

Innovation: a state of mind...



Neil McLean

Director, IMS Australia

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I have mixed feelings about writing this Frontline on innovation and technological change. In one sense innovation is simply something the 'brave-hearted' do and in another sense innovation is a complex key to change management in institutions. This leads me to my first general observation, as a practising librarian. We in the library profession are blessed because there is always ample scope for individuals to make their mark in terms of service delivery and 'experiments'. On the other hand (as is evident from the articles in this edition of *inCite*) we live in a time of opportunity where libraries as a whole can reach out to offer service to communities in a highly innovative fashion using the best that technology offers.

Why then are we not widely acknowledged as an innovative service community? The answer to this rhetorical question often leads to 'chest-beating', to extolling of the virtues of improving our image, or to discussions on the means of enhancing our marketing efforts. My own response to this question is of a more down-beat nature.

My experience suggests that innovation is primarily a state-of-mind which depends primarily on possessing personal characteristics such as endless curiosity, a high level of self-esteem, a tolerance of failure and a sense of vision or purpose. These are not things that library and information schools, or libraries, can teach, but the responsibility lies with library managers to develop and nurture environments where individuals, who inherently possess these treasured personal characteristics, can flourish. It is in this area that we have a fairly mixed record of success and yet there are outstanding examples of individual and institutional success which can provide inspiration and guidance to us all.

Such institutions normally have a strong sense of purpose that goes beyond the high-sounding words contained in strategic planning statements. Innovation implies change and new ways of doing business, however, there is little point in

having high energy simply 'swilling' around in an institutional vacuum, hence the need for libraries to be comfortable with their own sense of purpose.

The extent to which technology can be used to transform library and information services remains an open question and a question that has to be constantly revisited.

Whilst the accepted wisdom is that technology should not be the driver of change, I have seen many examples of technology opening up possibilities for offering services in a different way. I am, therefore, a proponent of adopting new technologies, in spite of the implied dangers as a means of changing service paradigms. The dangers of such a strategy are readily evident in an often obsessive need to embrace the latest technological gimmick; through a lack of expertise to harness the technology; through an inability to develop adequate infrastructure to support the technologies; and, through the possibility that service goals become obscured by the sheer weight of the technology drive. The alternative, however, is to become passive partners in an IT-driven world and this more-often-than-not leads to marginalisation of the service organisation or, even worse, stagnation within the organisation.

Innovation, of course, implies thinking 'outside-the-box' and it demands the formation of new strategic alliances, which often proves to be an Achilles-heel for libraries. I have had cause to reflect on this particular matter over the past six months in my role as director of IMS Australia. The IMS Global Learning Consortium is an alliance of software and hardware firms, content providers, educationalists and peak education bodies, all striving to understand how better to use technology for developing online learning and training environments. It is deliberately pre-competitive but it provides ample scope for new alliances and new ventures in areas of high risk.

In the Australian context, the education sectors have embraced this technical inter-operability agenda with considerable enthusiasm and the stage is set for a range of exciting new initiatives at both the Commonwealth and State levels. But the fact remains that very few librarians are involved in this current round of initiatives, and this should be a cause for some disquiet within our ranks. Put more bluntly: 'How can it be that we are already potentially marginalised within a community, which a great majority of libraries claim to serve?'

In truth, there is a convergence of e-learning and information services occurring at the conceptual and practical level in the global education community, which is having only marginal input from librar-

ians. One might have expected that the vexed question of metadata for the education community would have been prime territory for input from the library community, but there has been an almost total silence and a noticeable lack of engagement.

I return, therefore, to my initial reflections. To be innovative means being bold, imaginative and (at times) unorthodox. Innovation grows out of new alliances which value new ways of looking at the world and which release new forms of energy.

I commend the vision and spirit which underpins the articles in this issue of *inCite* and I trust we can all renew our personal commitment to being 'ahead-of-the-game', wherever we can. ■

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