Would you rather cuddle a computer?

Beth Mayo, Queensland Special Librarians Section president

There has been much talk of late of the migration in many organisations and government departments away from the centralised repository for information. Many of our workmates are convinced that access to electronic products (such as CD-ROMs) is all they need to perform their daily tasks. They assume these valuable sources of information will make them self-sufficient and automatically turn them into 'instant information professionals'.

But no matter how brilliant the technology or data base, no matter how many of them are added to a LAN or hard drive, we still need librarians to analyse information requests, anticipate information needs and weed out false 'hits' in searches. Even more importantly, the human element is still essential to evaluate the reliability of sources or suggest possible resources that will allow an information need to be met. But how do we make 'them' understand how essential the librarian is to their information needs?

Librarians are ideally-placed to lead the way in embracing technological changes. Special librarians can prove their worth to their organisations by constantly and pro-actively involving themselves in any new developments occurring in the areas of information retrieval and dissemination. We can no longer expect to maintain our professional status if we sit quietly in our libraries and never touch base with our users or create a professional bond with our organisations information technology people.

Librarians possess unmatched skill in the areas of: refining an initial request; selecting an appropriate resource to meet information needs; taking that intuitive 'extra step' and anticipating possible further request outcomes; quickly pinpointing inadequacies in data bases and having the ability to rank them in order of accuracy or relevancy to the information needs of the organisation; and maintaining an optimum level of communication within the organisation in order to filter the information flow and control 'information overload'.

It may also be useful to mention a recent survey of corporate libraries (Nardie, B, O'Day, V, Valauskas, E, 'Put a librarian, not software, in the driver's seat', *The Christian Science Monitor*. Vol 132, 4 June 1996, p18) that was conducted in that cauldron of the computer chip, Silicone Valley. The survey clearly demonstrated the special librarians ability to adjust to the constantly changing landscape of electronic resources, while at the same time treating their client's information needs with sensitivity and understanding in a way that 'intelligent software agents' could not.

Take a long, hard look at that computer that sits in your workplace. Does it smile, tell jokes or call you by name as you pass by? Technology is great, but it is not as great as a living, breathing special librarian on the trail of urgently needed information.

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