Redefining the landscape of a librarian

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I manage CSIRO's corporate website, which comprises both the external website (http://www.csiro.au) and our corporate intranet. Much of my work involves working with other professionals who come together to present these products. The major facets of this are: technical support in the form of programming and systems operations; authorship of the actual content; and the area in which my group has expertise, information design. Our sites disseminate information to several specific audiences. The external site caters for the industry sector, media, the scientific community, school children, and the general public. Our intranet, while it disseminates information and services to CSIRO staff, has many clearly-defined user groups within this broad category. These include scientists and other research support professionals such as human resource managers, librarians, and information technology managers in our research divisions. The information on the site includes policies and procedures, reports, minutes of meetings, help in using our tools and systems as well as providing an interface to many of these systems.

Our intranet is being redeveloped and the emphasis is on identifying the specific user groups and determining their information needs and their methods of seeking that information. We have conducted extensive interviews and focus groups with stakeholders and a sample of staff, as well as a survey of all staff to find out what they liked, did not like, how they sought information and what they would like added to the intranet. We also commissioned an independent heuristic study of the current site. Based on this information we are redesigning the pages and providing multiple access points to documents. We will also be adding some new features like alerts to staff when new information in their subject area is added to the site.

A feature on our intranet that has proved to be very popular with our scientific staff is a 'Directory of information tools'. This is an interface to all the scientific datasets that our libraries provide for staff, and was developed by my group in partnership with the CSIRO Library Network. It provides several access points to information about the datasets, which in turn assist the scientist in the selection of the right tool for their search. The system is maintained corporately but updated locally by the librarians in the network across Australia. Current awareness facilities in the various tools and how to take advantage of them will soon be added to the site.

In undertaking this redevelopment I am employing some basic, but in my view, very important skills I learnt when training to be a librarian. Most important are matching the right information to a user group and understanding that there *are* defined user groups with their own characteristics. Knowing that I needed to define user groups and their needs *before* I started the design process is a lesson that I learned in library school and has stood me in good stead in my professional life.

The management of a website is about the storage, description and presentation of material to user groups in a manner that is compatible with their information seeking habits. Our sites employ the use of metadata to allow us to be more flexible and precise in the retrieval and presentation of information. While the mechanisms for delivering information to the user may have changed over the years, the fundamental principles that have made information retrievable have not. For most librarians coming to grips with metadata and xml has been like shaking hands with an old friend — both these developments have put the sort of structure into and around information in a manner that we have always done. What makes these developments exciting is that these fundamentals have been applied in new technologies. The challenge therefore, for librarians like me, is to keep up with these applications in order to implement them selectively to benefit my users. Professional development schemes such as the one recently implemented by ALIA are valuable mechanisms for maintaining and monitoring this knowledge. It will also be very useful for me to plot the changing path that my career is taking.

When asked to write this, I was asked how I marketed my library skills in obtaining my current position. The short answer to this is, unfortunately, 'after the event'. The skills of a librarian are not generally recognised as applicable in this area — they certainly were not when I moved into it. This opinion was also held within my profession. Many of my colleagues no longer see me as a 'real' librarian; and yet many of the very trendy developments in my area — metadata, push technology, intelligent agents, xml, portals — could be seen as the re-badging of some very traditional library functions: cataloguing, SDIs and indexing. What happened? Why didn't *we* apply these fundamentals to the new technology and why don't we recognise our librarians when they do work in this area? The emerging landscape has so many huge opportunities that exist for professionals with our skills and schemes such as CPD can broaden our outlook so that we can take advantage of these opportunities and, in turn, strengthen our profession. ■

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