

Redefining the British Library in the 21st century*

Vanessa Bond, media manager, State Library of New South Wales

Lynne Brindley, chief executive of the British Library since 2000, is the first information professional to head one of the great libraries of the world, and she has reinvigorated the Library's brand, services and structure with a transformational modernisation strategy.

Making libraries matter in the digital age is an ongoing challenge and, armed with a snug-fitting 'flak jacket', Lynne Brindley set about removing the obstacles to change and seizing new opportunities for the British Library. To create a new vision and a more user-friendly feel for the Library, she introduced a market-facing approach. This saw the Library's services aligned to its five key audience groups: researcher, business, library and information sector, learner, and general public. As well as retraining for existing staff, new expertise was brought in, including marketing professionals responsible for each audience group.

The creation of a 'corporate team' also included the appointment of a director of e-strategy. Lynne Brindley's quest to turn 'a tanker around' included modernising and rationalising the Library's service portfolio, because 'you have to accept that some people only want to interact with us over the web'. Approximately 30 services were cut, and deciding what to cut was a painful decision for library staff. Ms Brindley says she was prepared for the complaints, but believes you just have to develop a tough shell and move on.

The high-level modernisation strategy has been driven by one simple but necessary question: what does it mean to be a great library in the 21st century? Especially when features like Google are 'top of mind' among younger people, who could poten-

tially be lost as future clients because of the technology's immediacy. In fact, Google has provided a huge wake-up call to the academic world in particular, with some universities in the United Kingdom arguing to cut library staff because of it.

The injection of new corporate expertise, the segmentation of markets and re-focusing the institution's vision and priorities are all part of the strategy for making the British Library relevant in the digital world. Changing the Library's culture and getting staff to examine their roles, attitudes and future ambitions was an extremely time-consuming but valuable process.

An historical sense of elitism prevented many new patrons from using the reading rooms. 'We've gone from turning away about 20 per cent of potentially entirely eligible people to turning away about 1 per cent,' says Ms Brindley, who believes these figures mean a lot in terms of culture change. Reducing the 30 customer service points to just one first port-of-call has also served to make the Library more user-friendly.

Engaging key strategic partners in both the public and private sector is critical to the Library's future, in particular technology partners for fast service delivery. E-commerce is one crucial area where the Library is capitalising on its collection by providing online access to its massive image archive, its bookshop and thousands of popular journals.

With a collection of over 150 million items, the Library was forced to revisit its digitisation strategy. It is now working towards digitising all local, regional and national newspapers, as well as its sound collection.



Dagmar Schmidmaier AO, chief executive officer of the State Library of NSW, with Lynne Brindley chief executive of the British Library, in the State Library's Mitchell reading room

One of the proudest achievements for Lynne Brindley has been the passing of new legislation that gives the British Library legal deposit of digital material. The Library now has statutory responsibility to acquire the nation's digital output.

Receiving £89 million each year from the government — accounting for about 75 per cent of its funding — the British Library operates three sites, two in London and a 46-acre site in Yorkshire. Re-thinking the reality of being one of the largest libraries in the world resulted in some interesting discussions around storage, and how to cope with a collection growing at about 12 linear kilometres a year. The Library has recently secured capital funding to build a high-density, 25-metre high building with automated retrieval providing some 250 linear kilometres of storage — the largest of its type in the world.

'If you hook [robotic retrieval] up to our ability, to scan on demand and then deliver to the desktop, you can begin to see our role as library converging with that of on-demand publisher. Then you need to think about what that means for your product and service delivery,' says Ms Brindley.

Also in the planning is a new conservation centre, funded by a £12.5 million capital campaign. With some conservators still working in less than optimum conditions, the new centre will focus on book and sound conservation and also serve as a public and education facility. The internship function of the centre is an example of the Library's commitment to leading professional practice and sharing this across the country and the world.

Since her appointment Lynne Brindley has made some radical changes to perhaps a rather conservative library world. Her strategy to position the British Library as a leader in the 21st century can be viewed at <http://www.bl.uk>.

* This article presents highlights of an address by Lynne Brindley to approximately 150 librarians and information professionals at the State Library of New South Wales in April 2005.

ALIA professional development recordkeeping

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If you deliver a presentation, write a paper or review an article or book, activities that are not part of your regular job, you may claim these as PD activities. However, if you undertake these activities regularly as part of your job, you would be ineligible to claim PD points, because you are using your existing skills and knowledge. Professional development is about learning and therefore attendance at social/networking events such as an annual dinner or AGM does not accrue PD points.

There is no penalty for incorrectly allocating PD activity categories. If you are not sure, you can always check the Summary of Activities table at <http://alia.org.au/members-only/education/pd/userguide/activities.html?realm=10>.

For more information contact Jill Yvanovich, ph 02 6215 8216, cpd@alia.org.au. ■