Directline

ALIA explores the value of libraries

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Special librarians are particularly vulnerable in this new information age. Many corporate managers believe that the proliferation of online information delivers all the information they require to the desktop. Corporations have already demonstrated a willingness to cut library services from the organisational structure in the belief that staff can negotiate their own way through the information networks to secure the knowledge resources they require. At a superficial level the jargon of the 'information economy' and 'knowledge economy' reinforce this perception. The recent establishment of an Office of Information Economy within the Federal Department of Communications and the Arts celebrates our government's commitment to encouraging all Australians to participate in the new information age. The task for the library community is to effectively mark out its territory and secure its future role into the next millennium.

ALIA has an important role in establishing the credentials of its constituency with government and business. Our advocacy efforts are predominantly directed towards issues deriving from the development of digital information resources. But to be effective advocates we must arm ourselves with persuasive facts and figures which demonstrate the indispensability of the skills of the professional librarian. It was in this context that ALIA embarked on an exploratory study to identify the perceived value of libraries and information professionals to Australia's top-100 companies.

This research is new to the Australian library sector. Importantly, it seeks to add an Australian perspective to the studies undertaken in the US by James Matarazzo and Laurence Prusak in 1990 and 1995. These particular studies examined the attitudes and perceptions of senior managers with budgetary responsibility for the library facilities of their companies as a way of evaluating the performance of the corporate library and of gauging its value as a resource to the organisation.

The American research results suggested that corporate management was neither familiar with the role of the library facilities in determining the success of their companies nor had they any formal procedure for measuring its contribution. They therefore concluded that if corporate library professionals wish to consolidate their position within the corporate environment, it was incumbent upon them to work to demonstrate the value of their services to their parent companies.

The ALIA study, while seeking data that is comparable with the US study, focusses on Australia's top-100 companies and seeks to generate information about company expectations of Australian library professionals — whether they have a library or not.

The project was undertaken in three stages comprising a literature review, ALIA research and mail survey and, finally the development and conduct of the telephone survey of the top-100 companies. The results of the literature review were reported in the *Australian Library Journal* (May 1997). We then conducted some preliminary research on the top-100 companies and identified 51 companies with either formal or informal corporate library facilities. We then wrote to the chief librarians outlining the nature of our research project, urging their co-operation and asking for some details about their library resources.

While our sample is too small to be reliable the results are not surprising — with one exception: the anticipated growth in library resources.

In the past ten years:

- 65 per cent of respondents experienced an increase in the electronic delivery of services;
- 60 per cent of respondents experienced growth in library resources;
- 35 per cent of respondents experienced downsizing of library resources; and
- 25 per cent of respondents experienced increased outsourcing.

In the next five years:

- 90 per cent of respondents anticipate a further increase in the electronic delivery of services;
- 65 per cent of respondents anticipate growth in library resources;
- 15 per cent of respondents anticipate downsizing of library resources; and
- 20 per cent of respondents anticipate increased outsourcing.

In September 1997 a telephone survey of the top-100 Australian companies was undertaken by a firm of professional researchers to elicit responses about how library services were valued and examine future expectations of information management within these companies. The survey tool was designed so that it could be replicated at some time in the future to enable us to measure any changes in the management and valuation of information resources in these companies.

Conclusion

This project is a first step in marshalling facts and figures which will assist corporate librarians to demonstrate the value of their services to management. Much more remains to be done. It is surprising that only 47 of the 83 corporations surveyed within the top-100 Australian companies have a library or information service. The ▶

statistics gathered to date suggest that there is little chance that this situation will change in the near future. Of those corporations with a library, responses indicate that about one-quarter believe that the library is not meeting the information needs of the company. What can we do to address this issue?

The research undertaken to date points to opportunities for further research. If we surveyed the top-200 companies would we find a higher or lower proportion of information services in the second cohort? If we revisited the same 100 companies in five years time would we see any change? What might be the nature of that change? Efforts at documenting models of best practice in valuing library services should be promoted (see Diprose K *Pricing the invaluable: putting a value on information in the corporate context*. ALJ 1997; 46(4): 386–393).

Perhaps the final message should be one of optimism. We know that librarians have special skills in providing timely access to relevant information. The proliferation of information in today's digital world provides great opportunities for the corporate librarian to demonstrate her or his (potential) contribution to corporate success.■

Survey results

The survey involved 111 interviews with employees of 83 of the top-100 companies. Of these 83 companies, 47 had a corporate library and 36 did not. Of the 111 employees interviewed, 36 were librarians, while the remainder were managers. [the detailed results of each question can be found on ALIAnet].
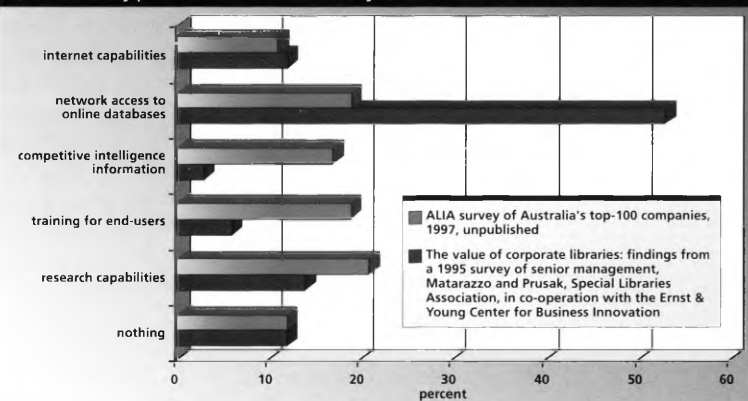
What methods and approaches are used to determine the library's value? Each respondent was asked how the value of the library was measured. Consistent with the picture which emerged when the question was asked exclusively of corporate librarians, no single, uniform standard of measurement of value is being adopted by companies. The most popular measure of value was by number of requests handled.

What competencies of the library staff are most valued by management? The key competency identified in the survey was the ability to interpret requests for information and respond quickly. This is clearly underpinned by knowledge about information sources and business and technical knowledge and equates with the findings of the USA study.

What library products and services provide the highest value to the company? Electronic databases library services provide the highest value to the companies surveyed in Australia and the USA although in the US the proportion is much higher than here. In fact the results of the 1990 study by Prusak and Matarazzo placed an even higher value on these services (78%) which led the researchers to conclude that non-library staff may be accessing the databases themselves and by-passing the library.

What products and services would you like to see in the future? Here we can see a significant difference between the two studies. In the USA study, fifty-three per cent of responses recognised the importance of networked access to online databases. Perhaps the Australian response of 19.3 per cent could be attributed to a lack of understanding of the terminology or the capability of this form of information. There is also an interesting difference in respect of competitive intelligence information.

Q: What library products and services would you like to see in the future?

ALIA survey of Australia's top-100 companies, 1997, unpublished

The value of corporate libraries: findings from a 1995 survey of senior management, Matarazzo and Prusak, Special Libraries Association, in co-operation with the Ernst & Young Center for Business Innovation

How does the library contribute to the strategy of the company? These results suggest that the library does have some influence on corporate strategy but that influence may be more passive than active through the adoption of corporate goals. However the higher ranking in relation to the role in currency of latest research is encouraging.

What is missing from the library tool kit? Australian respondents cited a need for more staff while the most popular response in the US survey was 'nothing' (29%). In Australia, seventeen per cent of responses to this question were also 'nothing'. As Matarazzo and Prusak have noted this could be a bad and a good outcome. If nothing is missing from the library tool kit it may be difficult to sustain claims for greater resources. On the other hand it could be an indication of satisfaction with the library service.

What is the probability that your organisation will allocate funds to a library in 12 months time (for organisations without a library)? 'No chance' was the response from ninety-two per cent of respondents from companies without a library.

Is the library meeting the information needs of the organisation? Nearly one-quarter of respondents felt that the library resources did not meet the needs of the users.

In his address to the last Specials conference in Sydney, Matarazzo suggested that the failure of corporate librarians to attempt to determine the the the needs of their customers and the expectations of their managers will only serve to erode user confidence in the value of the corporate library and relegate it as Australia's most under-used resource. Anecdote suggests that librarians are very good at trying to be all things to all people and not too good at targeting their services where they are most needed or desired.

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