

## The Only Certainty is Change: A Library Management Response to a Changing Environment

by MIRJAM M. FOOT

The theme of this year's LIBER conference emphasises the changing missions libraries envisage for the decade ahead and the different skills that are needed to fulfil these missions. However, change - a word we are hearing often during this week - does not materialise in a void, it does not just happen. There are reasons for the changing world in which libraries need to function and I would like to start by looking at a few of them.

Economic changes have taken place all over Europe. Manufacture, as a source of employment and as a creator of wealth, is declining - as agriculture did before - and is rapidly being replaced by a wide range of activities that are not very helpfully described as „service industries“. Many of these are based on creativity and intellect. The nature of society and the labour market have changed in that creativity and intellect transcend frontiers and technology has forced global communications, but also global competition and a highly mobile intellectual workforce.

In a paper delivered earlier this year at a SCONUL conference in Dublin, John Ashworth, Chairman of the British Library Board, described a new society based on „information and knowledge which [are] as important now as were coal and steam power for early 19th century industry“ and he expressed the „need [for] information and knowledge mines to underpin and develop these ... 21st century industries as the coal fields underpinned 19th century industry or the oil fields powered the 20th century ones“. He posed that these „knowledge mines“ are to be found in talented individuals, in past knowledge and in libraries (and I would like to add archives).

The importance of educating and developing the talented individuals, of nurturing their skills, of creating an environment in which their creativity can blossom and expand, is a task library managers will need to pay more

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attention to. We, as service providers ourselves, are not very good at giving those whose talent and knowledge underpin the service, the right environment to expand, to make mistakes, to learn (as a consequence) and to create. We tend to be too much focused on the actual service itself, without paying enough attention to the seed corn that feeds it.

We have been better at amassing past knowledge, but even there, financial crises which seem to follow upon one another with depressing frequency, have often prevented us from extending our collections into those perhaps less obvious and less often-used corners of culture and knowledge than would have been desirable, and we have certainly neglected to look after such obscurer corners, with worrying implications for their long-term survival.

The technological developments which have made such impact on our holdings and our services, as well as on our users, have tended to absorb too much of our energy, our attention and our resources, while threatening by their prolificity to create chaos. Information overload is a common complaint and the librarian is expected to organise this overload in such a way that it becomes intelligible and can be used.

Governments - perhaps at the moment especially in Britain, but not only there - place increasing emphasis on „knowledge for all”, on the knowledge society both as a creator of wealth and as a way to combat unemployment and fill the leisure that technology has created. This provides an opportunity for libraries to rise to the challenge and to demonstrate that this knowledge for all is to be found in their collections, structured and made usable by the talent of their staff. But in order to grasp this opportunity we must ensure that the collections are there and can be used in the long term as well as immediately; that the vision is there to take a sufficiently broad view of future needs; but also to develop and manage staff to enable them, not only to cope with, but to be in the forefront of and to lead, what is for many a profound cultural change.

What is the role of a research library in all this? Moving from the general to the specific, I would like to take the London part of my own institution as a case in point. As many of you know, after 20 years<sup>1</sup>, the new British Library was completed, providing space for 1,206 readers in 11 reading rooms with 23 linear kilometres of shelving holding open-access material; housing 12 million books, manuscripts, maps, scrolls, prints and drawings, tapes, sound recordings, microfilms and digital formats in a carefully controlled environment in four basements on 300 linear km of shelving. The library of King George III in its 6-storey glass tower, both enshrines the achievements of the

past and is a working collection. Three separate but linked automated systems enable the services to readers: the on-line public access catalogue (with 12 million records); the automated book request system which tracks the progress of the reader's request to the basement stores (or to one of the out-houses) and that of the book from these stores to the reader, and back again; and the mechanical bookhandling system which routes the containers full of books to their destination.

Three exhibition galleries show the Library's treasures, house thematic, changing exhibitions and demonstrate how books were made; extensive public events are held in the conference centre (which seats 255) and on the Piazza; while a large bookshop supplies both scholarly literature and merchandise with a wider public appeal. All this is serviced by about 1,200 members of staff ranging from cleaners and security warders to those who fetch the books, those who keep them in usable condition, and those who acquire them and make them accessible. All are equally important, as with one cog missing the whole complex machinery grinds to a halt.

The building is now fully operational - the last reading room is open, books, staff and readers have settled in well. To achieve this was not a negligible feat. Moving 12 million books from 8 locations into one is one thing, moving different departments with strong local traditions into one building where inter-dependencies are a fact of every-day life, is quite another. A very different physical environment, a much greater reliance on automated systems and much increased user demand are asking for new work practices and have forced us to look at how the Library is run and - as a consequence - to address the way in which it needs to be organised.

In the same way as the economy has moved from agriculture to manufacture to technology, the library structure has moved from one based on collections (subjects and languages), to one based on functions and processes, and it must now move on to one based on services. Changes in library culture from a tradition-based diversity to a cohesive corporate identity do not take place overnight. They need a more open mind, tolerance and respect for different traditional points of view, together with trust in one-another's capability and integrity; realisation that people from all backgrounds can be trusted to carry out their duties responsibly and offer a high-quality service, but at the same time acceptance of the fact that there is corporate responsibility to the service within the library as a whole, and that such a service must be considered from the point of view of the user. Readers and remote users are not interested in which part of a complex structure provides the service they need, they want their needs satisfied and their problems solved.

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The changes in emphasis by a Government that believes in „life-long learning” and in „access for all”, create tensions within a culture that was (and still is) elitist - and proudly so - aimed at satisfying the few rather than pleasing the many; that would go to extraordinary lengths to pursue one highly obtruse and obscure fact - often with astonishingly large implications - and that tended to neglect the needs of the uninitiated. These tensions and contradictions were shown very clearly when the Library, driven by an impending financial crisis and by political and economic/technological changes, embarked on an extensive consultation exercise, soliciting the views of its users, as well as those of the library and information community in the UK, in order to inform its own internal review of the Library’s strategic direction. Those consulted were all but unanimous in emphasising the need to maintain, extend and provide access to the Library’s collections. They saw the role of the National Library as that of a provider of knowledge in support of research, education and the national economy, as well as that of the guardian of the national cultural heritage. Reference and information services, opening hours and commercial services were considered important - but not as important - and services to the general public came some way behind - possibly because the one sector that was not properly consulted as it proved so difficult to identify and to reach, was the wider general public at whom the exhibition and education services are aimed. The dilemma in which a national library finds itself was clearly enough demonstrated: on the one hand it is a research library providing primary source material and reference material to its users, on the other hand it has an archival role on behalf of the nation as a whole. It is at the same time a library of first and last resort. It needs to concentrate on services for a wide range of users from academics to business people, from writers to performing musicians, from family historians to picture researchers, from professionals to that elusive category, the „general public”. It has to serve them all now, while ensuring that the same, and new, sources of knowledge will still be available for future generations. It has to provide information accurately and instantly without compromising its responsibilities towards those as yet unborn.

It faces the additional dilemma that technology helps to satisfy the demands, while at the same time increasing them. The globalisation of knowledge and of the demand for information, the ease and the speed with which information can be produced and disseminated, have opened up a whole range of further problems, of which increased competition with the commercial sector is but one. Publications on-line and in hand-held digital formats offer untold possibilities in providing and extending knowledge; they also present as yet insufficiently-grasped problems of handling and maintenance. Developments in

digitisation of existing collections side by side with the growth of electronic and electronic-only publications, together with the continuing growth of publication in conventional formats; the expansion of the world-wide-web and the expectation of easy access to it, the demands for longer opening hours, the expectation of high standards of service, the commitment of Government to education and life-long learning, the increase in numbers of students - at all levels and of all ages - combined with the ever-present constraint of funding, are compelling libraries to chose new patterns of working and to ask for and develop new skills and changed attitudes in their employees. Work patterns will have to become more flexible: no nine-to-five existence in one location, but shifts and rotas to cover extended and unsocial hours; rapid and frequent movement between departments, areas and functions to respond to changes in user needs; no more permanent jobs-for-life, but ever more short-term contracts to cope with fluctuations both in demand and in funding.

The problems of uncertainty, possible lack of commitment, lack of tradition-based skills, lack of profound and specialised knowledge that accompany such changed patterns will have to be tackled with energy, imagination and determination. Education and training, continual personal and professional de-velopment are needed, not only to motivate staff who see their security undermined, but also to make them genuinely flexible and service-oriented, to produce the wide range of skills that is necessary to respond to and, better still, to anticipate the needs of the users, to make them understand both external, and internal corporate, developments, and to enable them to grasp the opportunities offered by a „knowledge society”. We as senior library managers have the task and the duty to identify the skills needed in a workforce that can respond comfortably and self-assuredly to the demands of our users and to ensure not only that the necessary continual professional and personal development is in place, but that the staff themselves are committed to the development of their own skills, and are given the time and the opportunity for this. We can learn a certain amount from other service industries, such as banks, shops, hotels, where staff development has a much higher profile and where a flatter management structure and a less desk-bound environment create greater flexibility.

We as mangers have to be committed to our own development. We have to get better at working not against each other but with each other, we have to improve our communication skills and our understanding of how human beings behave and why, and we have to encourage both in ourselves and in our staff those new skills without which our libraries will not be able to function in this changing society. These new skills are not only those needed

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to handle and make full use of new technologies; but also fund-raising and marketing skills; new management skills, such as greater emphasis on coaching and monitoring; better communication skills; partnership skills so that our much-discussed and widely-agreed need for cooperation among libraries and Higher Education institutions can become a reality now, rather than a much debated hope for the future. Partnerships with the private sector will also be needed to survive in a world of global competition.

Perhaps the much discussed „virtual library” should not be seen as a large electronic network, but as a „well-ordered pattern of complementary and co-operating parts”,<sup>2</sup> forming the necessary library and information services for the country as a whole; not „virtually”, but as a concrete entity. If we want to achieve this, we must aim for genuine partnerships to provide a country-wide service forming the basis for the knowledge society, open to its ever-changing demands and working together to anticipate and supply them.

REFERENCES

- 1 The plans were approved in 1978, construction started in 1982 and the new building was opened in 1998.
- 2 Lord F. Dainton [et. al], Report of the National Libraries Committee (1968).

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