

Tell it like it is



Geraldine Barkworth

Bold Women Big Ideas



Mark Bryant

Head of libraries,
Information and Learning,
Ealing Council, London

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...a new series of interviews with library and information professionals rising to the challenges of the modern LIS sector.

Suggestions for interviewees are always welcome. Please contact Geraldine Barkworth via e-mail. ■

Mark Bryant says he's not controversial, he's just not afraid to tell it like it is. Currently Head of Libraries, Information and Learning, Ealing Council, London, UK, Mark tells career coach Geraldine Barkworth why British libraries and librarians need to re-discover themselves if they are to survive.

Why is "telling like it is", seen as a bit controversial?

Well, there is a large contingent of people with a big investment in keeping libraries the same. Recently I gave a presentation to a number of fusty politicians and community members who were upset that we were reducing shelf stock. I had taken with me a copy of the 1987 Guide to Nova Scotia and waved that about as an example of redundant material taking up shelf space. Someone said, "But that might be quite useful." I walked up the aisle and gave it to him: "Here," I said, "You can keep it." If I say I'm going to reduce the number of books, I do it. I'm not trying to be provocative; I'm straightforward and some people don't like it.

I have been surprised by the vituperation from some library users (probably instigated by current and ex-members of staff) in response to proposals to modernise the Central Library in Ealing. These are rooted in a 19th century vision of the public library as a space into which you shovel as many books as possible. They have great difficulty in distinguishing quality from quantity and see selective editing of stock as eroding literacy, whereas it is quite the opposite.

Your current role as Head of Ealing Libraries is seen as quite a challenge; what are you intending to do there?

When Ealing is compared with the 20 public library services in London, it is at the bottom, 20/20. My aim is to raise its performance to rate around 10/20 in three years. I would see that as a real success.

The service includes 12 libraries, a mobile library and a hospital library in West London. Some of the issues I'm tackling are:

- Increasing service take-up;
- Refitting most libraries;
- Attempting a major cultural change within the staff to improve customer focus;
- Empowering junior staff;
- Taking a more retail approach to service delivery.

What are you most concerned about on a professional level?

The future of public libraries; alternative methods of service delivery – like electronic; place of adult learning and libraries in improving the quality of life; community and mobile libraries – I'm currently the Vice-chair of Branch and Mobile Libraries Group of CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals).

Besides libraries, what are your personal interests?

Life drawing, art, theatre, classical music – listening and a bit of performing – I sing. I also like jazz and blues. My son calls me a 'boff'. Basically I am interested in pretty much anything – I sit and answer the questions on TV quizzes and read anything that takes my fancy (mostly non-fiction) and when I go on holiday, my family despair because I always want to look at archaeological holes in the ground rather than sit on the beach.

Do you have a personal philosophy guiding your career?

I believe that libraries can make a real difference to people's lives but we have to work with the world as it is, rather than as we would like it to be. This means that we have to adapt to the fact that information is available to people freely – we are no longer the gatekeepers we once were. Books are cheap and libraries have to sell themselves and to sell what we have to offer, rather than just making ourselves available and expecting people to come to us. Empower staff: ask not what you are allowed to do but what needs doing!

What are 5 things you'd like us to know about you?

1. I take risks.
2. I can recite the whole of *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* [Robert Service, Canadian poet, 1874–1958. I'm impressed. Ed]
3. When I was a reference librarian, sometimes the public used to ask me to keep quiet rather than the other way around.
4. When people assume I know the contents of every book in the library I do not see it as my job to spoil their illusions.
5. I am a family man with two teenage boys of whom I am immensely proud.

What trends are occurring in the library and information sector of the UK?

There is still sustained government support for libraries but we are being required to justify ourselves with clear outcome measures.

The reduction in the qualified professional workforce.

The sector's ageing workforce.

The continued march of ICT – academic libraries have adopted changes well (e-books, electronic info sources etc...) but public libraries are struggling still.

Self-service – it's cheaper.

A decline in the historical core services – lending, book-based reference and information.

Reader development – a new emphasis on the quality of the reading experience.

The need to attract new clientele – some public libraries are making significant changes.

You caused a bit of controversy when you replaced reference libraries with learning centres...what happened?

That was in my previous position with Buckinghamshire. They're still trialling it – but what we have learnt is that we didn't do enough staff training and the library assistants didn't have good enough referral skills. What we did was to take away the 'expert' (experienced reference librarian) standing behind them. The replacement library assistants had good skills but tried to solve everything themselves instead of discerning what they could do and what they should pass on.

You presented a paper called 'In Solitary Splendour'...what's your particular interest in 'lone workers'?

I feel they are a neglected bunch of people. As I have some experience with lone worker issues, I was asked to help out a service, which had never had lone workers and were nervous about the risk factors. The paper arose from that.

What do you see as the primary issues for lone workers and their managers?

Isolation leads to lack of consistency and lack of awareness of new developments. Communication is fundamental – they require more management time. Safety issues should not be exaggerated but proper risk assessments need to be done and call-in procedures put in place.

As a manager, what special or specific support do you provide to lone workers?

Timetabled regular meetings, proper procedures for eventualities and intensive induction training. I emphasise empowerment rather than instruction – they will have to take decisions based upon clear principles and guidelines, not follow strict procedure.

What do you project for the future of public libraries in the UK?

Sometimes I feel like Metternich, who was the Austrian Chancellor in the mid-19th-century tasked with shoring up an ageing empire that he knew would eventually fail. That is on my bad days.

However, I do think we have to rediscover ourselves if we are to survive as an institution. The community library has to join with other services to become a focus for learning and information within small communities. Large libraries have to become centres of excellence for personal self-directed learning and development. Librarians have to stop being precious about what they will and will not do if they are to survive.

What would you like to change about British libraries?

I think it probably needs about a billion pounds to demolish all the libraries currently in the wrong places and create

new joint community facilities in the right places for their communities with learning facilities, play space for children and performance space in larger libraries.

UK libraries are like the Church of England, collecting dust in the corner. The British library is very old and successful but has nineteenth century infrastructure. Libraries need to get into the 'café culture' and sell a 'leisure and learning' lifestyle.

What would be your catch cry if you were in charge of a library PR campaign?

'Your library: the place to think, the place to be, the place to learn.' Libraries play an important role in providing freedom of speech and information to all.

Is there enough appreciation for creative, big-picture thinkers in the profession, or is it mainly consumed by process-driven administrivia?

There are inspiring, big-picture thinkers; there are beacons of good practice and forward thinking. There are also bastions of opposition to change, motivated by fear of the unknown with an ostrich-like attitude to the outside world, afraid of engaging with the political process to promote a new vision of the service. Some sectors of the library profession are worse than others and there is a problem with CILIP, which is out of touch, in many ways rooted in the past and unable to acknowledge the reality of the need for a leaner, meaner profession.

How do you ensure balance between your work and home commitments?

Delegation Delegation Delegation

I am not convinced that more time equals greater effectiveness. I try to use my time effectively and to limit my commitments and I often fail. My aim is that I want to do a good job. Ultimately, my family comes first.

How do you help your staff balance work and home commitments?

Threats, imprecations and example. I actually believe that you can take work seriously and still have fun.

When you look back over your life and library career, what stands out so far?

I am probably more successful than I think I am. I am a great believer in cultural change as the key to success. I think I helped achieve a 'can do' attitude and properly customer-focussed approach in the library staff in my previous job in Buckinghamshire – it took eight years – and that is what I want to do here at Ealing – but it takes time.

If you could start your life again, what would you do differently?

More sex and a fine art degree. I'm a frustrated comic artist really.

Any thoughts you'd like to leave us with?

Never forget:

The look in a little child's eyes when you are reading them a story.

Old people whose minds are kept active and interested by the books they have borrowed.

The serendipity of finding an unexpected book on the library shelves.

Opening a world of information by showing someone how to find what they want.

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Geraldine Barkworth, transformative career coach, is offering a three-hour workshop called *How To Be A Relaxed Overachiever*, as a satellite event with NLS2006, Sydney, 30 November 2006. Register by 30 October by contacting her at geraldine@boldwomenbigideas.com.au or 02 6685 1917.

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