

Knowledge without Frontiers. Reskilling without Tears

This article is based on a paper presented to the 34th Annual Study Conference of BIALL in Cardiff, June 2003 by Alison Johnson

Introduction

Selecting my title to span two conference topics, this year's and last, I admit could have been a little tricky, but my inspiration in the end came from music and hopefully you too will see, as we progress through this presentation, just how much our profession can learn from the musicians.

'**Knowledge without Frontiers**' obviously makes a direct link to the topic of this year's conference, whilst '**Reskilling without Tears**' harps back to Tim Owen's keynote address last year entitled: 'All Change? Reskilling for the 21st Century'. (Owen, 2002). My focus will be on developing an agile information service and on how this could help us rise, as a profession, to the reskilling challenge.



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and it's professional support lawyer versus information professional, just whose role is it anyway? Even in organisations where roles are clearly defined, we as information professionals are actively seeking out other professionals as 'co-operators' or project partners and working alongside them to deliver key services for the benefit of the organisation. We are becoming more and more involved in cross-functional team working.

We are also seeing the growth of distributed and virtual team working. A phenomenon which is most certainly prevalent at Eversheds. For example, I as Head of IS Training, co-ordinate a

team of trainers who reside in many regions across the UK.

And so it seems that there are no clear boundaries either geographically or in the workplace and that the information profession is currently crossing boundaries on many fronts. It follows therefore that our challenge will be to demonstrate our competence to operate in this new environment.

No boundaries can lead to confusion, chaos and lack of direction, together with all the associated emotions such as fear, uncertainty, resistance to change and de-motivation, to name just a few. However it can also lead to exposure, new opportunities and ground taking initiatives. By that I do not mean empire building, I simply mean taking the initiative and demonstrating our competency to take on these new roles and responsibilities.

So how do you move from confusion to ground breaking initiatives? Well, one way is to invest time in developing agile information services to meet these changes head on, and this will be my starting point today.

My presentation will touch upon the current thinking behind agile information services to set the scene, reflect upon Tim Owen's keynote address last year and the reskilling challenges he identified for us all in the 21st Century and outline how Eversheds, one year on, plans to meet some of these challenges by developing an agile

Context

My context is somewhat different to your other opening speakers in that it draws from the last decade of rapid change and resulting volatile environments, where the five year, three year or two year plan is no-longer appropriate since they each become quickly out of date. It also acknowledges both the evolving workplace, where information teams seem to be constantly repositioning and re-aligning themselves and their strategies, and redefining their roles and responsibilities in response to the barrage of reviews, re-structurings, and re-organisations imposed upon them, and the inherent reskilling challenge identified by Tim Owen last year and facing our profession today.

Additionally, within this new knowledge economy the skills boundaries between some professions seem to be gradually eroding or becoming blurred. When knowledge management meets information management, e-learning meets knowledge management, IT and IS services converge

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information service. I will wind up by sharing some of the personal insights I picked up as I put together this presentation.

Agile information services – current thinking

The recent TFPL workshop on agile information services introduced me to the concept and it seems that it's all about business agility, which TFPL defines as follows:

“The concept of business agility focuses on a more responsive and flexible organisation. An agile organisation is better able to respond to changing customer profiles and requirements. As a concept, it covers both process and people and enables them to remain dynamic and adaptive in a volatile environment”

So in theory it seems that there are two roles involved in developing an agile information service:

- the individual or employee
- the organisation or employer

Individual has a key role to play

These days employers are looking for “can do” people and problem solvers, empowered individuals, who buy into the life-long learning ethos and continuous professional development principles. Individuals who take the initiative and learn independently. Individuals who are comfortable sharing their knowledge with peers and learning from others themselves (peer to peer learning).

There seems to be a new working environment where the initiative and responsibility to get and stay ahead rests firmly with the employee. This is certainly fuelled by the government push on life-long learning which is currently being fed into education and beyond.

Trends are emerging to support this theory in practice. New jobs and roles are being advertised and filled by information professionals in KM, e-strategy, e-learning, training, web development and publishing circles. Individuals are and have been supported by professional institutions such as BIALL, CILIP and ASLIB, who offer courses, seminars, discussion forums and toolkits on career development, study weekends and conferences investigating the changing roles of the information professional, lobby government and launch morale boosting initiatives like ‘Where Seagulls Dare’, which is a campaign co-ordinated by Graham Coult, Editor of *Managing Information*, aimed at gathering success stories from members of ASLIB to help those who need to provide evidence of the value of libraries and information services and to demonstrate:

- How to get the right message across to key decision-makers in your organisation
- How and when information has made a difference to organisational success.

The Organisation – its key role

The organisation also has a key role to play in implementing smart recruiting practices to find the right people, the “can doer” and the problem solver. They can manage change effectively by creating the right vision and culture to empower the individual and by preparing employees to meet change head on through the provision of tools, systems and applications to maximise their productivity and performance. Organisations can provide the right training at the right time so people can embrace change and work smarter and they can create the best environment to allow the best people to do their best work.

Trends are emerging to support this theory in practice. We hear of many IS departments being re-structured, re-organised, re-aligned or repositioned within their organisations. We see changing management structures within our own organisations as less hierarchical structures are developed, and structures adopted which are designed to empower the individual, such as matrix management. We have seen the growth of networking, offering individuals new opportunities for building contacts and learning from peers, and the growth of knowledge management and the introduction of information strategies as means of ensuring that an organisation's expertise is not lost as soon as these new empowered individuals leave the business and move on. We are seeing the development of client relationship management (CRM) initiatives aimed at getting closer to the customers to understand their evolving needs and to ensure services and products always meet customer requirements and demands.

Corporate accountability has always been high on our agenda, with corporate or workplace libraries having to justify continually their existence to their organisations. In today's workplace this is more than ever the case with IS departments having to make business cases, devise their own CRM initiatives to help them understand the evolving needs of their own clients and customers and demonstrate their business value in order to enhance their visibility and status within their own organisations.

Moving with the Times

We have seen evidence of organisations experimenting with the future and not ignoring it with the rise of e-commerce and e-strategies. The ethos being “if we are not doing it then our competitors are!” We have also seen evidence of organisations being flexible and adaptable to meet their corporate objectives with the introduction of flexible working practices, remote working and family friendly policies.

Uncomfortable as it is, it's all about moving with the times and some musicians have spectacularly paved the way:

MADONNA FOR EXAMPLE

FROM THIS...



TO THIS...



KYLIE FOR EXAMPLE

FROM THIS...



TO THIS...



Wouldn't it be nice if we could produce our own success stories and find our own trail blazers?

We can all re-invent ourselves and reskilling surely has some part to play.

Reskilling for the 21st Century

Last year Tim Owen alluded to the fact that we were unprepared for the challenges ahead and perhaps inadequately equipped. IS professionals would have to take on new responsibilities and adapt to new roles because the required levels of competence required to survive and thrive in these new environments, were not evident in sufficient quantities currently within our profession. These issues may at best result in our contributions being overlooked, and the loss of initiative in a knowledge economy, but at worst might lead to the prospect of invisibility for our profession as a whole.

Tim spelled out the findings of several consultant reports and inferred that we needed to face and respond to the following criticisms – that we lack understanding of the business we currently operate within, that we are not seen as ambitious or risk takers and that we fail to translate theory into practice.

He concluded that our profession needed to think strategically, be outward facing and proactive. We need to reposition ourselves and move from being a support function to being project partners in meeting business objectives, and working in co-operation with others, not in competition. We need to clarify our roles and responsibilities and develop our people management and leadership skills to try and manage these new cross functional and multi-disciplinary team working practices. Furthermore we need to co-ordinate the diverse and fragmented disciplines emerging in today's workplace as skills boundaries blur and other occupational groups lay claim to these emerging roles and new responsibilities. We need to develop more flexible organisational structures to support and sustain these complex relationships.

So we must all change and change quickly. Tim indicated clearly which skills he thought needed developing and what these new roles would be. With desktop access we need to become information educators. With evolving customer requirements we need to get closer to the customer to develop more user focused and customised services. With the development of the internet and world wide web, we need to translate traditional information skills into the new electronic environment, develop information

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and knowledge management strategies, integrate internal and external information, become content managers, e-navigators and publishers, continually update our own ICT competence and become advocates and promoters of information literacy to help others navigate this electronic environment.

Tim wound up by throwing down the gauntlet to law librarians:

“I’m convinced that law librarians can show the way to the rest of the profession as it faces the 21st Century”

And now one year on I thought it might be useful to share with you the methods by which Eversheds is aiming to future-proof its information service.

Futureproofing Information Services at Eversheds

At Eversheds reskilling “meets” developing an agile workforce where the individual and organisation do have an equal role to play. Our overall strategy is in the planning stages. We do have a clear picture of where we are and what needs to be done, so whilst I cannot elaborate on our overall strategy, I can share with you one or two of our initiatives, which are aimed at meeting some of these impending changes and reskilling challenges head on – thus demonstrating how we as a profession can translate some of this theory into practice.

Like many others, Information Services at Eversheds has faced internal restructuring and re-alignment. In 2000 Eversheds integrated its regional practices under one accounting structure and business strategy. Previously each region had been autonomous in the delivery of support services to its employees. Now IS has to deliver consistent services across the firm and ensure IS users have a uniform “experience” and access to the same levels of support and service wherever they reside.

Within this new framework new roles were created. For example IS Heads of Regions moved to Head of Service or Project positions and took on firmwide responsibilities and management of distributed teams, made up of representatives from each region to support them in meeting their new objectives.

Flexible organisational structures such as matrix management evolved to facilitate this new working practice. This meant that an individual based in Cardiff might report to a regional line manager but also to the Head of Training if they supported the training initiative and the Head of Current Awareness if they also supported the current awareness project.

In 2001 we re-aligned the provision of our services to take into account the development of practice groups across the firm, themselves a distributed team network, to ensure we met their information needs as whole. There are six practice groups covering commercial, corporate and employment law, legal systems and personal injury, litigation and real estate.

In 2002 all support services were renamed and became Business Services. In 2003 we were restructured into one new Knowledge and Quality Division. All information strands (intranet, KM and IS) now came together under one roof.

Having faced a rapid pace of change over the last three years, we are now ready to move forward strategically. We have produced annual business plans for the last two years and clearly identified our priorities for the forthcoming year. Senior management within IS are being invited to input to IS strategy and attend senior management awaydays. We are looking outward and striving to communicate our vision to colleagues and customers by demonstrating our business value, our understanding of the business we work within and our competency to operate within this new arena. We are spreading the word and vision to IS staff at our annual conference in October and are seeking to create a culture in which the development of an agile workforce is seen to be the next logical step.

Developing an Agile Information Service

Developing an agile workforce will in turn help us to build an agile information service, which is more able to respond and adapt to changing customer requirements and needs.

Well that’s the theory but how exactly do we plan to do this in practice?

Our annual Performance and Development Reviews (PDRs) for all levels of staff have for some time now included SMART objectives for individuals, which are linked directly to our business objectives and this gives us a good base upon which to build. The Director of Information Services is currently producing an IS workforce profile and considering the skill sets required by IS staff in 3–5 years time. We are looking for better co-ordination of staff training and CPD and for methods of improving our own knowledge sharing activities including the cascading of training among our wider teams. We are hoping to empower the individual to take on personal development himself through self-study and independent learning, peer observation and knowledge sharing. We are promoting professional standards through the demonstration of best practice, and the introduction of mentoring and coaching as required. We are supporting the development of soft skills by sending IS staff on internal management skills courses covering topics such as supervision, project management etc. and our ICT skills are kept up-to-date by our own internal IT teams.

How then do we plan to counter potential invisibility and understand our business better?

We are continually promoting our business value (or profile) via presentations, publicity, customer liaison, the development of new and user-focussed services, working in cross-functional teams as project partners

and networking. For example each IS Head attends the relevant Practice Group Conference each year; we work with professional support lawyers to support knowledge management and design and deliver legal research training for our trainees; we work with Business Development teams to source and gather market and company information, and we have IS representation to support key business initiatives such as Investors in People, new starter inductions and “Have your say” staff feedback sessions. At Eversheds this is a constant part of the job and profile-raising is considered everybody’s job!

Each IS Head has designated responsibility for liaison with one of our six Practice Groups. It is their responsibility to ensure we understand the future plans and strategies of each group, identify any implications for IS services and meet their evolving needs in a user-focussed and tailor-made fashion.

To support the IS Head we have set up the IS/Practice Group mentor programme. It is a partnership, linking an IS representative with a Practice Group contact in each region. This partnership is aimed at gathering information from the coal-face whilst the IS Head takes on a more firmwide and strategic perspective.

Our rationale in establishing this programme was ultimately to raise our profile and the general awareness of the services we offered to Practice Groups in and around Eversheds; to work closely with Practice Groups to improve our understanding of each groups’ information needs in general and within each region to target our services appropriately and develop high quality, responsive and added value services to meet their identified needs; and to work in partnership with and alongside the groups we endeavour to support, and not in isolation from them. It is all about moving IS from a support service to a perceived project partner.

Broadly our aim was to encourage the Practice Group to consider IS as an extension of their own team and we hoped that the established partnership would result in closer and more blended working practices to help counter the invisibility factor. It would also allow IS services to meet local and firm wide needs of the Practice Group and user demand and provide scope to move IS services forward in a user-focussed fashion, ensuring that we do not lose touch with our users and continue to respond to evolving business needs.

Moving from proposal to project

This programme started as an idea in one regional office. A proposal was put together illustrating the concept and demonstrating its business value to enlist senior management support. The Managing Partner within the region supported the idea from the outset and the Head of IS subsequently set about gaining IS and Practice Group support, identifying mentor contacts in agreement with local Heads of Practice and establishing the project partnerships within the region.

It was a simple idea and the original proposal was enough to secure support from all the parties involved. The liaison process started with an initial contact meeting and fact-finding mission. A checklist was drafted to facilitate discussion and ensure consistent profiles were produced for each Practice Group. Each project partnership then took responsibility for maintaining this newly established relationship and agreeing methods for subsequent contact, drawing from recommended guidelines and to fit in with daily working practices and operational reality. Each IS partner was expected to keep the IS team and IS Head up to date thereafter on a regular basis and to monitor any implications for IS services on an ongoing basis. The project was then outlined to Senior IS staff in other regions and it was decided to adopt the idea firmwide. It took about three months!

The project is still very much in its infancy and I can offer feedback at this stage on its implementation firmwide. The Practice Group contact would be expected to offer advice, feedback and a Practice Group perspective on IS services, give an insight into Practice Group culture and working environment, provide networking links into the Group and help IS to develop a broad understanding of the group’s business and commercial activities. They would also be expected to gain an understanding of how IS can support their Group and how they can support IS in moving key services forward.

The IS representative would be expected to establish an outward facing and proactive relationship, keep partners up to date with developments impacting upon their area of activity, understand their customers’ needs and to identify and develop user-focussed services. They are also expected to gain an understanding of the business the Practice Group operates within, identify IS champions within the group to help move IS services forward and raise awareness of “what IS does” and “can do” to support the group.

Reflections and Revelations – 1995 – 2005 Revolution, Transition or Evolution?

1995 to 2005 will certainly go down in the history books as a period of change but will it be considered a period of revolution, transition or evolution? Let’s look at the evidence.

There’s the “**re-factor**”. It certainly is a time of major, rapid, constant and sometimes chaotic change. Environments are volatile and need to respond quickly to new opportunities and strategies. It is a period of **review**, **restructuring**, **realignment**, **repositioning**, **reorientation**, so are we seeing a period of **revolution**?

On the other hand, there’s the “**warp factor**”. We have seen dramatic technological advancement and are currently trying to harness the potential of this electronic development and understand the impact or implications

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for our working practices. We are moving into a period of reskilling and workforce development to get people ready to move forward in this new environment. So are we seeing a period of **transition**, acting as a catalyst, hot-house or funnel for the transition from one century to the next?

Or then again, there's the "**me factor**". Take me for example and my career history. In 1994 I moved from the corporate environment to academia as information specialist at Nottingham Trent University. In 1995 I saw the advent of the internet and development of the world wide web and its impact upon teaching and learning at universities. Having gone away on maternity leave just as the internet was introduced, I returned six months later to a PC on my desk and responsibilities for delivering internet skills training to students. Flexible working practices were also creeping in during 1996 and I returned in a part-time and job sharing position. In 1997/8 I saw the growth of networks such as intranets, email discussion groups, as well as online, distance and resource-based learning. Having recognised that our profession would need to become information educators in this new environment, I obtained a Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education.

Things moved on again for me in 2000 when I returned to the corporate environment and joined Eversheds as

Information Services Manager. I still worked part-time and with a job share partner. During the last three years my role has changed and I have moved from regional IS manager to IS Head of Training and Staff Development. Eversheds has restructured several times and is promoting flexible working patterns and life style options, such as remote working, annualized hours etc, so now I occasionally work from home.

It's now 2003 and I am wondering what's next. I intend to develop a business focus and concentrate on my soft skills to ensure I remain flexible, adaptable and agile within the workplace and ready to respond to new opportunities as they present themselves. So are we seeing a period of personal **evolution** for us all?

It seems to me that we are coming out of this period of intense change, although there are perhaps a few more years of it to run yet. The final word therefore should perhaps rest with Roger Taylor from the group Queen.

'One dream, one soul, one prize, one goal, one golden glance of what should be. One shaft of light that shows the way the waiting seems eternity, the day will dawn of sanity.'

I for one can't wait and believe we all have a lot to learn from the musicians, don't we?

References

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