

Jill of all Trades: the tale of a Corporate Librarian

Jill Stephens (formerly Baker), UrbisJHD

The thought of a Corporate Librarian role can be daunting, but a better approach is to see it as a fantastic opportunity to access a broad range of experience and skills. My role at UrbisJHD is twofold. I manage the company library and intranet, but overall I see my role as promoting the benefits of sharing information among the 250 staff of various UrbisJHD offices in Australia, and deterring staff from storing information on personal hard drives, which creates silos of inaccessible information.

What sort of corporation is UrbisJHD? It is a property, retail and planning consulting company that offers solutions to assist cities to become more efficient.

Corporation horror stories – daunting perhaps? We've all heard those horror stories about working relentless hours and having demanding clients. I can't speak for other companies, but ours is nothing like that. The work is very hard and demanding but I'm not required to work long hours and my clients always say 'thank you'. They very rarely have pressing deadlines, but when they do, I always offer them my direct attention. Private companies give rewards like a monthly breakfast, massages and bi-annual team outings of our choice (one time we went roller blading).

My main role for the company is to provide an information storage solution. I gather all the electronic resources within the company and store them in a central location. And then promoting the information-sharing practices, educating staff on using the information and showing them the benefits of sharing instead of storing it on isolated desktops. Sharing can save money and (importantly) staff time on demanding projects, and will develop a strong national resource. For example, why do all that research for a proposal when a similar project has been done by another group in the company?

There is a strong link between the library and the intranet, and it's advantageous that I get to manage both. The library is a service that can be delivered through the intranet, plus I get to manage the other intranet information. Many of the documents from the national electronic storage area are delivered through the intranet, not just the library service. Our marketing department is a major user of the central repository.

A day in the life of Jill

A day in the life of Jill can include...liaising with the Australian Bureau of Statistics about purchasing a new data set, saving some select resources to a shared electronic drive, asking users to test the new intranet search engine we are working on, placating the person waiting for the data from ABS, purchasing some books for the new Dubai office (opening the following week), arranging the payment to the bookshop, and talking to a Brisbane office staff member about getting some information added to the intranet. And this is just an example of a few hours one morning!

In our organisation change can happen quickly. We are able to try new things rapidly, experiment and build on those experiments for future projects. Just recently a sustainability committee was established. They have begun storing information in our central electronic repository, and then they will have their own portal on the intranet where the information can be delivered to our staff via a blog. Doing things quickly can keep you very busy and planning can sometimes be quite difficult, but there is the advantage that work does not become stale and stuck at specific policy points.

What skills do you need to be a corporate librarian?

Corporate librarians need to switch between tasks quickly, to communicate with a wide variety of people, have strong technical skills, an ability to learn new skills to suit clients, an understanding of client's needs and what they are currently working on, the ability to meet deadlines, to balance time, and to follow up and complete tasks...to name a few! Overall, I think the most important qualities are the ability to work very hard, to

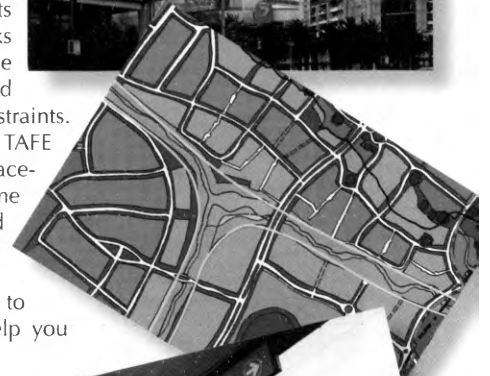
be receptive to all clients, and to be flexible. Other library skills include collection development, cataloguing, ordering, training clients, answering questions, storing information and managing information for the firm.

There is also a geographical sympathy needed when dealing with my clients from our interstate offices. I need to be able to communicate why I am trying to do X, Y and Z so it doesn't seem like an imposed head office policy. Part of this is the ability to work with others, understand their environments/states, and to look at things from their perspective. I work to provide an equitable service to all offices and all the teams within each office. I accept that some won't come on board as quickly as others, and I keep attempting to entice the slower parties with the benefits of the service. Interstate travel is required: it helps inter-office relations and promotes the service personally, rather than being a faceless e-mail sender.

Working on your own does bring some isolation issues. And future employees might feel I have no experience with staff as I am a solo librarian. But I have working relationships with over 250 diverse people, plus

managing one casual library staff member and a part-time intranet support person, as well as mentoring library students. By mentoring them, I reduce isolation from the profession, and discover what students are learning. The students help with important tasks that might not otherwise have been completed due to time constraints. Many universities and TAFE colleges offer student placements and, after some initial training, I've found students are generally very savvy about what is required and they are able to work independently to help you succeed with your goals.

Working in a special library offers a great variety of experience and I recommend that you give it a go, someday!



The images illustrate some of the projects UrbisJHD staff work on, such as transport, built form and the urban environment. (Images © UrbisJHD)