Special Librarians – Making an Impact by Redefining Roles

Introduction – Interconnected Challenges

Special libraries are faced with challenges that are interconnected, and sometimes inextricable from those facing parent organizations (Millward, 2012). When organizations face economic pressures, they turn the spotlight on internal departments for efficiencies, and may look to their library first (Fletcher, Franklin, Garczynski, Gilbert, & Mathis, 2009). Therefore, if they are to avoid being part of cutbacks, libraries must avoid being "the place of last resort" or a "redundant and invisible" department (O'Connor, 2010, p. 4). The perception of redundancy is related to the changing nature of reference; clients may feel they can complete their own research online from their desk computers, using search engines and information sources easily found on the Internet (O'Connor, 2010). As Shumaker (2009) has noted, "libraries' monopoly on factual information is gone" (p. 240). In fact, easy access to information through digital means can extend beyond simple answers to ready reference questions; as researchers and faculty are increasingly able to connect to online databases and other specialized electronic resources, they make fewer visits to the library (Kesselman & Watstein, 2009) – regardless of the fact that they might still benefit from librarians' expertise.

All these developments and the challenges they in turn pose to special libraries and their parent organizations point to a need for change in librarian roles and the services they provide; as Latham (2009) has stated, the library's "core components may well have to change as the priorities of your organization or institution shift" (p. 39).

However, change can also lead to evolution: as Shumaker (2009) has pointed out, "the same technologies that are competing with traditional reference service have freed us reference librarians from the chains that have kept us in the library" (p. 240).

Redefining Roles: From Value Added Services to Embedded Librarians

For special librarians to overcome the threats to relevancy and visibility, they need to "be proactive" to make an impact in their organization, beyond the library (Fletcher et al, 2009, Be a Part of the Organization). Libraries may elect to provide 'value added' services, for example, by enhancing information with charts or graphs, video or audio, a slideshow or a web page (Shamel, 2011). Additionally, librarians may choose to hand-deliver information, such as one law librarian whose library was facing outsourcing; she not only saved her clients time, but also took advantage of hand-delivery as a face-to-face marketing opportunity to become known in-person and to talk about library services directly with her clients (Fletcher et al., 2009).

In other cases, librarians are not merely promoting library services, but are willing to "immerse themselves in the wider business and to place themselves and their services where their clients are" (O'Connor, 2010, p. 4). 'Embedded librarians' may be collocated with the customers they serve, funded (wholly or partially) by that particular business unit, supervised by its manager, and may be a part of meetings and operations (Kesselman & Watstein, 2009; Shumaker, 2009). Librarians who are 'integrated' provide specialized research support, and may offer current, appropriate news dissemination services; librarians are also able to enhance teamwork and projects by tracking and organizing decisions and documenting outcomes, and by creating and managing collaborative solutions (Kesselman & Watstein, 2009, pp. 387-388). In academic settings, embedded librarians can assist researchers manage data and prepare

it for open access institutional repositories, digitize or preserve information and facilitate interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration – these services may all be promoted and enhanced by collocation of the librarian within the academic department rather than in the library (Kesselman & Watstein, 2009, pp. 391-392). The various embedded setting supports listed above serve to move librarians beyond the traditional, library-focused role, to one which is "outwardly focused and engaged in developing collaborative relationships with customer-partners" (Shumaker, 2009, p. 240).

Barriers

While the evolution of the traditional, segregated librarian role towards an embedded partnership within the organization may seem an exciting prospect, there are important factors to consider when implementing new models, which if ignored, may present barriers to success. Shumaker (2009) has listed three "common pitfalls," which include not budgeting enough money to accommodate any new embedded librarian initiatives while continuing to provide regular library services, failing to plan for workload issues which may arise from an "enthusiastic response" from clients, and a risk of losing "library staff cohesion" when some librarians are located separately from the rest of the library staff (p. 242).

Additionally, staff chosen for embedded positions should have "the skills and flexibility to take on the assignments your customer groups are likely to need" – such as even greater developed interpersonal skills than those of regular reference providers (Shumaker, 2009, p. 241). While a detailed discussion of competencies is not in the scope of this paper, interestingly, Kesselman and Watstein (2009) offer a set of competencies that I would argue are similar to the personal and professional

competencies listed in the SLA's *Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century* (Abels, Jones, Latham, Magnoni, & Gard, 2003), suggesting that actually, special librarians are already well-positioned to adapt to organization-wide roles.

Organizational context may also prove a barrier – library services must align with organizational and user goals (Latham, 2009, p. 39; Fletcher et al., 2009, Conclusion). Kesselman and Watstein (2009) have furthermore suggested that librarians work with organizational senior management to revise reporting structures, in order to make them "proactive, rather than reactive" (p. 397); they have found that matrix or team-based organizations are the most conducive to supporting the integration of librarians. Shumaker (2009) has also noted that organizational readiness is a key factor, and has found that "piloting, reviewing, revising and gradually expanding are probably the steps on the road to success" (p. 241).

Conclusion

Special librarians face challenges, including economic pressures, leading to budget cuts or constraints; a reduced client perception of reference needs; and the constant development of new technologies. However, in the case of special libraries, one can apply the adage, "with change comes opportunity" – librarians are adapting to new circumstances by moving beyond traditional, library-based service provision models. Branching out of the library and using their specific competencies is imperative for special librarians; by doing so they can create new working relationships, in which they are partners, "rather than service provider[s] standing apart" (Shumaker, 2009, p. 240), thereby ensuring their own sustainability and contributing to the overall success of their clients and parent organizations.

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