

Outside the Box: How Building Relationships Within your Organisation can Help Develop Your Information Service

Paper given by Janine Bryant at the 36th BIALL Annual Study Conference in Harrogate, June 2005.

Introduction

The modern Library or Information Service (IS) cannot, and should not, operate in isolation from the strategic planning of its wider organisation. Most IS units already tie their aims and objectives to the organisation's strategic mission, but how can the IS move from the confines of its traditional role to have greater influence and responsibility within the wider organisation? How can building relationships with key individuals/departments strengthen the overall role of the IS?

This paper seeks to address four key themes:

- Why might you or your IS be trapped inside the box?
- Why bother to move outside the box?
- How to get started
- Practical examples of what happens when you do!

What keeps us inside the box?

There are a number of factors which can negatively influence our ability to move beyond our core service areas and keep us metaphorically inside our box:

- Do the stereotypes of our profession mean we're not taken seriously within senior management circles?
- Are we too busy fire-fighting to have time to plan for the future?
- Do our staff and resource management responsibilities keep us too busy to break out of the physical library space we manage?



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- Are we afraid of taking on new responsibilities and challenges outside our comfort zone?
- Do we need to develop new skills to feel confident in some areas?

All of these are challenges which can be addressed and should not hold us back from looking for opportunities within our organisations.

Stereotypes

Like many information professionals I have been battling to break free of the stereotypes of our profession since I qualified. However there are ways to achieve this if you want to be taken seriously. Firstly be proud of your knowledge, skills and experience. Understand how these can make a difference. If you don't know how – find out; if you do know how – let someone know!

It is amazing how many projects need seriously good information management techniques in order to be effective, ranging from building redesigns and paper management projects to website creation and client/customer relationship management projects. However, to even know these projects are imminent, let alone relevant, to you or your team, you need to be out there in your organisation meeting the right people.

Be visible

Whilst it might be tempting to hide behind the shelving avoiding that demanding user, or burying your head in that urgent pile of invoices, these shouldn't be the only priority. It is essential to get out of the physical library

space or away from your desk to meet colleagues and key decision makers. Attend wider organisational meetings such as AGM's, relevant forums, department meetings etc. and meet key stakeholders of your service. This will result not only in being better known, but you should be more aware of the challenges and strategic aims, know the key projects planned in the next few months and get invited to the right meetings to contribute your views.

New challenges

Any sensible person has a certain amount of fear of the unknown. However, don't let this be a barrier to embracing new opportunities. If you are not sure about someone's role or don't understand the purpose of a particular project, don't be afraid to ask. For example, if you're not sure what the Business Development team does, so don't understand how best to support their needs, ask them to tell you – most people are only too happy to talk about their own work and priorities.

If you do think you have the knowledge to help in a particular area, don't be afraid to speak up, especially if you can see issues brewing. Make sure you consider who to speak to; it might not be appropriate to go straight to the top, but in some cases you might need to do this. Sound out a couple of friendly colleagues first if you're unsure who to approach. Remember to be as positive and constructive as possible rather than appearing to whinge about individuals!

If asked for an opinion based on your knowledge and skills, make sure you give it, even if you end up with new responsibilities or more work (within reason!) as a result. You may have to step outside your comfort zone, but you will be respected for giving a straight answer and taking a stand on areas/issues where you have relevant expertise. Even if your suggestions aren't followed in the first instance, your value within the organisation will be recognised and your opinion will be more frequently asked in the future.

Lack of time

This is probably the most likely reason that many of us focus on core services rather than looking further afield. It is not necessarily easy to come up with an instant solution to this, other than fairly simplistic options of improving time management and making more opportunities to delegate within your team if this is possible.

Perhaps the clearest point is simply that without making the time for the big picture, understanding your organisation's aims, the market place in which you operate, the challenges and opportunities for the future, your whole service is at risk. Even if it means something else has to drop off the list, or be passed to someone

else, making time to see the big picture has to be a priority.

Why move outside the box?

Being inside the box isn't necessarily a problem. If you are running an effective IS which meets the needs of your users and staff, has the right level of resourcing and is well respected within the organisation, it could be argued that focusing on core services is part of what has helped achieve success in these areas. However, doing this can severely limit opportunities to develop your staff and service, can mean you lack the vision to understand either how your organisation is changing or the challenges affecting your market place or service.

Will legal research in your organisation be outsourced to an agency in India? (They do exist in case you wondered ...) Will you need to cut your budget in half because funding has been lost or profits are reduced? Will increased merger activity between US/UK law firms transform the whole operation of your firm? Is your University planning to open a new campus 200 miles away?

If you do not make the time to consider these and other crucial issues outside your core service, in the worst case you may be left without a service. In other cases you may simply miss the opportunity to be proactive, or to develop in line with the needs of your organisation. It may also mean you are unable to influence the right people and therefore cannot secure funding or staffing levels required to maintain your service in the future.

If you diversify your focus to include a wider range of influence and responsibilities you are more likely to be able to face the challenges which arise positively. You will have a team of staff with broader skills and experience and a service which is valued beyond the confines of the library and regular users. You and your staff will grow and be more motivated and enthusiastic in your work, with a wider range of opportunities. Your personal and service profile will be raised in the organisation and your ability to influence decision making and levels of responsibility will increase.

How to get started

One of the best ways to start moving outside your core service and into the rest of the organisation is through building relationships with your peers and colleagues, especially those with complementary roles and responsibilities. There are a number of ways to consider how to get started:

What are the business critical areas? – If you are trying to understand your organisation better, you should be able to identify business critical areas where you could help. Do firm management need support for

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benchmarking and market/sector research? Is someone needed to own the new content management system? Are taxonomy/metadata skills required to improve website searching?

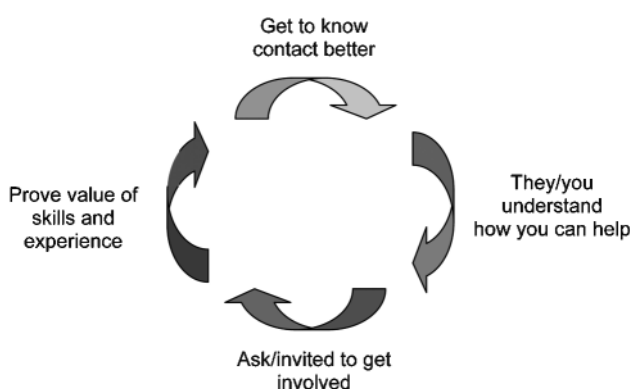
Get out there – Look for pro-active opportunities to be visible. For example, ask to give a presentation at a Business Development team meeting on how the IS can help; offer to run research skills training for project managers; offer to work with your IT department on reducing calls to do with IS issues so they can improve call close rates and performance statistics. Know where your skills can add value to your organisation.

Don't underestimate your assets – Every IS has a wealth of assets which could be used more widely; a team of staff, a budget and a wide range of knowledge, skills and experience. Many other teams don't own a sizeable budget, have limited IT skills, haven't had the opportunity to manage even small projects (e.g. rollout of new IS electronic resource, planning a training programme), don't understand websites or intranets, don't understand how to manage information effectively – the list is endless. Be aware of your assets and use them wisely!

Look for the right opportunity – Through all of this, look for the right way to make inroads in your relationship building. The first opportunity which comes along may look boring, but be a big picture thinker and look for the wider opportunities which might materialise as a result of showing willing in the less glamorous projects.

Start small – Don't try and conquer the world with your first step. Be prepared to start small and grow. You may be asked to look at how you could improve your intranet's information pages, but your knowledge and skills in the small arena may result in greater responsibility in the long run. You could well find yourself on the project team for the next firm-wide intranet redesign.

The opportunity cycle



The above diagram shows a simple cyclical process where, by getting to know someone in your organisation better, you gain a better understanding of each other's issues and future plans which creates opportunities to get involved and therefore prove how you/your team's skills add value to the project and improve the end result.

Through actively participating in this process you should be able to progress to the next stage, the pyramid!

The opportunity pyramid



As you develop relationships within your organisation, get more widely involved, so your ability to influence will grow as will the strength of the relationships you've built and your access to senior management and strategic planning.

Practical examples

Two practical examples of how this has worked in reality are the relationships built with our IT and Business Development teams, but why did these areas stand out? There were several clear reasons:

- There were obvious synergies between our skills, knowledge and experience
- We knew Information Services involvement could make a difference
- They were high profile areas of the business and/or rising stars
- There were clear links to high level business strategy
- The teams were open to collaborating in order to deliver on key projects
- We had access to the right people to start effecting change

IT Department

Strategic planning for IT has enormous influence on IS: from the systems and resources we are able to use and purchase, to the way we train and interact with our users. For this reason, if no other, it is essential to build strong relationships. By proving our understanding of users, information management, databases and website

design the IS can be given responsibility for key technical projects such as know-how management, portal and intranet design. This embeds the IS firmly within the strategic plans of the organisation, brings opportunities for networking and building further relationships at all levels, and brings great influence at senior management level.

Strong relationships with the IT department are not only essential for the success of any Information Service, but are critical to the overall business success of most organisations. Our IT department had been undergoing a major period of change, and in particular were shifting to look towards the business as a whole to own the technology projects, rather than the IT department alone. In addition, within the Information Service we wanted to promote our knowledge and skills in the IT area and to prove the value of including us in relevant projects. We had the long term aim of improving our users' experience of technology as well as our ability to deliver electronic services more effectively and improve the support we received from IT.

What knowledge and skills did we have?

These ranged across a wide spectrum: database design and management, website design and usability, understanding of users and their interaction with technology, search engines, taxonomy design, knowledge and information management processes, supplier management and contract negotiation, project management the list goes on.

How did we get started?

We started small, with a project to select a new library management system. This progressed to designing a know-how management system and on then to wider firm projects such as the selection of a new document management system, the redesign of our firm intranet, a range of knowledge projects, redesign of the firm's website and most recently selecting and implementing a new content management system.

Where are we now?

The Information Service manages the firm intranet and content management system. We have a place on the firm's IT Steering Group and I have moved into a new role to take on responsibility for all knowledge technology projects (enterprise search, portal, intranet etc.) as well as a large number of more general knowledge projects.

Business Development

The Business Development team is usually core to the strategic planning and is often already very influential.

You can use this to tap into key contacts within the organisation and to help you understand the strategic planning process – documents, meetings, strategy days etc. In turn, the IS can support the strategic planning process through market and competitor research and become intrinsically linked to this process.

Business Development had also been through a period of rapid change, with a new firm leadership team and the start of a new strategic planning cycle. They needed support to deliver on a series of key business initiatives, including a shift to focus more closely on sectors and to increase the business intelligence available to inform strategic planning.

What knowledge and skills did we have?

Predominantly our core research skills, knowledge of business information resources, database and information management and our knowledge of the organisation and people within it.

What opportunities were available?

A new client relationship management (CRM) programme was launched with a key ingredient being business information to support this. Work was also needed to improve areas of the CRM database.

What did we do?

We offered to help with the CRM programme especially the need for business information to inform client and sector based initiatives. We delivered research reports and intranet pages and invested in new online database subscriptions to provide the right resources. We also worked on a project to improve management of information within the CRM database and supported BD in their aim to classify clients by industry type. We promoted the services available to partners to support their client care work.

What we do now?

We work closely with Business Development and the Business Intelligence team to support business planning; firm strategy and benchmarking, Practice Group business plans, tenders/pitches, industry/sector reports and CRM initiatives. One member of IS works in close liaison with BD to support these requirements on a full time basis.

Conclusions

As with any change, it's not all perfect and there are some distinct warnings!

- Know your limits and don't take on work or responsibilities where you have no interest or understanding. Make sure you have the right knowledge and skills.
- Don't over promise, either your own or your team's time.
- Don't lose your focus on core services. If these fail, your reputation and value to the organisation will dip accordingly
- Make time for your own team/colleagues – don't be so fixated on the big picture that you become isolated in your own team or neglect core duties thus upsetting team members
- Don't be a dumping ground for everyone else's rubbish! Evaluate the benefits of taking on additional work based on strategic planning, not because you can't say no.
- Don't be seen as an empire builder – you cannot lead every project or recruit every new member of staff, but if your skills and knowledge become highly valued you will be included in the debate, have the opportunity to get a team member involved in the project and may end up leading the work or taking on new responsibilities

However, despite these warnings, the benefits are well worth the risk:

- You will be closer to the business and have a better understanding of the strategic plans ahead
- As a result you will be better prepared for the future and more able to provide an effective, proactive Information Service and be better able to react quickly to change
- You will have increased influence and authority at the most senior levels with the resulting ability to input into the strategic planning process
- You will have increased opportunity to get involved with key projects
- You will have more interesting and rewarding careers for the whole team and a wider range of personal responsibilities
- New challenges keep the role fresh and help maintain enthusiasm and energy levels for new projects

If you've been feeling trapped in a box and wondering what to do next, why not break outside and start getting to know colleagues in other areas of your organisation? We all know the grass isn't always greener in a new organisation, so consider what you can do to effect a positive change within your own organisation or team. Try promoting your skills, knowledge and experience to those around you and who knows where it could lead ...?

Biography

Janine Bryant has worked in the legal information profession for over 12 years and was Head of Information Services at Osborne Clarke for the last six years. She has recently started a new role of Knowledge Consultant at Osborne Clarke and is responsible for a range of knowledge and information management projects with a key role in implementing new technology developments.