



2010 and the new professional – for discussion

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Introduction

As one long serving representative of the library and information profession I want to share what I see as a possible future for trained library and information professionals in a field that has been totally ignored until now.

Many of my former colleagues are working in document, records and knowledge management and doing a fine job at that but they work within the confines of systems and processes that have been designed by the IT industry to make sense of what I call "the chaos of information management".

Many of these information management experts instinctively know that what is missing is real order and control but what they work with is always limited to what the IT industry believes is the optimum requirement and any other way of looking at managing precious information in the business is going to be resisted.

The industry, working the paradigm of the power of the search engine continues to perpetuate the myth that technology just by using a good taxonomy and appropriate metadata is providing all the information management that the world needs.

When questioned on the required elements needed in their systems to be able to cater in full for the needs of a business and at the same time deal with the wide variety of attitudes, skills and ability and time and other operational considerations, the IT industry will look to the next release or the next operating system.



The emperor is without clothes and nothing on the horizon is ever going to make a great deal of difference to the way that human beings want to manage information and the time they are willing to take to get it right.

It seems strange to be promoting order and control while the world of technology wants to rely on anything but being organized but there are huge benefits unavailable in any other way.

Business owners, managers and inevitably the workers are the losers and the world is missing out absolutely everywhere while nobody notices the loss.

Since the mid nineties I have worked in the main outside of libraries in businesses ranging from government down to the smallest, some owned and operated by a single person.

There were four questions about business information that everyone was desperate to have right answers to but where the answers always showed that the business was at risk, was not as productive as it should be and was found to be losing in every way.

Those questions are simple and anyone would want to be able to say "yes" to everyone of the following

do we know what is there?

do we know what is that that should not be there?

do we know what is missing?

do we know what we need?

So simple. And yet all of these questions turn out to be minefields even when a business has invested heavily in the latest information management systems and the latest technology.



I have been able to prove that it is always going to be hard to find great answers to these questions unless a business has set about organizing its business information by organizing the computer network or the standalone machine they are using to run the business.

When you are working either as a consultant or a contractor you can't afford to stir the possum. To point out that the information in the business is in a huge mess often went down like a lead balloon. In some cases I faced some fierce opposition from IT personnel who saw me as either a crackpot or a threat.

It was nigh on impossible to have them see that there was a fundamental and critical difference about information management as they knew it and the problems with information content management that was my focus.

It was my job to tell it like I saw it but that rarely worked for me as they were sure I was invading their territory.

I had earned the profile of an information trouble-shooter. I would be called in to find out why something was not working, something was missing or something needed improvement.

Most of the time, the very last people to be asked to work on the design were the users and all of the time, they had ignored the possibility of talking to someone like me.

Sometimes the database or project management tool was much too badly designed to be saved. Sometimes it just needed a little tweaking.

I couldn't help noticing that computer networks were in a mess and that all of the efforts of information management people to create tools for finding information again were not working well enough.

The information was searchable, sometimes retrievable and mostly unreliable and the staff rarely used the systems. When they did, they used them badly.



Back to where it all began

While I loved working as a library manager and loved working in libraries I was born to be an organizer.

That passion had started long before I became a librarian while I was working with the Anti Cancer Council of Victoria in Melbourne in the medical records library.

I was young and eager to learn and I was able to learn from a quite extraordinary person. That experience in the "Cancer Registry" was where I learned about and saw at first hand the evidence of good organization, good order and good control.

The role of the Registry was to collect information on cancer treatment and survival rates from 10 major public hospitals and manage it in such a way that it could be used to support the work of researchers.

It was in the Registry that I worked with the late Jean Higginbottom or "Mrs Higg" as she was affectionately called.

Mrs Higg was in my opinion a genius who had taught herself about information management systems and strategies and then about computers when they first appeared. She knew how to get the best out of the data and strived constantly for excellence from her staff and her work processes.

There were no personal computers at her disposal when she started but she was never afraid to deal with the boffins working on the huge mainframes who could help her provide current information for those who would work with and talk about cancer.

Higg was later to be recognized for her work by being given the honorary qualification of Medical Records Librarian.

She had created a classification system for the disease in which it was cross referenced to all parts of the body. It worked beautifully.



For example, squamous cell carcinoma of the larynx had its own classification number and this meant that every patient could be listed with the correct diagnosis. A change in the diagnosis just meant a change in a number.

As a member of the team I was engaged in tracking every patient so that Mary Jane who shifted hospitals and became Jane Mary was not counted twice. Our efforts to preserve data integrity were legend.

In the early days the Registry had transferred all of the information to punched cards and used the mainframe computers belonging to IBM and later at Monash University to interpret the data.

In order to do that they wrote what I now see were primitive programs designed to read the punched holes in the cards and prepare the information which was transferred to documents and sometimes to the overheads that a specialist would proudly use somewhere in the world.

This was Mrs Higg at her best. This was information management at its best.

There was much to learn from Mrs Higg and I really enjoyed the work because at the end of the day you could see the results in what we were able to prepare for the medical specialists we all held in high esteem. And in this case, it was not hard to see that we could be making the difference that would ensure someone's survival.

I think it is that attention to input and output that has led me to want to work in a field that was about business information.

I see parallels between the collection development I taught to undergraduate students and the view I continue to have that business information just like the information in a library is the soul of the organization and secret to its success.

By now you will have realised that my career is not only interesting, it has been long.



I have the credentials and the runs on the board to be able to put forward these ideas and what I am hoping for is that some discussion will begin about the baby they threw out with the bathwater, so to speak.

Many of you will know me as a past national president of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA).

It was during my office bearing days with ALIA that I started to realize that I was someone who represented both the library and information aspects of the Association in a very practical way and I knew that I would probably never return to working in a library as I had known it in the past.

I stopped calling myself "a librarian with an interest in information management" and referred to myself as "a library trained information management professional".

I was amazed at the number of managers and owners who said they wanted me to work for them because I was a library professional.

That was quite a discovery when the profession had been dealing with an identity crisis and libraries everywhere were being renamed "information centres".

It was only after a number years working as a consultant that I actually was given the opportunity of getting my teeth into helping businesses design their information management strategies, redesign their computer networks and use the design to manage the business, training, resources and knowledge.

When the results are breathtaking you have to create Ten Steps to Best Business and write in the book

Ten Steps Business Publications published the paperback **Sleepers: the world's best-kept business secret** in late 2007 and the eBook version in 2008.



Sleepers was followed by **Business Information Organization: 21st century best practice** in 2008

These books are about everything that we at Ten Steps Business Publications know about information from policy and compliance to organization and control.

Your job, should you accept it, is to be ready to take on the task of helping organizations, big and small, to design their own networks for their own businesses and to take advantage of this twenty first century management breakthrough.

When I was studying librarianship, it wasn't hard to be fascinated with the lives and theories of two librarians who have made their on particular mark in the history of our profession.

They were Melvil Dewey (American author of the Dewey Decimal Classification system) and S.R. Ranganathan (Indian string indexing theorist), both geniuses of their time. This was a time when information was thought to be confined to the book or the journal.

I often wonder what they would be doing now if they had been living in this century just as I know that Mrs Higg who is no longer with us, would be in her element creating the kind of information structures I am talking about.

I hope that these words will be read by an educator who will start the discussion and the debate about order and control.

I would argue that there is much more meat and much more mileage in studying order and control than there is in 'how to purchase good document management systems'.

The time to make some fundamental and powerful changes is now.

Nobody would have listened a decade ago.

Everybody has to listen now.



In 2007, I realised that with all of the will in the world, being a consultant and getting to a few people was never going to really change anything.

As the developments of 2008 have shown there is nothing sure in this world except death and taxes and there is nothing sure about the world of business.

Just maybe this is the conversation and the debate the world needs right now.

Nobody should leave it for another day or another year to address the fundamental issues of who is in charge of the business when business information is in a mess.

Now it's over to you. I might just be onto something here.

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