

## The challenges facing corporate libraries are challenges to us all



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At the end of February, I visited Tasmania where I met with members in Launceston and Hobart. While at dinner in Launceston, I was told that not only was the Tasmanian tiger extinct but so too were corporate libraries south of Bass Strait.

I pondered on the fate of Tasmanian corporate libraries during my drive to Hobart the next day. Why didn't industry in Tasmania need libraries? Where did they get their information? What caused the demise of the corporate library? Has the decline in the Tasmanian economy been the result of the closure of corporate libraries? By the time I reached the antique shoppes and ye olde tearooms of Campbell Town, I had reached the conclusion that the challenges of the corporate library were not much different to those encountered in other sectors. The outstanding difference, however, was their vulnerability.

We tend to think of corporate libraries as those established to serve private enterprise, but is that necessarily true? Aren't most libraries established primarily to serve at least some of the needs of a corporate body or organisation? Meeting the information needs of students is a corporate objective of schools and universities. For many public libraries, supporting the administrative and management information requirements of their councils is an important strategic activity. If private enterprises believe that they can do without libraries, the cancer may well spread further unless we take positive action.

There are many examples of very successful corporate libraries which flourish because their staff integrate themselves into the operation of the company. The library staff not only work efficiently but they work strategically. They are informed about the company's activities and they use their knowledge to ensure that key personnel have access to relevant data which will facilitate decision making. An indicator of success is often the extent to which the library markets itself. This is as much about providing and promoting services as ensuring that the contribution of the library is recognised.

The corporate library experience holds lessons for all of us. Many businesses which previously supported a library found that they could obtain the necessary information from other sources at a seemingly lesser cost. In many instances, there was no concrete evidence of the benefits which the library provided and there were no influential champions of the library within the organisation. Having disbanded their libraries, few corporations re-instate them yet they continue to operate and even make profits.

Could the same not happen in other library sectors? Many schools no longer have a full-time librarian, government departments have closed or amal-

gamated their libraries and universities lucky enough to have branch libraries are constantly seeking ways to reduce their number. Some change and rationalisation will always occur but libraries do not have to be the inevitable sacrificial lambs.

Irrespective of the sector to which they belong, the well-being of libraries depends on the provision of quality services as well as effective marketing. We cannot rely solely on arguments which stress inherent worth. Whether we agree or not, funding bodies are interested increasingly in performance measures which are related in some way to money.

ALIA and ACLIS have each attempted to provide assistance to libraries interested in developing performance indicators and quality assurance programs. Both organisations have conducted lobbying campaigns aimed primarily at politicians but the methodology is equally applicable to corporations, local government administrators and other policy makers. Neither organisation has ever had the resources to target individual private enterprises and it is usually too late once the closure of a library is announced.

The organisation, to be created from the merger of ACLIS with ALIA, is likely to regard lobbying as an important activity. Since it will represent both institutional and individual members, the new organisation will need to tread a fine line when there are potential conflicts between the interests of the two groups. Other than in exceptional circumstances, lobbying will be aimed at promoting the benefits of libraries and information services in general. Workplace lobbying will remain the province of the membership concerned.

Library organisations can contribute a great deal by lobbying and by providing support to their members through professional development activities and by providing forums in which issues can be discussed. The real contribution, however, has to come from individuals. Library managers must be aware of the objectives of the company or institution and ensure that the library meets them. Quality assurance programs are an excellent way to link organisational expectations with services.

Individuals also have a part to play and should take every opportunity to promote the library. The objective should be to convince the decision-makers that the library is an indispensable part of the organisation's operations. Every customer should be regarded as a potential champion of the library and treated accordingly.

Corporate libraries are an important sector of the information industry. Other articles in this issue of *inCite* provide a glimpse of the issues facing our colleagues in these libraries. Given the breadth of tasks which they undertake, often without any support, it is no wonder that they are called special librarians. ■

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