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## Librarians save lives?

**D**ying for information is the title of a report released on 7 November by Reuters Australia. The accompanying press release was headed 'Information overload causes stress, ill-health and poor quality of life in Australia'. Based on a survey of 1313 junior, middle and senior managers in Australia, the United States, Hong Kong, Singapore and the UK, the results suggest that Australian managers are more severely afflicted with information anxiety syndrome than their counterparts elsewhere. The obvious solution is close at hand — the corporate librarian.

In the foreword to the report Dr David Lewis (who, we are told, acts as an adviser to major multinational companies in Europe and the United Kingdom) explains the link between information overload and stress. There is a fear that failure to understand crucial information will lead to expensive mistakes. There is a belief that huge quantities of information must be absorbed if a job is to be done efficiently. Stress, he says, 'is caused by not knowing whether crucial information exists, or if it exists, of not being sure of where and how to locate it'.

He continues in a more dramatic fashion: 'Confronted with these threats, our body immediately goes into primitive survival mode termed the *fight or flight* response. This evolved millions of years ago to safeguard us when confronted by physical danger. In situations where the only options are to kill an adversary or flee from it, the *fight flight* response can make the difference between life and death.' While the report does not identify the solutions to this problem it does signal that 'dealing with the information burden is now one of the most urgent world-wide challenges facing business'.

There seems to be a common misconception that this information overload is a recent product of the availability of online information. We know that the availability of networked information is growing at a phenomenal rate. But, as the report points out, a weekday edition of the New York Times contains more information than a citizen of the 17th century would read in a lifetime. The number of books published each day is now around 1000 volumes and the total of all printed information is doubling every five years. It is these facts that have established the position of corporate libraries as an integral component of the business equation. The availability of online information has erroneously caused some managers to de-

value the role of the librarian in the management of and access to new media. What this report does is provide some more ammunition for corporate librarians to demonstrate the effectiveness of the information services that they can provide.

In the survey Australian managers identified the following costs to business as a result of information overload:

- Fifty-seven per cent agreed that information overload can lead to delays in making important decisions and forty-eight per cent agreed that it hampers decision making,
- Thirty-seven per cent agreed that their colleagues often waste substantial amounts of time locating the right information,
- Sixty-seven per cent believed the cost of collecting information exceeds its value to business, and
- Eighty-five per cent said they were forced to collect information just to remain competitive.

We must argue that the role of the corporate librarian has never been more important. Indeed, given the Reuters survey results, librarians can claim a role in stress management as well as information management — the new corporate health professionals! However further work is required to fully understand what is happening in corporate libraries throughout Australia. ALIA is undertaking a study which will provide us with important information about how the top one hundred Australian businesses value their libraries. I am a member of the steering committee which also includes Margaret Hyland and from the Board of Education, Marion Nicolson, Julie Dow. Julie Dow has secured a small grant from the University of South Australia to develop and conduct the survey. We look forward to presenting our results in the early part of 1997. Members who would like to receive a summary of the Reuters report should contact Jane McCarty at ALIA National Office.

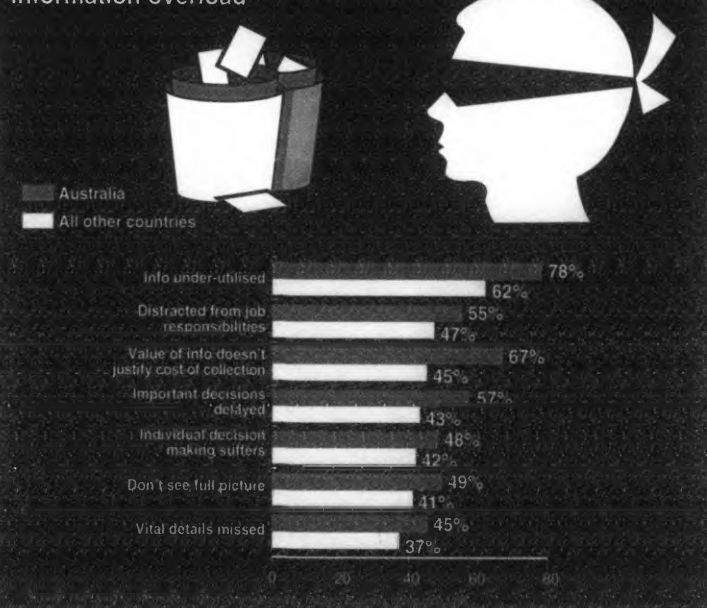
Finally, and on a different note, I want to thank the many correspondents who have responded to my comments in the November issue of *inCite* about the 'tremendous opportunities' available in the library sector. The 'optimistic' portrait that I sketched has drawn positive and negative responses from readers. Labour market surveys support my claim that the future for library professionals looks 'rosy'. Such an observation does not

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deny the difficult times experienced in the library job market today. We have acknowledged in many articles in recent times the impact of major structural change in the workplace, the impact of new information technologies, the need for continuing professional development and the importance of flexibility. As the article by Ross Bowerman stressed we have to look further than 'L' for librarian. It was this awareness in part that precipitated the addition of the word 'information' to our Association's name in 1988. Stimulated by the response from library practitioners in higher education we will be featuring university libraries in the February 1997 edition of *inCite*. That issue will present portraits of a number of university libraries, an analysis of job opportunities and the emerging industrial landscape and a story about the application of quality standards.

I wish all our readers a happy, peaceful and anxiety-free Christmas!

Problems experienced from information overload



## Quality rewarded

At the annual Australian Quality Awards ceremony held on 12 November, the libraries of the University of Wollongong and the University of Melbourne received Achievement in Business Excellence Awards. The Australian Quality Awards were introduced in 1988 and have contributed significantly to the growing awareness within the community of the importance of quality to Australia's international competitiveness. The Awards provide a framework for defining sustainable organisational excellence.

For the University of Wollongong Library, the presentation culminated a two-year commitment to the quality journey and almost a decade of planned change within the library. The process has transformed the library from a rigidly hierarchical, reactive organisation into one which is flexible, team-based and client-focused.

Participation in the awards program provided the library with a structured means of critical introspection. It reaffirmed the library's goal of creating a culture which values both team and individual achievement. More pragmatically it has prepared the library for meeting the challenges brought about by changes in University funding. Unlike many other sections of the University, the library has a clear mission statement, can identify its core activities and has data regarding its performance and costs.

The library now has a framework around which to continue developing its services in a manner which is strategic and closely aligned with the needs of its clients. This framework will facilitate the library's ability to meet

whatever challenges the future brings.

For the University of Melbourne's library, the award recognises considerable gains in the areas of staff, community relations, planning and products and services, although the library recognises that quality is a journey and they still have some distance to go.

Organisations must lead from the front by effecting their own continuous learning. This requires an approach which encourages audit and review and retains enough flexibility to move resources to new programs and drive change to achieve greater customer satisfaction.

Libraries need a vision which can be owned by the organisation and its customers. The massive increase in information both in print and electronic form requires that libraries change their roles to meet the opportunities and challenges ahead. It is in this context that many libraries have used quality principles as a tool for moving forward.

When the library began its quality journey it was seen by some to be 'lagging behind' — although many of the library's services and its collections were extremely good, the library was criticised for its lack of a service focus. It was clear that substantial quality improvement programs needed to be established as a tool for achieving organisational change and development.

A framework for sustained improvement is in place. Libraries have a future, this future will continue to change rapidly and libraries must be able to embrace the opportunities this future will provide.