

From Embedded to Liaison Librarian - promising new concepts?

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Abstract. In the last years the concept of „embedded librarians“ was much discussed and it was stated that a straight link of librarians to projects, committees and faculty work is a prerequisite for the integration of librarians in knowledge and information businesses of their responsible bodies. Since 2009 ARL has announced a secondary concept called „liaison librarian“. A special issue provided detailed information about the changes for librarians especially in the university and research libraries.

“Building relationships is becoming the essence .. - one that connects users with their information needs, ...”

The new concept aims at building individual relationships between librarians and customers and at creating electronic libraries according to customer needs. The university library of Christchurch, New Zealand, put this concept into practice after two massive earth quakes left the library badly damaged and no longer usable. The liaison librarians contact every professor at least once, in case of greater interest even twice a year, they gather the information needs via special interviews, give advice about the collection and talk about new acquisitions, which are mainly electronic media. Even after less than one year the concept meets the general approval of the customers.

The article discusses the change of the concepts from „embedded“ to „liaison librarian“ and its fields of activity. Furthermore the overall conditions and reasons for introducing this concept are presented. The main aspect is the „weakest“ link, the electronic collections, which remain invisible as library services without active marketing .

Keywords. Embedded Librarian, Liaison Librarian, Library strategy, Human Resources Management

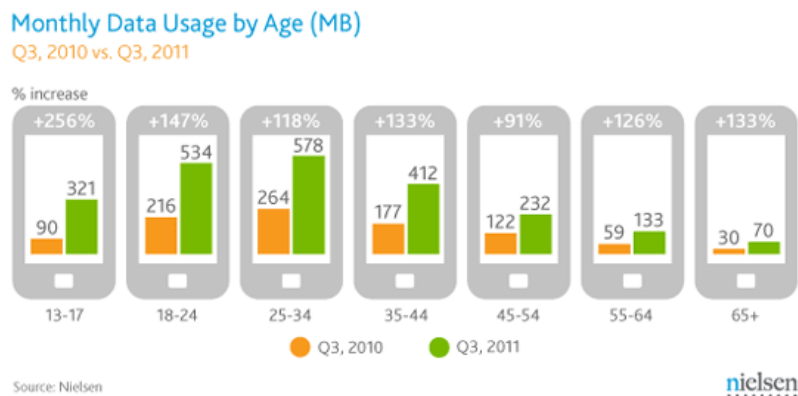
1. Starting Point

Our entire way of communicating as well as our information behavior is changing. For librarians this is no big news, yet from time to time it helps to once again bring to our minds how fast this change is taking place. Only then

we will realize what a challenge it is to “keep at it” or “stay up to date”. A few weeks ago Apple's iPhone, whose appearance heralded the age of smartphones, celebrated its fifth birthday. Today, one out of every three Germans owns a smartphone; in the group of persons below 30 years, i.e. the majority of scientific libraries' primary target group, it is more than half of them (Tuma, 2012, p.63). It is estimated that in about 5 years all other mobile phones will have disappeared.

What is problematic about this development is not necessarily the fact that something is changing but rather the speed of that change. While it took the revolutionary new concept of printing still two centuries to spread worldwide, radio only needed two decades (ibid.). For the World Wide Web, whose “birthday” is usually given as 4-30-1993 when it was first made publicly available, it took less than 10 years, and now, with only five years that it took the smartphone to achieve that, it can count as one of the quickest innovations. In many cases, the search for information can be said to be taking place in our pockets – and this tendency is bound to increase again, due to that development. Libraries therefore are obliged, if not downright forced, to adapt to that innovation.

Apart from technical innovations, the users with their behavior concerning communication and information are changing as well. According to Nielsen (2011), teenagers in the US (13-17 years) on average are exchanging 7 text or multimedia messages per hour, 16 hours per day. Compared to the year before (3rd quarter of 2010) that is an increase by 256% – this generation will be pushing toward the universities by next year.



As shown in the image, increase rates are significant not only in the age group mentioned above. In almost all age groups, there is an increase of more than 100%, only the 45- to 55yr-old are slightly below that at 91%.

A study conducted by IMLS Rutgers University found out what the information behavior of 18- to 24yr-old persons looks like (Radford, 2010). The

18-24yr-old, i.e. the people currently populating the universities, were interviewed about how they rated the offered virtual information services. Included in the study were users as well as non-users. Methodically, the study is based on focus group interviews and analysis of transcripts, as well as online surveys and telephone interviews. This group was born between 1988 and 1994 and has never experienced a time without computers. The focus group interviews revealed the following search behavior:

- they prefer Google and other search engines,
- browse the Web,
- ask friends,
- find information by themselves.

Concerning library usage, the study's result was sobering. Although the majority of the interviewed persons had mobile phones, they were not aware that there was a telephone information service available – no one ever called the library for help with homework (exercises) or would have considered writing an email to the library. Interestingly enough, there were also concerns that the librarians would not understand them or not take them seriously (face-to-face contact is intimidating), or they voiced concerns about (data) security.

The online survey revealed that the chat service was rated best among the virtual information services. The virtual information service itself mostly turned out to be used only after having been recommended by someone else. As problematic they mostly considered answers that were not helpful (having already found the information themselves), finding out that the responding persons were no specialists, or the connection being too slow. Non-users stated that they did not know the service existed, that they are not sure whether librarians can actually help them, that no 24/7 service is offered, and that they are already satisfied with their own results.

The question “What would make the virtual information service (more) attractive?” brought the following results:

- faster and easier software
- personalized interfaces
- longer service hours
- experienced, friendly, and technically competent librarians

Decentralizing the library as a basic condition

What do all these developments and assessments mean for managing libraries, i.e. controlling processes and managing staff? The various types of libraries are developing very differently in that respect.

In 2009, a survey on the future of research libraries found out that these libraries are changing especially fast and dramatically (Fühles-Ubach / Lorenz, 2009, 9). The examples covered (amongst others: finance/banking, heavy industries, a pharmaceutical company) made it very clear that the future research library will have neither the classic “four walls” nor, and most notably, will it have a reading room where customers can get information on-site. As a result, customers will disappear from the library, as the offered services will be made available to the individual office or research facility via internet/intranet, often as full text. The library as a physical space, as far as researchers are

concerned, does not play a significant role anymore. They want and need the “library at your desk”. Services will be procured and managed centrally, but provided via the Net in a decentralized way, being available directly at the customer's site, instead of at a central library. The closing of the Fraunhofer Central Library in St. Augustin this spring will have to be regarded as concrete evidence of this development.

The University Library of Christchurch, New Zealand serves as an extreme example for this new orientation towards digital services. Two earthquakes heavily damaged the library building in February and June of 2011; on-site library services had to cease completely from time to time, and are noticeably limited even today, while staff employing special protective measures can only access the 10-story building containing large parts of the stocks. In order to allow university life to continue and to provide an adequate supply of literature for faculty members and students, the greater part of the media had to be digitalized and made accessible for faculty and students in minimum time. To achieve that, the concept of the “liaison librarian” was realized very successfully in less than 6 months.

However, what exactly is a liaison librarian, and how does that concept differ from the “embedded librarian” which has been introduced as current and seminal only a year ago? (Salz, 2011)

2. Being more strongly embedded in projects and companies – the “embedded librarian”

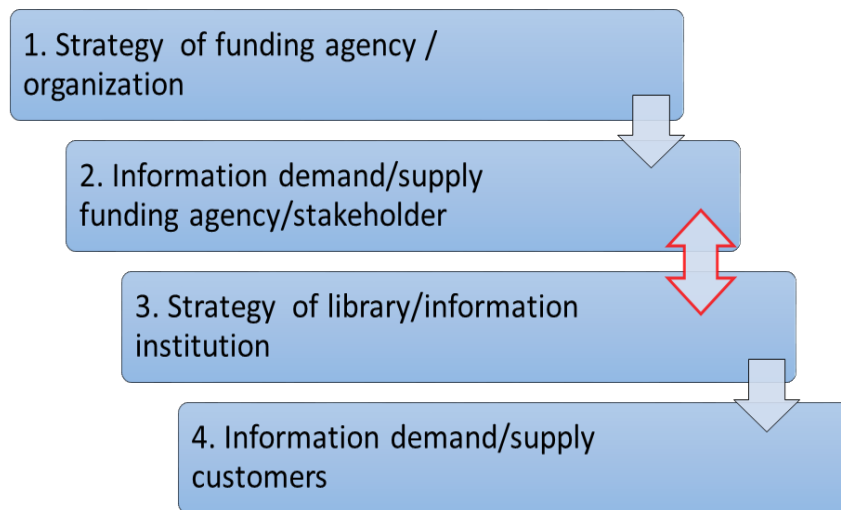
Changing the library as a location results in librarians no longer delivering their services mostly in the library itself but being closer to the customers' workplaces, thus actively contributing to projects or larger meetings. This status of being strongly integrated into project and corporate structures is called “embedded librarian”. This concept has already been implemented and put into practice in a pharmaceutical company, a bank, and a consultancy. It is mandatory that the institutions involve the library / information retrieval service in any project planning and kick-off meetings; furthermore, presentations concerning new or changing services are offered regularly (semi-annually). (Fühles-Ubach / Lorenz, 2008, p.9)

Starting Point “Strategy”

The “liaison librarian” concept clearly goes much further than the “embedded librarian” concept. It is less about integrating individuals in a wider organizational context, but rather about changing the way large parts of the library's staff are working or communicating. Perhaps this concept can best be compared with that of a military “liaison officer”, whose task is to keep up and maintain official contacts and communication with other departments or individuals within his or her own institution. They are especially important in

joint “operations”, adding in their respective institution's interests and services to the group or team.¹

The reason why good “liaisons” are so important is that an information and research institution's success depends significantly on its contact with its funding institution and primarily on the way; it can contribute to achieving that institution's strategic objectives. This connection is illustrated in the chart.



What needs to be stressed is that there is a very strong emphasis on the relationship with the funding body. The latter logically has an expressed interest in getting a performance presentation for the organization itself as well as for the primary user group; essentially, by verifying how exactly the funds were used.

3. The new role of librarians

How the role of the “liaison librarian” can be defined for libraries is illustrated by this short task description by Kara M. Whatley, librarian and director of Coles Science Center, New York University:

“Building relationships is becoming the essence of what it is to be a liaison librarian—one that connects users with their information needs, whatever the format and whatever the technology.” (Whatley, 2009, 29 f.)

¹ Verbindungsoffizier Zivil-Militärische Zusammenarbeit. - <http://www.reservisten.bundeswehr.de/portal/a/resarb/resoffz/aktuelle/zivilmil/verbindu1> (last access on 13.08.12)

In the summer of 2009, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) published a special issue containing detailed reports on how, especially in the research and university library sector, the job profile of librarians is going to change profoundly towards so-called “liaison librarians”. Karla Hahn, Assistant Executive Director “Research, Training, and Learning” in the ARL, pictures this as follows:

... Several new roles that are being fostered in research libraries and offer different leadership perspectives on the change process.....
*...New kinds of relationships are needed to respond to the changing work of faculty and researchers and to constantly evolving learning outcomes, research processes, and communication practices. In addition, research libraries are increasingly seeking to influence larger dialogs about changing practices that are occurring on campuses and within disciplines. **Liaison librarians need well-developed, high-trust relationships to create strategic opportunities to participate in and influence disciplinary and departmental decisions.** It is also evident that the range of activities addressed through liaison work is growing. As a consequence, liaison librarians increasingly need the ability to acquire new skills and leverage more specialized expertise among their library colleagues in service of their clients. Liaisons cannot be expert themselves in each new capability, but knowing when to call in a colleague, or how to describe appropriate expert capabilities to faculty, will be key to the new liaison role. Just as researchers are often working in teams to leverage compatible expertise, liaison librarians will need to be team builders among library experts where this advances client research. New liaison roles are not emerging de novo, but rather in continuity with established roles. (Hahn, 2009, S.1f)*

Thus, after the “embedded librarian”, whose internal integration in the organization and most of all in the project work was strongly emphasized, a further component is added to the job profile: the role of the relationship worker in one's own organization as well as in specific external sectors.

The Position Description Framework, an official policy document, defines 10 fields of responsibility for “liaison librarians” (Williams, 2009, 3-8) :

1. Campus Engagement:
In order to be closer to the funding body and its general orientation, a stronger commitment in committees and sectors outside of the library is needed.
2. Collection Development and Management
Library stocks are developed and maintained (concerning media form and location) by consulting with the user community (Patron Driven Acquisition)
3. Teaching and Learning
Enabling the users in-house to work with the library services on their own, like e.g. researching international professional databases.

4. Scholarly Communication
Developing stronger and closer ties with researchers (and students).
5. Digital Tools
Recognizing new developments in the market and their potential use as well as options of adapting them to one's own institution.
6. Reference/Help Services
Developing electronic reference/help services for questions regarding content or technology of the locally available information sources.
7. Outreach (to the local community)
Marketing and PR activities (within your own “community” – this of course implies the funding agency in a narrower sense, as well as the commune in its more general sense).
8. Fund Raising
Raising money to support the library financially
9. Exhibition and Event Planning
The library should actively plan and stage exhibitions, as well as participate in events initiated by their organization as a whole.
10. Leadership
Taking over leadership tasks in committees, not only inside but also outside of the library, as well as taking on a pioneering role with regard to all aspects concerning the media and information competence of the organization as a whole.

4. Reducing current fields of activity

Accepting new tasks also entails a reduction of current activities. To take a closer look at that aspect, we have consulted statistical data by the ARL covering the last 17 years. This offers quite a good overview concerning which activities have increased or decreased over the years.

In the “service” category, inter-library lending has increased significantly, as did activities for group presentations, i.e. trainings. Simultaneously, the number of students using these services is increasing. Media turnover has increased slightly. What has remained constant is the number of employees in that sector. A strong decrease was recorded for the “reference services” sector. (ARL, 2009, 9).

This development confirms the illustrated trend of building stronger customer relations by means of presentations and trainings, while the classic “reference business” strongly decreases due to users' own internet research. What remains is less but, in a qualitative respect, significantly more demanding research work.

Regarding spending, costs for periodicals have increased noticeably, as well as “library materials” (e.g. network technology), but also maintenance costs in general. Wages and monographs increased slightly as well in that period. (ibid., p. 15)

With regard to spending per student, significantly, less monographs were bought, and the number of students / researchers in relation to library personnel was reduced. There are 11 employees available per 1000 users. (ibid., p. 16)

An especially close look has been taken with regard to expenditures for electronic resources, as they have constituted more than half of all library spending since 2008. With 51% of all expenditures, they represent the library's biggest budget item. Electronic resources are divided into e-books, e-serials, library materials (internal/external network), hardware, software, document delivery / ILL. (ibid., p. 18)

In summary, the situation in American libraries can be described as follows: The customers are clearly using the library services differently now. There is a far stronger exchange between libraries in order to serve customers' needs. Personal information for customers, on the other hand, is declining. Regarding stocks, costs for periodicals are still dominant, while acquisition of monographs, respectively their percentage with regard to the acquisition budget, has been decreasing. Meanwhile, more than half of the budget is being spent on electronic resources. Those, however, are difficult to determine in terms of performance measuring. On the one hand, they are not visible as stocks by customers and financing agencies. Thus, they demand distinctive communication concerning availability and usage. On the other hand, their usage is independent of location, i.e. they are used predominantly outside of the library, which means losing physical customers and receiving only sporadic feedback about the realization and success of information brokering.

Especially important is the fact that 64% of all polled customers of American libraries were using the electronic resources outside of the library buildings. Further differentiation by user groups showed that usage by students inside the library building is strongest with undergraduates, while graduate students and researchers are using the electronic resources not only outside the actual library, but also outside off-campus. (Brinley, 2006, 49) The study quoted above, which was carried out by the Bochum Ruhr University, comes to corresponding results.

5. Consequences for library work

What will be the consequences of realizing the "liaison librarian" concept? First, one requirement is an unemotional examination of the facts and changes surrounding libraries, as well as a readiness to reduce or even completely stop "old" services in favor of new developments, in order to create space for personal communication.

In fact, it becomes clear from the varying trends, that not all services are necessarily desired to be mainly virtual. One example outside the library sector is shopping malls, which enjoy increasing popularity, even though all the items are readily available via the internet. However, what the web is missing is personal assistance and the option of seeing, tasting or trying-on goods and products on-site. That is exactly what the library, being a place for studying and lingering, offers students - providing them with ideal surroundings for studying and researching as well as with professional advice in an adequate environment. That aspect concerns the communication with students.

Additionally, communication with experts and managers, like e.g. tenured professors, directors of institutes, or deans, is changing. The focus here is to

develop lasting ties including regular meetings, in order to determine specific demands or requirements. Here, the trend towards “patron driven acquisition” has become an actual way. Like in a “liaison”, this is about the “time between four eyes” which offers the library the chance to have personal professional conversations and thus present or promote services or products the customer cannot actually see, like e.g. new electronic services or newly acquired books. The highly specialized knowledge of the subject specialists starts playing a more dominant and important role here, as it enables them to communicate as peers with scientists and researchers.

For the library board and even the middle management this means a paradigm shift concerning external communication. Comparable to insurance services or other invisible services, customers are supported and cared for personally, in varying intensity and regularity, in order to build long-term, stable relations (“liaisons”). At the same time, the “embedded” or “liaison” librarian is a concept which cannot per se be said to be right or wrong for an institution. Rather these concepts are the result of a specific environment and its options and individual surrounding conditions. Actual “liaison relations” cannot necessarily be realized everywhere. In this respect, the concept is comparable to real life: relationships only work when both parties are able to agree on a shared view – and that is something that one is not always guaranteed to achieve.

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