

Library staff or resource managers?

The Libraries Redevelopment Project of the Department of Primary Industries Victoria

Over the past few years the library service of the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) Victoria has faced a number of challenges that will be familiar to all libraries: debunking the myth that libraries are redundant, as everything can be found on the web; demonstrating the relevance, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the service; facing budget pressures with rising costs and a declining Australian dollar; and needing to vacate expensive CBD accommodation and find alternative space for collections.



The display and reading area in the new Knowledge Resource Centre at Werribee

In response to these challenges a bold new strategy was conceived to reinvent the service: the Libraries Redevelopment Project. The project began more than three years ago and incorporated three broad strategies: a new library intranet, known as the Virtual Library, with a focus on electronic information products bringing more of the library service to the desktop; centralising the majority of the print collections to a state-of-the-art storage facility; and transforming the regional library staff into knowledge resource managers who would spend less time on operational tasks such as photocopying and document delivery and more on value-added tasks that utilise their information management skills.

The library service of DPI was dispersed across Victoria in sixteen staffed libraries, mostly associated with research institutes. The service to those staff co-located with a library was very good; however, many staff located outside these areas received a lesser service. The Redevelopment Project also sought to address this inequity.

The project represented a significant change-management process that met with a range of emotions: opposition and cynicism from some library users, and anxiety to excitement from library staff. Constant communication and engagement were essential. Uncertainty on the part of library staff, whether as a result of anxiety or excitement about change, sometimes meant that an inaccurate message was sent to users. As a result, project management staff developed a comprehensive communication plan. Key messages included assurances that DPI did not intend to reduce library services, rather that




Exterior of the new Knowledge Resource Centre at Werribee

the service was to be delivered in a different way. To encourage an understanding of the overall project, library users were invited to participate in the selection of a small collection of relevant print materials (less than 80 per cent of the original collection) that would remain on-site, using guidelines developed in consultation with the library staff. Library staff and users were also involved in the development of the Virtual Library.

DPI made a significant investment in libraries with the construction of a multi-million dollar Knowledge Resource Centre at Werribee in outer Melbourne. Located in a technology precinct, the Centre is co-located with a DPI research facility. The Centre has a state-of-the-art, environmentally controlled storage facility ideal for the preservation of library materials. The collection is arranged in a way that maximises the 6170 linear metres of open shelving. Adjacent to the storage zone are staff areas, a reading room and meeting room. The Knowledge Resource Centre has attracted favourable attention from libraries both within and outside the Victorian Government.

With the project in its final implementation phase, the years of planning and communication have paid off. The DPI Knowledge and Information library service now has a much stronger future as operational services are delivered from the Knowledge Resource Centre, providing an equitable service to all staff bound by a service-level agreement. With a virtual library that delivers electronic information resources regardless of geographic location, Knowledge Resource Managers located across Victoria can focus their skills as information management professionals.

Michele Nijk, Libraries Redevelopment Project Manager, Department of Primary Industries Victoria




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