

Improving access to transport information through resource and knowledge sharing

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1 Introduction

There is little argument that we are experiencing an era where there is an ever increasing amount of information available. One market research firm estimated that the worldwide total of email messages sent on a daily basis would exceed 60 billion in 2006, an increase of 29 billion from their 2002 calculations (IDC, 2002). Just one of those emails making its way to your inbox may be the Transportation Research Board's e-newsletter. In 2006 that email newsletter alerted subscribers to 867 recently published items, including research reports, papers and other newsletters covering the land, sea and air transport fields. In 2002 that figure was only 296 items (TRB nd).

This is one simple example of the growth in electronic publishing and information dissemination in the transport sector, to which there are both positive and negative aspects. On the upside there is the speed of access to items upon their release, compared to waiting for print copies to be available. However the ability of many organisations and individuals to publish material electronically has not only greatly increased the amount in general, but what your clients, stakeholders and management may expect should have come to your attention. Attempting to prioritise your time spent monitoring new material in your fields of interest can be a risky business. You probably don't have time to view all possible sources of new material in your sector and so feel the need to be selective in what you check and read to stay up to date. But what might you miss? And who might see the material that you didn't?

Wouldn't it be great to have someone watching developments in the fields that interested you, alerting you to newly released information? Who understood the terminology of the sector you worked in and could package material for you after regularly reviewing a diverse range of sources? And who could also tap into the resources and knowledge of other professionals and organisations in order to service your needs? These are all services that a librarian can provide.

2 Libraries as an organisational asset

Your primary view of libraries may be as repositories of material – and the physical collection of a library is indeed an important tool in servicing the information needs of clients. A specialist library collection may contain items that, even in this age of digitising archives and pay-per-view services, are only to be found in hard-copy and in a select few libraries. Such items, whilst not published recently, may record studies and data of high methodological quality still relevant today - and expensive to recreate.

The library in your organisation may not hold the item in question but can probably obtain it from another. Librarians have long understood the value of resource sharing and distributed collections. Networks of libraries within subject areas, shared catalogues, and the speed and ease of electronic communication all mean that the resources a library can call upon to service clients go far beyond the physical collection it owns. The value of inter-library cooperation will be examined later in this paper in a case study of the activities of the Australasian transport library network Tranzinfo. Let us first however review another asset and its potential benefits to your organisation – the librarians themselves.

3 Librarians as information filters

Collections of material require monitoring. Without a record of comings and goings, collections within an organisation soon develop “branch libraries” – the offices and desk spaces of other staff. When staff transfer within an organisation, or leave it entirely, collection material may go with them – and an asset becomes a loss.

It is a mistake however to view librarians only as fearsome protectors of collections, reluctant to let anything leave their guardianship. Librarians know that information collected (be it a purchased item or online material that has come to their notice) remains a cost to the organisation unless it is used. This may happen as a result of a direct request from a client or because the librarian knows the interest areas and current projects of organisational divisions and individual staff.

Librarians can amass some knowledge of these areas on their own but become so much more effective as filters of information for the organisation when their understanding of corporate interests is actively fostered. Using their own devices, librarians can inform divisions of newly released material with connections to previously undertaken projects, but to know about projects and potential clients in the bid or planning stages requires cooperation from within the organisation.

Why should librarians be kept abreast of impending projects of developing staff interests? A great deal of material comes across the desks of librarians each day. These may be items already obtained for the library collection – journals, reports, conference proceedings, books – or they may be emails alerting to the existence of newly released material. One conference paper or journal article may discuss the costs and benefits of the type of project your division is currently contemplating commissioning. One online news item may announce an overseas inquiry into the safety of a construction material your organisation is considering using. The librarian could pass this onto the relevant personnel - if they knew of these project plans. Or the librarian could alert staff to the inquiry development immediately - if they were aware a decision was imminent.

That a library service with knowledge of organisational activities fostered through collaboration could have such an impact on outcomes may sound idealised. Consider though results from a survey of 660 management level personnel working in organisations in Australia and Europe. This study incorporated questions relating to corporate information flows and decision processes. Amongst the Australian respondents:

“32% claimed they did not have the right tools in place to help find information”
(Information Builders, 2007, p.7),

while:

“over three quarters (78%) believe that if information was delivered in an instantaneous and easy to use format it would enable them to work more efficiently”
(Information Builders, 2007, p.7).

In addition, when both Australian and European managers surveyed were asked “What would help you do your job better and be more productive?”, 59% replied “easy access to information” (Information Builders, 2007, p.9).

4 The costs of managing your own information

Of course the paper or news item may still come to the attention of those within the organisation with an interest in it (it may indeed have been amongst the many items in your email inbox), but that may not be at the time when it would have been of the most value. It may, however, have come to the attention of your potential clients and commercial competitors before it came to yours.

You may still believe that you are the best person to keep abreast of developments in your professional interest areas, and at the moment receive a range of emails and electronic alerts connected to them. Do you have time to read them and do they comprehensively cover your current demands? Are you covering news items, press releases, reports, conferences and presentations from government, research centres, commercial enterprises and non-government organisations at local, state, national and global levels? Are you accessing business intelligence services?

Most importantly, does your organisation have a library? If so then it is already paying staff who could monitor all these sectors for you, supplying you with the material that matched your specified interests. There have been attempts to quantify the monetary value of library services, including a transport industry example by the Minnesota Department of Transportation in the United States in 2001 (Minnesota Department of Transport Library, nd). On the provision of reference question services alone, savings to the Department of \$US468,000 were estimated. This is from time saved by the library handling 3,600 requests, rather than Departmental personnel attempting to source their own information.

Such calculations do incorporate wage cost comparisons (library staff time and average client hourly wage) but only look at the costs and benefits in monetary terms of obtaining the information, not the value that supplied information actually added to organisational projects.

In terms of the time taken by non-library staff to material, we could look again at findings from the survey of management personnel quoted in the previous section. The:

“typical Australian employee wastes an average of 67 minutes every day looking for company information, equivalent to 15.9% of the working time per day or \$7,950 of a \$50,000 salary”(Information Builders, 2007, p.6)

While it may be hard to measure in precisely monetary terms, harnessing the filtering skills of your organisation’s librarians should actually lessen the emails in your inbox, improve your information flows, and your time management.

5 What you need to do to make information filtering work

To be effective information filters for an organisation, librarians need to be privy to organisational developments and plans. This means changes to clients and business areas as well as knowledge of projects under consideration. Librarians need to be included in business meetings and have access to agendas and minutes. The word access is used here to suggest an organisational awareness of the library’s potential to have a positive influence on outcomes if the library is included in the sharing of knowledge on corporate objectives and activities. It is not presumed that libraries will have the human resources to read the contents of all minutes and briefing papers of the organisation they serve, and target information services to meet all current and proposed initiatives. However the more a librarian

understands both the organisation's business activities and the sector it serves, the better the library can monitor for you developments within the industry.

You will need to move on from any perceptions you may still hold of librarians as only book collection guardians. Think instead along the lines of this statement from a online column titled "7 great careers for 2007" published by the personal finance and business forecasting group Kiplinger:

"Today's librarian is a high-tech information sleuth, a master of mining cool databases (well beyond Google) to unearth the desired nuggets". (Nemko 2007)

In addition to information filtering and targeting, the skills of a librarian can also encompass information analysis. With further training supported by their employer, librarians in some corporate settings customize material to the interests of the firm, producing executive summaries and reports.

Librarians will uphold their part of the resource sharing and cost saving bargain in several ways. Armed with knowledge of an organisations present and emerging activities, they will be able to manage access to paid subscription services so that they accurately monitor the interests of the organisation. Librarians will also use their professional networks to bring you access to material not accessible through other avenues.

6 Resource sharing on a library to library scale and what this means for you

This paper examines two forms of resource sharing to improve transport-related information flows – librarian to client interactions and library to library initiatives. To illustrate the latter the activities of the Tranzinfo network of Australasian transport libraries are reviewed. Founded in the early 1990's, initially as an Australian group, it has since expanded to include transport libraries in New Zealand (necessitating a name change from Translib to Tranzinfo). Pentecost, Jensen and Capurro (1999) reviewed the operations of the group in its formative years. Currently the network incorporates over twenty actively participating libraries within national government departments, state and territory government road authorities, research bodies and corporate entities. Tranzinfo's website (Tranzinfo, 2007a), offers details on the current network membership, as well as offering information on many of the activities discussed below.

Networks of libraries with a common bond such as subject matter are neither a new invention nor uncommon, and vary in membership size and activity. Libraries may be members of several such networks at the one time (a state government health service library for example may belong to a national network of health libraries and also be involved in a state government library consortia). This paper highlights the Tranzinfo network as a case study because of the level of cooperation it has managed to achieve, and thus the range of resource and knowledge sharing activities it has undertaken to the benefit of transport information provision.

Let us examine Tranzinfo in the context of other transport library cooperatives internationally. In the United States, a Transportation Division has existed within the Special Libraries Association since 1943 (Special Libraries Association - Transportation Division, 2007). The Transportation Division provides a vehicle for active communication between staff within libraries with a transport focus via the Tranlib email list, such as those serving state departments of transport, private enterprise consultancies or university engineering faculties. Subscribers to the list (this is not a closed list and many transport libraries in Australia and New Zealand also receive these messages) see some alerts to new resources but it is often

used for requests for assistance on specific topics or to locate certain items, in the hope that another subscriber has knowledge of the topic or can provide the item in question. While there may be a subscriber with knowledge of the field in question who has time to reply, there is no guarantee that an answer will be supplied.

Taking advantage of its smaller size for cooperative ventures when compared to the much larger number of transport related libraries in the United States, the Tranzinfo network has been able to take the expertise sharing process one step further by producing a skills database. A knowledge bank has been established, recording the skills of individual staff in member libraries, such as foreign language ability and previous experience in subject specialty roles (such as law or medical sector experience). These skills may then be called upon when member libraries seek expertise outside the transport area to service a client request. So your organisation's library may only not offer you access to material outside of their own collection but to expertise and subject knowledge across Australia and internationally.

Information for the knowledge bank has been collected as part of the reference information sessions organised by Tranzinfo. Conducted via teleconference, these have been purposely designed to support and share the skills and knowledge of the reference librarians in member libraries, and thus the professional development of staff who have direct contact with clients seeking information. In the United States a Transportation Libraries Roundtable, to be facilitated via web conferencing, is in the process of being established, with the first session scheduled for September 2007. However the number of libraries and seniority of staff to be involved in this planned exercise has not been stated (Evans, 2007).

Staff expertise is not the only resource shared within library networks. The existence of some specialist libraries, and certainly the details of what items are held in their collections, is often rarely publicised. Cooperative networks open up access to such collections to member libraries, allowing them to source items that their clients would not be able to obtain as individuals. In the case of Tranzinfo, such resource sharing has effectively created a single Australian and New Zealand transport collection, meaning items held by a single library that may be rare or expensive to purchase, are now available to the clients of more than twenty libraries. Libraries may also make decisions to purchase (or not purchase) single items or journal subscriptions, based on their knowledge of, and ability to access, that material in other member libraries.

Resource sharing within Tranzinfo also takes place in the form of consortia agreements established to obtain resources from vendors at group prices. Subscription-only information tools such as databases of published research become more affordable – both to those libraries already paying for access and to those who had not before been in a position to purchase them. Suggestions for consortia purchasing can come from any member library and initial interest may then be canvassed amongst the network. Decisions to approach vendors about negotiating a consortia purchase, and to finalise the number of committing libraries, are usually made when network members meet at their annual meeting.

In 2007, Tranzinfo's consortia purchase was the establishment of an automated system for recording the journal titles held in member libraries and for requesting copies of individual papers from a journal held in another library collection. This document exchange facility, Intersearch, was purchased from a commercial supplier, Prosentient Systems, who also maintain similar facilities for other library networks in areas including health, government and emergency services (Prosentient Systems, nd). Such a system gives libraries access to a current database of journal collections within a network alongside the facility to request for items to be copied and supplied, improving delivery times to clients who are seeking material. While Tranzinfo is by no means groundbreaking in adopting this technology, the network is moving to continually increase its value to library clients, with plans to also

incorporate information on member's collections of conference proceedings within the system.

The Tranzinfo network, and the Special Libraries Association Transportation Division operating within the United States, are not the only transport library groups involved in resource sharing. The Nordic Baltic Transportation Libraries is a cooperative of transport libraries based in eight countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden (Nordic Baltic Transportation Libraries, 2007). Publicly accessible information on their activities however is limited. Certainly there is no evidence of initiatives like Tranzinfo's moves to use the resources of a group to coordinate, collate and distribute transport information alerts.

Since 2005 Tranzinfo has produced *Hot Topics* (Tranzinfo, 2007b), a quarterly bulletin listing approximately twenty recently published items on a specific topic. This may be with transport sector focus (issues have been produced on tunnels, level crossing safety and alternative fuels) or topics of a more general interest (emotional intelligence for example). Individual libraries are rostered to take responsibility for an issue which is published online under a network logo. Libraries can then choose to circulate new issues to particular client groups, who gain access to a customised alert produced through network-wide resource and expertise sharing which the library as a single entity may not have had the human resources to produce.

7 Conclusion

Whatever field within the transport sector you work in, material relating to your areas of interest is being released constantly - research reports, product developments, business area analyses and funding announcements are just some examples. How well are you staying in touch with developments? Are your associates, competitors, stakeholders and clients seeing new material before you do?

This paper, however, isn't designed to leave you with feelings of guilt and concern but to highlight that a solution to your information management issues may already be within your organisation. Librarians have the skills to monitor, filter and customize information in your areas of interest to suit your particular needs. Libraries are already sharing knowledge and resources to refine information provision to their clients.

The case study of the Tranzinfo network highlights that clients should not view their organisation's library as a single entity – what they can see in terms of the size of the library collection, the number of library staff and the knowledge and expertise of those staff - is not all that they have access to.

What librarians also need to manage your information requirements effectively is your participation in knowledge sharing - advise them of emerging areas of interest to your work and the organisation's activities, such as bids in process, alliances under consideration and projects in planning. Librarians will also be of maximum assistance to you if they have knowledge of your current information practices, such as what alerts you currently receive. This will allow librarians to more precisely target the material they supply to you, complementing rather than duplicating the items you already review. You can stay well informed without being burdened with information overload – but you'll have to be willing to share!

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