

## **The future is in your hands – what's in a name? <sup>1</sup>**

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Kofi Annan once famously described information as being 'the oxygen of democracy'. He made this statement in reference to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 19 which proclaims that 'everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression ... freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas ... regardless of frontiers'.

However this concept was taken much further when adding that deprivation from ICT infrastructures and the information literacy skills that facilitate access to information was as great a deprivation as inadequate housing or nutrition. At first glance this seems as extraordinary statement to make.

How could information have come to be regarded as being of such significance to the human condition as to be considered the equivalent of sustenance?

Information has always been valued but never more so than in the information age in which we now live. Access to information is directly linked with an individuals and nations means to participate in the global economy. This participation is a significant means to wealth creation and as a consequence is directly linked to quality of life issues including access to housing, nutrition, education, health care etc.

Yet the majority of the world's populations and nations do not have ready access to ICT infrastructures nor the information literacy skills that enable meaningful participation in the global economy. This very situation effectively excludes a large proportion of the world's population from basic human rights' protections and the means to access significant enablers of wealth creation.

This is the net result of what is referred to as the division between the information rich and the information poor, or what is frequently termed the 'digital divide'.

So what has this to do with the topic at hand? What has this to do with the future of our profession? And what has this to do with the library profession within the context of business?

Any profession we care to consider has survived for one reason and one reason only and that is to fulfil a need, in other words it is 'useful'. Where usefulness cannot be demonstrated, the laws of supply and demand simply eliminate the means for that profession to survive and this is no less true of access to government funding. Any family historian can supply you with a plethora of job titles that have no current equivalent.

However many professions do not so much 'die' or have been recent developers, such as that of computer technician, but have metamorphasised into something that allows for its survival. You not likely to meet a stage coach driver these days but you will meet plenty of taxi and bus drivers. Adaptability to change has been a key factor in the process of survival.

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So is our profession a dying profession or an evolving one? And if we are an evolving profession, then what is it we are planning to evolve into – do we even have a plan? At this point I am not confident that we do.

How many of us have had the experience of telling someone it requires a degree to be a librarian only to get a confused look and a comment like - 'it can't be that hard to check out books' or 'you're a librarian – that's a great job – you must get to read a lot' presumably between checking books in and out.

Should such responses should be ringing alarm bells? Does it really matter if few understand what we really do? I believe it does.

While attempting to implement information literacy programs as the manager of a public library I found myself confronted with comments such as 'libraries are not here to compete with schools'. Equally, attempts to open up internet usage for information access was generally met with 'libraries are not here to compete with internet cafes'. So what did they think we were there for? Why was there is no distinction being made between the services offered by libraries and those of other service providers?

In attempting to make clear what that distinction was I commented that I sometimes thought there were those in council who thought that all we did in the library was to check books in and out interspersed with the occasional shopping expedition. The response typifies why I believe we should be so concerned. 'I think that's a very fair comment – all we want you to do is run the library.'

Such perceptions of our purpose and role effectively relegate our professional standing and skills base to little more than that of a glorified supermarket checkout operator and if only from the perspective of career development this should be of great concern.

Can you imagine the response of health professionals if they had to contend with perceptions of their respective professions such as 'chemists just put pills in bottles' or 'nurses are there to make beds and take temperatures'? Such a level of public ignorance would very likely create such a degree of concern as to initiate a publicly funded health education program.

Yet our profession generally, seems to shrug off such misconceptions with a sense of our own self-confidence that as long as we know how important and valuable we really are, then all is well.

Consider this situation within a broader context. If the value of our profession, and the services and skills we are able to provide are so poorly understood, then where does this leave us at the negotiating table in terms of advocacy, effecting real change, lobbying for funding or expanding our career options?

So what does this have to do with the future of the profession of librarianship within the context of a business environment?

Put simply if we want to achieve the dual objectives of a) ensuring the ongoing development and relevance of our profession, and b) to affect real change, we need, as a profession, to seek to define ourselves as something valuable, useful, unique, relevant and marketable within current and future contexts. Further, we need to be identified as a power profession, and yes, even identified with profitable or quantifiable outcomes, be that in terms of providing information literacy skills to a remote area community or assisting business in remaining viable.

We need to position ourselves to be potential decision makers and leaders. We need to be and can be a profession that would be considered a possible candidate for CEO of a community for example and not only considered for roles within the traditional confines of the library profession. In other words we need to be a profession that does not limit itself to past perceptions of what we do or can do, we must move our skill sets into a 21<sup>st</sup> century context.

The world isn't changing; it has changed already. If we do not act affirmatively to move with those changes we may simply find ourselves overwhelmed and sidelined as other professions rise to fulfil unmet information needs. You can guarantee if we don't act to stake a claim in fulfilling a particular information need others will move in and do so, and don't doubt there are other professions quite capable of doing just that.

Consider the extent to which the IT professions have high-jacked the knowledge and information management field. I say high-jacked because IT specialisation alone does not provide the skills base to make a good information or knowledge manager and yet IT has so often been the profession associated with these processes.

So how is this transition into the 21<sup>st</sup> century relevance is to occur?

On stating my professional title as Knowledge and Information Management Co-ordinator of a law firm the response this time was 'so what was a high flyer like you doing working in a library in Katherine'. I was frankly very surprised by the comment.

Why had the perception of my professional standing and skills taken such a turn? I am the same person with the same skills and the same qualifications I had just months ago, it is just their application that has changed. What's in a name, a whole lot it seems.

Knowledge and Information managers are highly regarded within business and amongst those that seek to improve workplace efficiencies for one reason only, and that is demonstrable and quantifiable 'usefulness'. Effective knowledge and information management practices can be shown to clearly and directly increase workplace efficiencies and as a result increase profitability and business sustainability.

For a business, such as law, the means to effectively and rapidly research and locate relevant information and knowledge can quite literally be the difference between winning and losing a case. You don't have to tell someone in private enterprise twice that success equals profit and that profit ensures business survival. The skills of the library professional are consistently identified with the information and knowledge management skills required to develop and implement the systems that affect these processes.

So what exactly is my point here? Is the message that most have little regard for those that provide more traditional library services? That if we want to be taken seriously as a profession we should all bail out of public service and jump onto the information and knowledge management bandwagon championed by private enterprise?

Absolutely not, the message is simple. The skill sets of the library professional are highly valued and we have a high degree of relevance and usefulness in a world dominated by information and information dissemination. However we appear to

continue to define and limit ourselves as a profession within traditional concepts of who we are and what we do.

I believe our future as a profession is bright but I am concerned that conservatism within the library profession generally potentially puts at risk this future. When we limit the perception of our skills sets from application in its broadest context we cut ourselves off from many wonderful opportunities. This includes a degree of reticence when considering librarianship within the context of profit margins, private enterprise or even completely outside the library profession altogether. Such thinking can only do us harm.

Opening the door to new opportunities does not close the door on old ones; however, new opportunities do provide us with the means to further associate our skill sets and profession with 21<sup>st</sup> century relevance, value and usefulness and as a consequence I believe increase our professional viability, value and standing. Further improving our means to influence decision-making processes and future directions and thus effect real change. The current and future information needs, of businesses in particular, provides us with the very means to achieve just this process.

I continue to believe sincerely that our profession has an important role to play in promoting and supporting the principles of information access, equity and many other important principles, what I no longer believe is that this process can be achieved while staying within the traditional boundaries associated with our profession.

This leaves us with few choices. Either we can stay as we are and in my opinion risk atrophy and irrelevance, move forward and embrace change in whatever form that may require or a third, and less palatable way forward, is to simply part company with old ways and form a new professional identity, and I do believe this is an option.

So if usefulness is the measure value. How can we prove usefulness?

I believe the very way in which libraries in general, report service provision and outcomes requires review. What is the significance of 1000 transactions to someone who is responsible for distributing limited funds around an ever increasing funding needs base. What does it mean to say we have achieved an increase of 10% in these transactions if the transactions we refer to have little reported or demonstrable usefulness to those with the means to make funding decisions?

We must express our service provision in terms that mean something to those that will employ us or support information projects. Why shouldn't public libraries be able to claim to improve an individuals communication and computer skills or improve employment viability through provision of information literacy programs. Why shouldn't public libraries be able to claim to improve a communities means to access ICT infrastructures and the means to ensure the premise of FOI is made available to all and not just those that can afford it. Why shouldn't the library professional be able to claim to have the skills to make a business viable, sustainable and profitable or a government department more cost efficient? We can do all these things we just need to dispose of past perceptions and limitations, expand our professional horizons and stake our place firmly in the information future.

In other words we must directly link out skills and profession with usefulness at every conceivable point. We must define ourselves as having a unique role to play, and unique skill sets to offer in the information revolution. We must demonstrate we are as capable of providing useful services to the public as we are to effect business efficiencies in the private sector.

Libraries and the library profession as a whole can not afford to continue to expect to exist based on a feel good factor alone. We already know people love library services and would have them if they could, which in itself has a value, but people love ice-cream to, and no one is going think the sky will fall in if we no longer have it, economic rationalism has little time for sentimentality.

The consequence of our failure to stake out a clear claim for our profession within current and future contexts will not just be about risking relegating our profession to the dustbin, but additionally to remove our opportunity to achieve what I believe most of us came into this profession for in the first place. It's not just about career and income or power or influence, its about making this world a better place, a more equitable place and place where self empowerment means something. Information access and information literacy provide the means to self-empowerment and wealth creation not only for individuals but nations and businesses. In this, our skill sets have a high value that crosses all social and economic divides.

We can stand for something, we can effect real change, we can influence and shape the future, but we cant do any of these things while standing in one place. We must embrace change and expand our standing as a profession, we must seek to not only have our skills and professional advice valued but actively sought after, we must increase our influence and further our professional cause.

We must inextricably identify ourselves with new and developing information professions and the means to fulfil new information needs thus retaining a direct connection with 21<sup>st</sup> century relevance and usefulness. I only hope that we choose to see the potential of this future and reach for it.