



LIBRARY HISTORY: WHY?

In our June 2011 issue Dr Bob Pymm, Editor of Australian Academic and Research Libraries, encouraged us to get involved in research. In our August issue, Mary Cain pointed out the challenges in getting serious

about that research. Now Dr Sue Reynolds picks up the thread to put the case for the value of collecting and understanding library history.

Very recently someone reported to me that historical research was viewed with some disdain by library practitioners who consider it to be far removed from the action in the 'real' world. And in the August 2011 issue of *Incite*, Mary Cain debated the issue of what real research is. So, in a profession which

is essentially practical, can research into library history, or a library's individual history, "inform library administration and practice", as Mary thinks research should?

As a researcher into the relationships between library history and the information profession today, and into the impact of an organisation's history on its practice today, of course I think it can.

Libraries, like archives or museums, are "memory institutions" (so called by Lorcan Dempsey, blogger and OCLC's Vice President of Programs and Research), responsible for acquiring, retaining and maintaining records of the past for those who care to pursue the link between it and the future in any field of endeavour. It's a large part of what libraries do, yet when it comes to themselves and their own records, individual libraries are often not good at carrying out the aforementioned activities or at transforming their memories into organisational intelligence for institutional benefit.

The documented history of an organisation can act as a case study which, at a basic level, provides perspective, context and understanding of current issues for all of an organisation's human resources, but especially for new personnel. A recorded historical narrative can present a common understanding of identity and retain the knowledge of individuals no longer in an organisation. In addition, a clear retrospective view, which includes original circumstances and intent, can illuminate strategic continuums and, more specifically, help avoid the need to rethink solutions to similar current problems through the knowledge and understanding of those which worked, and those which didn't, in the past.

As well as using history to explore earlier incarnations of activities and relationships, synergies and discords, organisational memories can be leveraged to inform and market present day enterprises. Bruce Weindruch, founder and CEO of *The History Factor*, a commercial enterprise for promoting corporate history, calls this "applied history", and he maintains that "The real value of your history is in knowing it and using it as a resource that supports your character and informs your path ahead" or, to "inform library administration and practice" - flagged by Mary Cain as a research essential. Using the past to showcase an institution in the present can be engaging and positive - for employees, clients and for those who control the

funding. To know and successfully use an organisation's history involves research and, to again quote Mary Cain, research is difficult "to justify and fund" as "more and more libraries insist on applying business principles within their institutions."

The construction and use of 'applied history' should be recognised as a sound business principle which can be used to underpin change management. Professional acquisition, retention and maintenance of historical records, by an appointed researcher, archivist or historian, may need to wait for more prosperous times or until the usefulness of these activities is recognised as a valuable business enterprise but it need not be expensive: digitisation can cheaply and easily store, preserve and make readily accessible an organisation's records; web 2.0 tools can be used by staff and clients to record their memories and create metadata to assist in retrieval.

Libraries traditionally collect, preserve, organise and provide access to records for both practical and intellectual pursuits. If your "histories, hauntings and heroes" are to be known, told, understood and usefully applied in the business of

your library, if a breadth and depth of understanding of an organisation's history is required for strategic development or if tradition is valued, some very practical historical research may be required.

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Each month, *OPINION* features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.