

Identifying and recognising innovation in the workplace

David Tan, Coles Myer Research Centre

Guy St Clair, past president of the Special Libraries Association (SLA) wrote that 'libraries and information services are not necessarily the most conducive organisational entities for innovative thinking' (St Clair 1996, p111). Dr Patricia Milne has also been less than complimentary in her writings. She identified, 'the ability to innovate' as an attribute lacking among information professionals (Milne 2000, p148). Also, librarians were described as being 'unable to recognise opportunity' (Milne 2000).

I have always advocated the 'praise hamburger/sandwich' approach to tackling problems and challenges. The idea is that you start off with a positive affirmation or statement, followed by the challenge/problem in case, and then finish off with another positive. Particularly useful for counselling situations, this approach to dealing with stakeholders is also beneficial. The start of this article in no way follows this convention and my reasons for departing from it momentarily will be made clear.

It is often only when confronted with some home truths or unconventional wisdom that we are forced to examine existing paradigms, behaviours and norms. The opening statements, though harsh, provide an opportunity for debate and discussion. Like the article published in the February edition of the *Australian Library Journal* by Ross Harvey, I am sure some sentiments that I put forward will result in the same detractions. It is the way of it, when one concurs in part with harsh statements.

If one were to paint a rosy picture unlike those comments from the start, who would we be fooling into a false sense of security? The fact that respected figures in the information profession are publishing such beliefs, raises the question of why librarians have not been successful at recognising opportunity and identifying innovative practices in the workplace?

Recently, at the 9th Special Health and Law conference in Melbourne, I had the pleasure of chairing a session in which Angela Hennessy and Karen Mann-Henderson, both of the CRS Australia Library in Brisbane, presented a paper. Aside from the fact that they exuded enthusiasm and professionalism,

I was particularly struck by one simple statement from their paper, 'get out of the library and into business' (Hennessy and Mann-Henderson 2001, p6). This was not only one of the seven main survival points provided, but also indicates one of the glaring truths as to why we, as a profession, have not recognised many opportunities for innovative practice and the pursuit of that which is new. To think outside the square, we need to leave it altogether and immerse ourselves in the quagmire of corporate or organisational life. 'Too hard', some might say. However, something that might raise the profile of one's library, help ensure its survivability, and demonstrate real value (that management relate to), can only be worth the try. It is often the action of trying that speaks louder than any outcome. Any dividends can be taken as the bonus deserved.

If we accept that libraries have not been seething cauldrons of innovation and that many a ship has passed in the night, the stage is set to explore the middle of the 'hamburger', where opportunities abound, and where the substance of what we do can be explored, enhanced, improved and renewed.

As this is no academic paper, there is an imperative to keep to things practical, and brief. My simple lay definition of a problem/challenge, is the difference between where you are, where you want to be or what you want to achieve. That in the middle is anything we choose to evaluate, focus on or challenge with a view to improve, modify or change. At the risk of oversimplification, libraries may engage in the following primary directions for innovation:

Consulting: Crudely speaking, the selling of one's expertise with the view to offering advice and solutions. A common example is the library gaining extra leverage from its existing information management system, and offering to package solutions to other areas within an organisation. Everyone else is an information worker to some degree, so what better way than to offer personalised solutions to their information management challenges.

Hands-on: Ours is a practical craft as well. Seeking opportunities to host, collect, store, manage and supply in-

formation can also open doors, engage other work areas, and once again, solve other peoples information problems. If nothing else, we get out of the square and are exposed to other areas within an organisation. Sponsoring access to a particular information source on behalf of another area can take the administrative and procedural stress from an area, and at the same time you gain access to that resource as well.

Guidance: This direction can result in hands-on and/or consulting, but often, it stops after a simple referral, verification or advice. While not necessarily momentous in itself, providing a guidance related service can often be the door opener to other opportunities for innovative practices and solutions. It cannot be underestimated.

If there is a remote chance that we can help, guide, refer, consult and generally get our hands dirty, then an opportunity exists. For every group of opportunities chased, there need only be a modicum of success to make it worthwhile. One thing leads to another and success breeds success.

Returning to our *praise hamburger* and in summing up positively, seek opportunities where traditionally libraries have not been viewed as players. Seek out 'business' relationships, alliances and mutually beneficial partnerships. Occasionally leave the square altogether to gain a fresh view of an organisation and identify areas for value adding. Ask ourselves, 'most organisations cannot function without the right kind of information, therefore, how could they function without the right kind of information service/library?' I think we know what we have to do...

References

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