

Corporate Libraries: A Confluence of Forces Pressing on their Future

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Abstract

The authors briefly survey the literature of the past twenty-five years on survival and sustainability of corporate libraries and the ongoing confluence of forces challenging information professionals working in them to demonstrate how they contribute to their employer's organizational goals. The question posed throughout the period reviewed remains the same: Despite warnings that if they don't act dire consequences will result; why aren't information professionals taking the lead in aggressively demonstrating how they contribute to their organization's success?

Keywords: corporate libraries, special libraries, alignment, value, strategic focus

Introduction

One of the most difficult questions asked of the corporate librarian/information professional is "what is the value of this service to the business?" Past responses have included the usual array of basic statistics or number of customers or even some anecdotal evidence. However, by the time the question is asked, it is usually too late to make a case for retention or to avoid drastic cuts in staff and resources.

Ard maintains, "the golden age of corporate libraries may have been in the 1970's and 1980's, there was certainly a lot of growth in organizations such as the Special Libraries Association and a lot of growth within corporate libraries." This growth continued into the 1990's. The difficulties begin in the early 2000's and were exacerbated after the financial collapse in 2006 and beyond. Corporate library managers, used to a freer environment, found themselves in a precarious situation as hiring freezes, the need to present a business case for the Information Center, and tighter budgets became the norm. Most of these managers had never had to face these kinds of challenges before.

Warnings for the Profession

In 1993 Davenport and Prusak sounded an alarm in their prescient article "Blow up the Corporate Library." This article pressed corporate librarians to demonstrate value, to stop treating the library as a bunker, and to bring the library into the main stream of the business. Not all of the responsibility for the lack of obvious value or the lack of appreciation for its services rested with the library staff, though; for whatever reason, corporate managers simply did not understand how the library contributed to the organization.

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In 1990 and again in 1995, the Special Libraries Association sponsored and published two studies related to the value of corporate libraries. In both of these, only one-third of corporate executives could articulate the value their library contributed to the organization. These were the same individuals who held responsibility for the library and its future! One wonders why these results did not spark the keen interest of corporate library managers to proactively demonstrate their value.

Another alarm was sounded at the 2001 conference of the Special Libraries Association in a paper entitled “Corporate Bunker or Cyber Cafe: Rethinking the Strategic Role of the Library in the Corporation - A Case Study.” The authors argued that the corporate library ought to be thought of as a strategic resource and then how its services contributed to the larger corporate goals could be demonstrated.

In 2009, the Special Libraries Association’s massive and very expensive “Alignment Survey and Study” contained more proof that there was a significant disconnect between the activities that information professionals working in special libraries wanted to perform for their customers and those activities the customers actually valued.

That same year, Edgar asked the question “Is the Bell Tolling for the Death of the Corporate Information Unit”? She argues that corporations want to reduce headcount and cost and “scale back and reassess the business need.” She reasoned that these are “harsh economic times and businesses are changing, priorities are altered and there are casualties.” Edgar challenged information professionals to enter a new economic era.

In 2013, the Financial Times, in conjunction with the Special Libraries Association, surveyed a large number of Information Services Professionals and Corporate Executives. The same themes noted above recur. While the IS professionals felt they add value to their organization, only one-third of the executives responding could say that was true. Executives want their information professionals to demonstrate their value to the business and to actively engage their customers.

Back in 2009 the authors of this article began writing a series of articles for Searcher Magazine (now Online Searcher Magazine) on the topic of the survival, success, and sustainability of the corporate library. This culminated in a book *Special Libraries: A Survival Guide* in which the authors as well as a variety of seasoned information professionals demonstrate methods of success for corporate information professionals. While there have been many warnings to what is now a much smaller professional group and an equally smaller professional association representing them, however, information professionals continue to struggle with the concept of aligning their services with those of their parent organization and aggressively demonstrating what they contribute to the success of that organization.

One possible explanation for this is cited by deStricker in a chapter in Ard’s “Corporate Libraries,” as a lack of specific preparation in special librarianship. To a certain extent, this absence of preparation must be laid at the doorstep of our Masters in Library Science and related programs in which the study of how special libraries differ from those in public and academic settings and training in the additional skill set needed to be successful in a specialized environment is often woefully absent. On the other hand, with so many warnings in the literature and with the number of reductions and closures in the United States, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, something else must also be at work. How could a subset of the profession be so blind-sided to miss what has happened and continues to happen while taking so little action to correct the situation?

The Future

A recent survey by the management consulting firm Bain & Company, Inc. lays out a problematic future for an unprepared group of information professionals.

After surveying 1200 corporate executives, the survey found their confidence level down from three years ago and that they see slow recovery and some new challenges. This is driving their new priorities (reminiscent of Edgar's 2009 commentary); revenue growth, cost reduction, and increased profitability. They are "now scouting for new and creative approaches to cost reductions to help them fund investments or meet earnings targets." The survey also found that management is now more risk averse.

The corporate information professionals who read our analyses are advised to find out the strategic objectives of their organization and then devise ways to demonstrably assist in meeting those objectives. This might mean taking the initiative for alternate sourcing or finding new ways to add value where their customers believe it matters. Clearly, information managers need to engage with their stakeholders and ensure that they are using the scarce resources they have to provide services where they can do the most to benefit their organization's goals. This is the minimum they must do to lay the groundwork for success and sustainability and to address the confluence of forces pressing on their future.

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