

# Change and competition challenge special libraries

Deanne Barrett, national president, ALIA special libraries section

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As we move rapidly towards the new millennium, special libraries are facing many challenges — some of which are common to all libraries and some of which are unique. Constant change and competition from other information sources and services are the major challenges for special libraries.

It is essential that information professionals remain current and up-to-date with new ideas and directions, technological advances, and management changes. Making a firm commitment to participate in continuing professional development and ongoing learning, both within and outside the library profession, is a major way for special librarians to stay one step ahead of their clients, and to remain employable, relevant and valuable to their organisations.

Special librarians must be aware of the changes, research and directions other special libraries all around the world are experiencing and implementing, so that Australian special libraries can benefit from this information. To help achieve this, the ALIA national committee of the Special Libraries section is working with other international special library organisations to share information and knowledge. In addition, we need more research into Australian special libraries regarding issues of performance measurement and value-adding to ensure the survival and development of special libraries. This research has begun with one of ALIA's current projects, *The value of corporate libraries*, which is jointly sponsored by ALIA National Office and the Special Libraries section's national committee.

'Who needs a library now we have the Internet?' is a question we have all heard at least once. Special libraries and information centres are all facing competition from the Internet, intranets, electronic databases and the concept of the virtual library. We are providing clients with direct access to databases and many users are now conducting their own searches — something which used to be in 'our area of expertise'. Electronic information, document management and the storage of information for the future are also some technological challenges for special libraries.

Knowledge management, that latest buzzword, is something many special librarians have been doing for years, under the title of SDI service, and in many ways it is not a new concept — it simply has new applications for organisations.

To remain relevant and to make a valuable contribution to our employing organisations, special libraries must remain customer-focussed

so that the library or information service can provide the best service to meet their clients' needs. It is very important for special libraries to be clear about what their clients' information needs really are — not what we think they are or should be.

Marketing is also important to special libraries. Constant promotion and marketing of the information service is essential. Getting to know your clients helps to build a support network for the special library. But hard data and quantitative facts are essential to prove to management that the information service is contributing to the success of the organisation. Every special library and information centre requires performance measures that are meaningful and quantitative — not just work-flow statistics. Management want to know that their library or information service is at the cutting edge and that it uses best practice, which is why more special libraries are becoming involved in benchmarking. Special libraries have to prove and demonstrate their value in economic terms rather than simply spout 'feel-good' statements.

The present management and economic climate means that we all are trying to do more with less, and that outsourcing is increasingly seen as an option to funding an in-house information service. Contracting out is not always a bad thing, nor does it signal the death of a library. Out-sourcing and contracting out do have disadvantages, such as gaps in corporate memory, and a possible impact on continuation and quality of service. However, some services can be more cost-effective if contracted out and will allow the special librarian to provide more complex, value-added services. Value-adding is something we, as information providers, need to understand and do more of. Gone are the days of the traditional bibliography. In corporate libraries the client requires the 'answer', not materials to read in which to find an answer. Our specialist knowledge base is the key to value-added services in corporate libraries. Special librarians are diversifying their tasks and services, and taking on non-traditional roles and responsibilities such as litigation support, records management, database design and management.

Special libraries have always prided themselves on being 'special' — dynamic members of the library profession who are implementing new ideas and facilitating change at the cutting edge of technology. Special libraries must continue in this practice and be the instigators and the leaders in implementing change and innovation to ensure that special libraries remain relevant and play an important role within the organisations of the future. ■