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We all spend a great deal of time dealing with day-to-day tasks without being too aware of the context in which the tasks are being performed. We recognise from time-to-time that we should be making more time to focus on the what and why instead of just carrying on with the task in front of us — but somehow the tasks are always there, demanding all the attention that we can give them.

Every now and again an event occurs which reminds us what the job is all about, and raises our sights in a very positive way. It might be a user's expression of appreciation for the wonder of a service which we provide every day without conscious thought, or the question asked at a public presentation. The best of training and staff development programs sets up the opportunity to stand back and look objectively at what the job is all about, and sometimes briefing notes or budget justifications can do the same thing.

In early May I had a 'red letter week' when several of those occasions occurred. The first was the opening of Australian Library Week in Victoria, an impressive gathering at the Parliamentary Library. The guest speaker was the state finance minister and newly-appointed minister for multimedia. He had made sure he was well-briefed for the occasion, and was up-to-date with key initiatives in the library and information field. Listening to what has been done and is being planned for the immediate future brought it home to me just what exciting times these are, as the tools that disseminate information improve at lightning speed and opportunities to select material expand daily. The same occasion featured the ALIA FLIS Innovation Awards. Winning projects were announced from school, public, special, and university college and research libraries. The crisp citations depicted a lively range of service-focused initiatives, which strongly reinforced the impression of vitality and professionalism which had come through in the ministers speech.

Later in the week, I attended the seminar given by Larry Prusak and James Matarazzo. They stimulated some very interesting discussion about the value of special libraries to their institutions, and the value-adding role of libraries and information services. Prusak and Matarazzo taxed us to really think about the degree to which we assemble data, or provide information, or add knowledge. The difficulty with which the group had in defining these terms shows how seldom we focus on these basic questions ourselves, let alone articulate our value to others.

Immediately following that seminar I attended an Institute of Public Administration forum addressed by Bill Scales, chair of the Industry Commission, on benchmarking and performance monitoring in the public service. In my twenty-five years of involvement with public service performance measurement, I have never heard such a compelling exposition of the what and the how, or felt so stirred as to the why. Anyone who can deal with benchmarking and performance monitoring with the fervour of a southern Baptist preacher has to be a pretty special speaker. The key message which came through in his presentation was how critical it is to be absolutely certain about our goals, and to be clear about what measures will give us meaningful information about how well we are reaching them.

Which brings me, in a terribly roundabout way, to the subject which was the original focus of this column — service to minority and special interest groups. There has been a great tendency in the library and information field over the years to do things which we know are right, without being clear about how they are justified in relation to community or institutional values.

The provision of a free, or more accurately, community-funded, public library service and the horror with which we reel back from anything which seems to challenge it, rather than confidently arguing why it is important to the community, is a good example. Another is the complacency with which we talk about the importance of equality (or should that be equity?) of service. Does it mean equal expenditure per head for minority users, or equality of outcomes? The cost and service implications will be vastly different. Does it mean recognising and responding to minority needs at the level they exist in the potential user community, or among actual users? Do we focus our resources and efforts on providing the materials and services appropriate to minority groups or on communicating appropriately with them to attract them to use existing services?

We will never answer these questions in a useful and cost-effective way as long as we have a politically-correct glow and warm feelings of automatic virtue related to any services to minority and special interest groups. We must be able to clearly and unemotionally define exactly what we are doing in terms which align with the community or institutions values, and to justify and measure how effectively we are allocating scarce resources to achieve the most important goals. ■