case' collection-centred approach to a 'just in time' service-oriented operation.

A key challenge in the project is to change clients' focus to emphasise quality service rather than access to collections.

$150 000 win should not be taken for granted

In the wake of the Northern Territory University Library's recent success in winning a $150 000 grant to take part in the Australian Best Practice Demonstration Program, a seminar on quality management in Australian academic circles is to be held in Sydney next month.

Sponsored by the Council of Australian University Librarians and the Australian Information Management Association, it will take place in Sydney on 27 October and focus on the range of issues that surround the subject of best practice.

The seminar highlights the importance of best practice as an issue not only in the library and information industry but in the private and public sectors generally.

It also underscores the NT University Library's undeniably excellent achievement in beating stiff competition from companies around the nation to win the grant. The library also is the first non-trading organisation to participate in the demonstration program.

This article aims to bring you the background to the NT's approach to best practice, as well as some definitions of the area and a look at the Australian Best practice Demonstration Program. ■

Quality and the Northern Territory University Library

The University Library has a threefold mission to provide quality information services and resources to support learning through Northern Territory University courses, research and independent study by University students and staff and activities in the wider North Australian community.

With a long-standing commitment to improve its own performance and participate in regional and national initiatives to improve information service deliver, the library has achieved much, particularly in the development of electronic information services and in the improvement of services to support coursework. Criteria include fitness for purpose, responsiveness, timeliness, cost efficiency, accessibility and support.

A *commitment to service pamphlet* provides students with an unambiguous statement of the standard of service they can expect from the library. The Council of Australian University Librarians' key performance indicators for document delivery, document availability and client satisfaction will be implemented shortly.

Information technology permeates every aspect of the library's operations. For example, the searcher service offers and extensive range of electronic information services to students in the library's four branches, elsewhere on all

The Australian best practice demonstration program

The best practice program aims to encourage Australian companies to adopt international best practice, identify effective methods and approaches for its implementation and to promote a more widespread understanding of best practice in Australian companies in general.

Administered by the Department of Industrial Relations in association with the Australian Manufacturing Council, the program aims to promote the enhanced international competitiveness of Australian industry. Organisations participating in the program commit themselves to demonstrating to wider industry the methods and approaches to best practice they identify.

In the first two rounds since its inception in 1991, the program has provided project help to 43 enterprises to accelerate the introduction of their change projects and their move toward international best practice. Thirty other enterprises, including the Northern Territory University Library, are being funded in the current small and medium enterprise round.

Over 400 firms submitted proposals for the first two rounds and 267 for the third round. The proposals were considered by an expert panel and selected on the basis of each organisation's record of change and the potential of the organisation and its project to act as a demonstration model for a wide cross-section of Australian industry.

During the life of the project, the successful organisations are evaluated regularly by a project management team. The organisations also must demonstrate aspects of their projects and overall improvement processes to other organisations through site visits, seminars, participation in networks, publication of articles and reports, provision of information materials and participation in Australian Best Practice Week. ■

the university's campuses and off campus through dialup or network access.

Those services include a range of databases on CD-ROM mounted in the library, locally developed databases and resources elsewhere in Australia and overseas which are accessible through Internet links.

Of particular note is INTAN MAS, a bibliographic database on eastern Indonesia, developed by the library and accessible worldwide via Internet. Databases on North Australia and Aboriginal issues also are being developed.

While the library's mission focuses on support for research and study in higher education, the underlying issues and principles addressed are common to many service organisations, particularly to organisations delivering professional and information-based services. The processes to be followed in the best-practice project therefore will have wide relevance and not only to other libraries.

To identify the key characteristics of a quality research information service, the project initially will involve focus groups to identify the hallmarks of quality research information service from the client perspective.

The focus groups will help identify performance indicators, performance levels, benchmarking and setting of target levels to achieve best practice in research information delivery.

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What is '...best practice'?

Best practice is a comprehensive, integrated and co-operative approach to the continuous improvement of all facets of an organisation's operations. it is the way leading-edge companies manage their organisations to deliver world-class standards of performance.

Best practice is a moving target: as the leading organisations continue to improve, the 'best practice' goalposts constantly move. But some general principles have emerged from the experiences of firms which are pursuing best practice in Australia:
* Shared vision for world class performance.
* Strategic plan, developed in consultation with workers.
* Commitment to change throughout the organisation.
* Flatter organisational structures, often involving team approaches.
* Co-operative and participative organisational culture, with innovative human resource policies.
* Commitment to continuous improvement and learning.
* Focus on customers, both internal and external.
* Closer relationships with suppliers.
* Innovation in technology, products and processes.
* Performance measurement and benchmarking.
* Environmental management in all operations.
* Networking with other organisations to enhance competitiveness. ▪