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Biography

Jennifer Smith is a qualified, chartered librarian. She worked for several years in legal information, both in commercial law firms and in legal education. She co-founded OneIS to provide smaller organisations with the technology and expertise to improve information management.

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Proving You're Worth It: Managing an Information Department in Challenging Times

Abstract: This article results from the Pre-Conference Seminar presented at the BIALL Conference in June 2009 by Victoria Jannetta and Pamela Wolffsohn. Having both raised their Information Department's profiles in a better economic climate, they shared how they created opportunities to establish good positioning in their firms. They also addressed the challenges we now face in these frostier times. This was a workshop and was brought to life by spirited discussions, potential solutions and ideas on how to deal with problems faced by many of us – reduced resources and headcount.
Keywords: information management; management skills; law firm libraries

Introduction

Victoria and I joined our firms, FFW (Field Fisher Waterhouse) and Nabarro LLP in the latter part of 2006, as managers of our Information Departments. The firms have similarities, both being medium-sized with some shared practice areas, Real Estate, Corporate, IP and Technology. We took different routes to establish a real presence in our firms and shared our success stories with our audience, but also discussed the challenges we face and how to cope with them whilst maintaining our hard earned reputations and good positions.

Current challenges

Challenges facing us all stem from budget cuts, including both research resources cuts and headcount reduction and we identified the following issues:

Increased demand on the team's time

Rationalisation is an ongoing process to ensure we only purchase the resources which are going to be of value to the firm. In the current climate that process needs to be more rigorous and resources need to be business critical. The administrative time needed by the team increases as they ask more questions about the renewal and cancellation of a resource. Negotiations with publishers are tighter and careful thought needs to be given to finding alternative sources of information when a valuable resource has to be cancelled. If you are losing a current awareness service, more time is needed to look into other ways of delivering the service, if it is still needed. It may lead to tailored current awareness bulletins being produced manually. Research becomes more imaginative, information that may once have been at the fingertips may need to be found by more challenging methods.

There is also the increased challenge of supporting resources in dual format, electronic and hardcopy. This has over the years increased the strain on the resources budget. It is interesting that sometimes when faced with having to cut budgets at Nabarro some decisions have been made to keep the printed and cancel the electronic resource.

Lack of capacity/heavy workloads

Headcount reductions lead to increased workloads for the remaining team members. The situation threatens team morale, as the survivors may feel undervalued and overburdened with work. Something has to give and the business critical services are those that remain. If the core services are mainly dealt with at computers there is a danger that the team may end up stuck behind their terminals and unable to attend practice area (PA) meetings. This means losing the relationship and visibility with their PAs and ultimately their alignment to the business. Morale may also be low if salaries and potential promotion are frozen. There is a real danger that, by cancelling services, continuing to support the business behind the scenes and failing to engage with the firm, the ground you have gained will be lost. It is always important to feel part of your organisation as it provides the team with a sense of purpose and pride – lose that and morale will be seriously threatened. It is also a challenge to continue to support the areas which are growing in the downturn e.g. business development.

Technology

This is something we need to keep up with and, although it can indeed bring wonderful benefits and aid innovation, it can also lead to false perceptions. One of these is that automation is the key to providing services and reducing manual labour. Automation works well if used to reduce mundane administrative tasks and enables a skilled team to do higher value work, but this requires the investment of much manual work to ensure it all runs smoothly. At Nabarro we looked into automating our press service, as we no longer had the capacity to scan (by human eye) the broadsheets and then e-mail electronic links on different topics and companies to interested individuals and groups. It took time to find the right product at the right price. The searches needed to be set up with unfamiliar software and tested and piloted. The searches had to be set up by an information specialist, in order to capture the relevant articles (no mean feat). The challenge was to identify the articles on topics that are simple to pick up with a manual process, but are very difficult to get right with an electronic process. With technology comes the additional challenge of working with other departments in the firm, for example IT, which may have a different set of priorities from your own. With technology's increasing capability come the problems of information overload e.g. e-mailed current awareness and keeping up with searching skills. All databases have their own search language and the remembering password issue is a minefield.

Outsourcing

Automation and outsourcing are considered as ways to reduce the manual labour required internally on certain tasks and services. We look at both as a way of allowing the team to up-skill. Outsourcing could potentially be used for managing routine tasks, such as journal subscriptions, or for business development enquiries which do not require any analysis.

Measuring success

Why? What? and How? are pertinent questions to ask before you set out to measure success. Until you know why you are doing it, you will not know what you need to measure and the best way to obtain the relevant results.

Why?

You may need to measure success to see if your service, recent innovation, pilot, or training is worth continuing. It may also help to show the value of what you do and positive feedback always helps to sustain a strong sense of purpose and improve morale. It is quite crucial, in the current economic climate, to find out or prove which services are business critical. You must be in a position to

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demonstrate return on investment and the value of everything you do. The key is to ask the right questions, listen to the answers and to respond in a realistic and visible way. Talk to the Practice Areas (PAs) about their priorities and find out how you can support them. Looking at ways that you can be a facilitator, rather than the sole service provider, may allow you to continue valued services when these are threatened by lack of capacity in your team.

At Nabarro, for example, instead of cancelling a valued construction current awareness bulletin, we are training the construction trainees at the start of every seat change to produce the PA weekly bulletin. When we no longer had the capacity to produce our highly valued Daily Press e-mails we looked at ways we could create relevant RSS feeds for each PA and also set up automated news searches on different companies and topics to try to fill the gap.

What?

It is important to anticipate what needs to be measured in preparation for when you may need it. For example I faced losing the enquiry desk in the new Knowledge Centre when additional personnel moved into the area. Our enquiry statistics, which included numbers of enquiries in person, thankfully saved the enquiry desk. Research resources also need to be monitored. We are able to see the use made of hard copy sources by our library management system's loan records. Usage records of our electronic resources have also been achieved by using Research Monitor (a usage monitoring and password free enabling tool) and this has provided very useful information, as it shows whether a resource has been wisely invested in or is now redundant. It enables better informed decisions on renewals and it also highlights whether training or profile-raising needs to take place. It is up to you to identify what you need to monitor and the level of detail required. For the more complex databases I was interested in what could be classed as a successful search and how this could be monitored. I can look at the search string, the number of results and what was downloaded, printed or e-mailed. This gives me a good understanding of how a resource is being used and whether further training needs to be put in place.

How?

Tools that can be used additionally to Research Monitor and the library management system include electronic surveys like Questback. This is useful for any type of questionnaire and has been used to get feedback on resources and training. Paper surveys can also be used at training events when you can encourage your audience to fill in their feedback forms there and then. Providing e-mail feedback links on the intranet wherever pertinent is also helpful. For example, if providing a link to a resource available on trial, we always put a note encouraging feedback.

It is also important to talk to people. The representatives attend meetings and ask for feedback (verbal) and due to their good relationships with their practice areas receive constant feedback. We also work closely with the knowledge lawyers who talk to the relevant people in their team and provide informed feedback.

Good feedback is always a morale boost. By attending an IP presentation in which they talked about their deals, my colleague and I discovered how the research and work our team had carried out helped with their deals. We were able to feed this back to our team at the team meeting the next day and it was a great feeling.

Once you have measured success, it is good to use it when relevant and know the best arena in which to do this. It may be that a simple e-mail to your practice area telling them of the success of something is enough, or something they have asked for and you have achieved is enough. What does the firm read – is it the intranet and/or a social internal magazine? My team got into the first edition of the new social internal magazine on some achievement quite by chance and I have never had so many congratulations in one day! It is amazing what a little publicity in the right place, can do.

Marketing and branding your service

Marketing and branding your service can help to ensure that high usage is maintained. You and your team members are often the most effective marketing tool available and this has been proved at both Nabarro and FFW, by the success of the information teams working more closely with the practice areas.

Technology can also be harnessed to promote your service. Well constructed intranet pages can be used to advertise your services internally. Adding internal branding to external online services raises awareness of who manages these services. Making current awareness services available as RSS feeds can help to promote your services to wider audiences.

FFW

Identifying some key services and packaging them into distinct products can provide the information team with the equivalent of sales collateral to give to new and prospective users. At FFW outputs include current awareness bulletins, company profiles, competitor analysis, and target lists. They have created templates for each type of service based on the firm's house style for colours and fonts. Each template includes a department banner, the date the research was conducted, the name of the person commissioning the research and the name of the researcher. All content is sourced. As research requests sometimes come via the marketing department, their branding ensures the information team gets credit for the work they do.

Having templates to work with enables the information officers to know exactly what content is required

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for each type of research request. The templates also ensure that the quality of work is consistent. The reports produced look professional and information is presented in an easy to digest format.

At FFW the information team also files the research reports in the firm's knowledge bank which is searchable via their enterprise search system, providing the team with another way to raise the profile of the department.

Nabarro

At Nabarro we branded our current awareness both internally and for external clients. The OPAC for our new library management system is branded so that it integrates seamlessly with the knowledge database thus promoting our image as a central part of the knowledge function.

Knowing our worth and embracing opportunities

Our skills and expertise will always provide opportunities for us, but it is important to show our value and how adaptable we can be. We just need to have the imagination to rise to the challenge.

Here are what I believe to be our core skills:

- Organising
- Research expertise
- Good knowledge of technology
- Good interpersonal skills
- Cataloguing
- Project managing
- Budget managing
- Negotiators
- Copyright experts
- Resources managers and facilitators
- Good networkers

Opportunities which need this expertise include:

- Business development
- Knowledge Management
- Copyright, especially in the digital age
- Providing easy access to relevant resources, password free if possible for electronic resources.
- Tenders
- Web 2.0
- Current awareness both news and legal
- Training

We have the skills and opportunities to be an important part of the firm, even in the downturn. It is imperative to be flexible and develop your skills. Above all be innovative and open to change.

Conclusion

The challenges we currently face derive from increasing constraints on time and money. These are a few ideas on ways to lighten the burden placed on both your teams and the budget:

- Assess the information requirements of the firm.
- Review your services and research resources provision.
- Cancel redundant services and resources.
- Communicate any changes in services or resource provision.
- Manage expectations – what can you actually deliver?
- Facilitate – utilising other resources to support services e.g. replacing appropriate in-house training with external provider training or working with trainees to produce current awareness.
- Provide good training on and easy access to resources allowing the enquiry service to focus on the more complex enquiries.
- Negotiate good deals with providers so that budget can support business critical services.
- Investigate possible alternatives to current services e.g. via automation or outsourcing.

All of the above have helped to align our Knowledge Centre at Nabarro with the business and therefore maintain our high profile. By prioritising our responsibilities as Practice Area Representatives we have been able to maintain visibility and relevance.

Biography

Pamela Wolffsohn is Knowledge Services Manager at Nabarro LLP. She has 15 years experience as an information specialist in the legal sector, and has held management and knowledge positions at Denton Wilde Sapte and Morgan Cole.

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