Thinking of offering electronic library services?

Many of us may already have ventured to that point of virtual no-return by offering electronic services to library users. Some may be afloat in the sea of change by staging and implementing a collection of electronic services. Some of us may be about to toss off the lifejacket and take the plunge. And others may be thinking that the tidal wave will pass (I hope that these people can breathe underwater).

In any event, decision-makers within the institution/organisation responsible for the planning and implementation of electronic services must think strategically. They need a vision, they must make plans and choices regarding what will and will not be done, they need to manipulate resources, they must know the current and potential information needs of library users, they need to target services and resources to specific users, they need to exploit competitive advantages, and they need to position the library in both the larger institution that the library belongs to, and the electronic community. A strategic posture is opportunistic — it relies on bold decision-making and is a stance that attempts to set agendas rather than responding to them. It also recognises the importance and use of power and politics.

The development of a strategic plan is a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what the organisation is, what it does, and why it does what it does. Strategic planning becomes a short-term (look to the immediate horizon — that point in the future that is still within control of the organisation), service-oriented, opportunistic process, that provides a rational response (that is, minimises the risks) to uncertainty and change, focuses attention on organisational outcomes, establishes priorities for resource allocation decisions, provides a basis for accountability, encourages the development of processes to gather information useful for further planning, educates staff and others about factors affecting the success of particular information services, informs the governing bodies/board of directors/external community about the maturity and successes of the organisation, forces informational input into the organisation from a broad range of stakeholders, reduces the risk that the organisation/institution will be marginalised by providing contemporary methods of delivery of timely, efficient and effective services, and orients the institution/organisation to identify opportunities and be future-oriented rather than responding primarily to daily difficulties.

One of the primary difficulties faced by those who wish to introduce electronic services into an organisation, whether it be a library or any other type of organisation, is that program decision-making is often left to those who have few technology-based skills. Those well-versed in technology often make matters worse by knowing too much and letting technology dictate what service is provided instead of the other way around. Some countries have actually written legislation to force end-users to dictate the design of the service to be offered. But this in itself can lead to problems, particularly if the knowledge-base of the end-users is low: what is a web site, for example? Put simply, many potential users of electronic services do not know what is possible, do not know the terminology, do not yet know what benefits are likely. In the face of this difficulty, many service providers soldier on regardless, without due regard to building a level of knowledge at both ends of the equation — from user to provider. Likewise, there are decision-makers who regard the whole process as inevitable, or useful, but have no firm understanding of critical issues such as the desirability of ease of access to the service, employment of set-up staff versus maintenance staff versus contracted assistance, training requirements for incumbent staff and end-users, the need to provision for continual upgrades and maintenance (this is one factor that is missed by many!), and the development of a strategy to evaluate the network service provided - see the diagram alongside.

The development and evaluation of network-based programs and services requires considerable thought. It is not possible to transport an evaluation procedure from, say, a print media analysis. A different set of criteria need to be developed. And a different set of data needs to be collected, data which has yet to be collected for the delivery of non-electronic library services. As an example, if Qantas knows that people won't wait for more than 45 seconds when phoning in for reservation or flight information, and can develop programs to enhance the speed of response to customers phoning in, why is it that libraries do not have this kind of data? If end-users of library services decide that they are receiving poor service, they will simply look elsewhere. It is not enough for decision-makers to be convinced of the worth of libraries on the basis that the half of the population of Australia that do not regularly visit libraries regard the preservation of libraries as essential and that their taxes should adequately fund these institutions. We need more information about what end-users want, what they need, what they use and when they use it.

In that way, when the tide finally recedes, we will have the tools that we need to build a structure on a strong foundation that will survive the next big wave. Without this level of planning, we will be unable to survive for long whilst others are building bigger, better and stronger networked services around us.

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