

The Changing Environment for Information Professionals

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The Changing Environment

It is no news to say that we all exist in a business environment characterized by constant change. At an April 2007 talk to Special Libraries Association (SLA) members of the Southern California Chapter in Los Angeles, CEO Janice Lachance put it as directly as it comes – “we live in a world of change...and nowhere is this more obvious than in the world of information and communications”. So how do we make that great shift to reinvent the delivery of information services when we think about some of the key technical and social changes impacting our environment?

Web 2.0

Web 2.0 has become something of a buzz word – but what does it really mean? Simply put, it's using web technology to provide services in a more “social” way that works for the user. In other words, it's about sharing, about facilitating and communicating in a “community”. It allows the sharing of information and functionality in a way that has not been possible before.

This list taken from an article by Tim O'Reilly gives specific examples of the newer manifestations of Web 2.0 (as against earlier representations of the Web).

- Flickr
- Wikipedia
- Blogging
- Cost per click
- Participation
- Tagging (“folksonomy”)
- Syndication

So, where before we had Britannica Online now we have Wikipedia. Where originally “page views” defined the internet, now we have “cost-per-click”. Where previously someone published content to an intranet for others to view, now we have “participation”, and so on. (O'Reilly, Tim. What is Web 2.0, 2005)

Now, Web 2.0 has given rise to Library 2.0 or L2 for short - a library or information centre that embraces the Web 2.0 technology in order to provide services in an entirely different way. In practice, Library 2.0 suggests moving beyond physical and virtual walls of the library, and being present not only in the library catalogue, but in places where information consumers actually spend their time online. Some examples would be eBay, Google, Amazon, portals and, finally, in virtual learning environments associated with daily life, such as learning, work, leisure or other communities of interest. And this environment moves so fast, Web 3.0 is also around the corner.

Changing Role and Generations

What about the coming information professional talent shortage – How are we to continue and grow our roles if we are not being replaced as we retire from the profession?

Our customers and our replacements will increasingly be part of Generations X and Y. Generation X is the children of the “baby boomer” generation (who are just beginning to turn age 60). Born from 1960-1985, X generation members are also referred to as Millennials, NextGens or Echo Boomers. The younger generation Y were born from 1986 to about 2001.

An IMLS white paper on the *Future of Librarians in the Workforce* (Chidlund, J, Chochrek, D, et al. The Future of Librarians in the Workplace – Business Librarians, IMLS, 2005) thinks that both Generation X and Y will have a great impact on business libraries over the next decade. X and Y are considered more family or dual-centric, than the work-centric Baby Boom generation. They value flexibility and want to have it all, on their own terms. Even more, with Generation Y, they want the workplace to be fun, relaxed and non-traditional!

According to another paper published by Deloitte entitled “Connecting Across the Generations in the Workplace: What Business Leaders Need to Know to Benefit from Generational Differences”, (Deloitte & Touche, Talent Market Series, Vol. 1, 2005) individuals from both groups have a deep reliance on technology and believe it enables them to work (and play) anywhere and anytime. Having grown up with video gaming, they are likely to work well in teams, take risks and quickly make decisions and manage problems. They process visual data as well or better than textual data. They are also more adept at multi-tasking.

What insight does all of this give us in the way we attract new blood into our profession, and very importantly too, how we provide services to them?

Disintermediation

We can take comfort from the thought that we are not the only profession undergoing changes resulting from all these challenges. For example, disintermediation caused by end users going directly to the internet also affects professions like the travel industry, financial and legal services, insurance brokers and so on. How many of us now search the internet for car insurance quotes, and sign up without going in to see or even speak with an insurance broker? How many of us book our travel, purchase the ticket, check in, print boarding pass (even choosing our seat along the way) and go straight to the departure control? It is a pervasive self service model.

A new plan for service transformation

We need a new generation of products that extend entirely new services to users and facilitate the sharing of applications to a wider degree than ever before. We must seek ways to unburden users from the restrictions in the sharing of information as ease of fulfilment--think Amazon or other web enabled facilities—is the user’s normal expectation today.

Library 2.0

This is a very different type of library service, one which operates from the expectations of the user today – “wherever, whenever and how I want it”. In an article in the July/August 2007 issue of *Searcher* magazine, the authors view information professionals as ideal champions of the “relatively unstructured and very dynamic” environment of virtual communities and social networks. They feel that info pros are in a “unique position to bring order to chaos...by applying the traditional skills of finding, evaluating, organizing and applying...people-centric information” to meet organizational needs (Reid, M. and Gray, C. *Online Social Networks, Virtual Communities, Enterprises, and Information Professionals – Part 1. Past and Present. Searcher, Vol. 15, No 7 -*

Jul/Aug 2007). Thus, instead of patrons coming to visit the library, it will be “the library that comes to visit!”

Connect with users by embracing non-textual information and the power of pictures, audio, moving image and so forth. Connect with everyone using their preferred communication mode – telephone, Skype, Instant Messaging, SMS, email, MySpace.com, Second Life – whatever! Malcolm Gladwell, author of the much quoted “The Tipping Point” (Little Brown & Co, 2000) is of the view that these social networks depend very much on “connectors”. Information professionals are uniquely placed to become, and can become these “connectors” in delivering a new library service.

Other suggestions for promoting this new library service include:

- Model on the “self-service” of Google and Yahoo
- Populate with information sources required by your users
- Include all the metadata and descriptive terms familiar to users
- Encourage interactivity, “conversations”, networking
- Be more flexible and better situated for changing needs
- Appeal to new, younger users
- Enable more user “participation”

This self-service model and the ensuing user engagement will open up new opportunities for the information professional as never before.

Technology Opportunities

A common question often asked by information professionals is how they can utilize the new web technology in a business environment. We need to get comfortable with the technology to facilitate this new game plan. For most of us, this is not a problem. The problem is probably more with getting our “powers that be” to be open to it and accepting and allowing us to put it into practice. This is the core of the challenge for us – getting our management (and our IT department) on board!

Here are a few of the current technology trends we need to include in our new service definition:

- Data and Text mining
- Information visualization
- Blogs and Wikis
- RSS and XML
- Podcasting and MP3s
- Streaming media - YouTube
- Personalization and Customization – “My Profile”, Widgets
- Social networking – MySpace, Facebook
- Open source and open content

Widgets particularly have gained momentum lately, and in fact, a 2006 Newsweek article predicted 2007 to be the “Year of the Widget”. Widgets are particularly “participatory” in allowing users to design the page they see when they log on (Braiker, Brian, Newsweek, December 30, 2006).

Reid and Gray in the Searcher article (Jul/Aug 2007) reference a company called Cerado, who provide social networking technology for business, and provide a list of some of what the new technologies enable organizations to do, including but not limited to:

- Allowing employees and customers to find and connect with experts
- Understand and visualize real communication paths within organizations
- Share knowledge with user-desired ...technologies (such as RSS)

If information professionals could “sell” these benefits to organizational stakeholders, they would be sure to connect to at least one of these benefits. Today, the internet has evolved into what one commentator calls a “DIY Web” (Ammirati, S. Read/WriteWeb, April 18, 2007). We would be well advised to become “enablers” in this environment.

Finally...

If we can't grow, we cannot adapt to change. We should accept that new staff or the younger generation has something to teach us. We can't know it all! And sometimes this learning can be FUN, so let's develop a sense of adventure.

And speaking of change, consider this. Libraries have existed since early civilizations, beginning with the papyrus collections of ancient Egypt, to the Greco-Roman philosophy think- tanks. Today's talk of digitization, open access, and social networking should come as no surprise to anyone, an article in the Christian Science Monitor tells us (Wright, A. Libraries as places to linger and mingle. Christian Science Monitor, January 13, 2006 edition). According to the article, down through the ages, libraries have been living, human institutions. They have always been “open spaces” of collaboration in a human experience. Just as they have survived since medieval Europe, they will continue to survive and move with “technology” and other knowledge evolution tools. After all, in the old days, papyrus was “technology”. As the title of that article suggests – Libraries will continue to be places to linger and mingle.

Further Resources

This paper reflects some of the issues addressed by the Quantum² leadership development program, offered by Thomson Scientific for information professionals. The program targets both the strategic competencies and business competencies needed for success within your organizations. Quantum² consists of a mixture of tools and resources to help information and knowledge workers evolve professionally and gain support from decision makers in their organizations. You can learn more at <http://www.thomsonscientific.com/quantum/>.

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