THE INFORMATION COMPANY
(LA COMPAGNIE D'INFORMATION)

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ABSTRACT

The field of information science has become so
diversified and sophisticated that the average
layman cannot utilize the new technologies to
alleviate his information problem. This com-
plexity has spawned a new phenomenon - the
information company. This development, ex-
amples of work performed and the role of this
type of company in the information community
will be discussed. (Le science d'information
a devenu si divers et compliqué que l'homme
ordinaire ne peut pas utiliser le nouveau
technologie pour ces problèmes d'information.
Cette complexité a frayé un nouveau phénomène
- la compagnie d'information. Ce développement,
quelques examples du travail, et le rôle de ce
type de compagnie dans la communité d'information
seront discuté.)

INTRODUCTION

Proliferation of information sources and the sophistication of
information-handling technologies have precluded all but the inform-
ation scientist or information professional from understanding, and
more importantly, utilizing these resources to advantage. Scientists,
scholars and technical persons concerned with their own special area
of expertise have neither the time nor background to stay current with
information science developments or evaluate specific applications.
And what of the small business-person whose need for information is
undefined - but is nevertheless real? Current information sources,
even as provided by existing libraries and information-handling tech-
nologies, are all but unknown to them.

To fill this gap between information provider and information
user, the "information professional" and the "information company" are
emerging. Some have called these a passing phenomena, however growth
projections indicate that nearly one half of the nation's population
will be involved in information processing within the decade.

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The information industry is presently grappling with an identity crisis. There is still a lack of consensus on the terminology to describe this occupation. "Information consultant" and "consultant for information" have been used as well as the phrase "information professional". Persons who have entered the field with a library background have been called, "free lance librarians", "alternative librarians", "peripatetic librarians", or "information brokers". And since this is the age of shortened words and short forms, "infotist" has also been suggested.

The size and extent of this development in Canada has not yet been accurately determined although there are indicators. In a survey for the Spring 1977 issue of the Canadian Library Journal, Susan Klement of Information Resources in Toronto received over 100 replies from Canadians who consider themselves working in the information field outside traditional libraries. This does not take into account many groups and individuals who consider themselves part of the information industry with a background in the computer sciences.

Whatever the title or size of group, these are all individuals or organizations who, on demand and for a fee, provide answers to questions using all the information sources available. Others in this group provide information services as varied as the field of information science itself. Analysing information, evaluating information needs, indexing and abstracting, organizing special collections, and repackaging information are but a few of the services currently being offered.

What then is the role of the information company? Most individuals are highly dependent on information essential to their work. These same individuals recognize that there is an information problem although they may not know what to do about it, nor for that matter, are they generally aware that there are professionals who can help.

My own experience showed that librarians in traditional libraries did not have the time to provide in-depth reference help to everyone - perhaps not even their primary clients. On the other side, I was constantly astounded to learn how little people actually knew about the diversified information sources that were available. Scientists would begin projects without being aware of whole collections of material - either in printed form or as a computerized data base. The information gap was very apparent. Sometimes people saw the need for information, but were unaware of its availability, sometimes they didn't know they needed it, and sometimes they had the information but couldn't organize it in a useful fashion. But the information problem was much larger than that. Information suppliers and data base brokers sometimes began offering and marketing their services without a thorough understanding of the user's needs - or in some cases, promising

that the particular service would be the answer to all of a user's information requirements.

These factors have led information companies to develop a wide understanding of user needs, and a broad appreciation of the advantages and shortcomings of information sources, both manual and computerized. Information brokers must be aware of the most cost effective way of supplying relevant information - rapidly.

This particularly applies to the area of literature searches, in that information brokers have to know when to use a printed index and when it would be more practicable to do an on-line search. Here, knowledge of the new technologies is imperative. They must know which data base will have the most relevant subject material, how retrospective the material is, and the idiosyncrasies of the various suppliers. Although there is some duplication between the services offered by Lockheed and Infomart, for instance, some differences do exist in the way certain tapes are mounted and handled - and this affects the information that can be derived from the data base.

These factors can influence the decision to use one or other of the services depending on the results wanted. Other data base services such as QL Systems Ltd. are entering the field. Again we must know their products, and the contents of each data base as well as the indexing technique used - whether keyword with free text searching or a hierarchical system. Some private data base developers are now providing access to their own collections. The characteristics of these collections and their access must be considered. All these factors must be examined carefully since the client's budget may not allow leisurely browsing through several data bases. The two or three sources that will provide the most relevant material must be accessed first.

Most of these information companies or individuals have moved from library-dominated manual information handling to the expansive world of computer science. Users, who are paying the bill, want the most economical way of providing, storing and retrieving information. As labor costs rise, and technology becomes more efficient, the traditional methods of information handling are often not cost effective. It is the responsibility of information companies to be aware of current developments and advise a client if there is an appropriate computer based application to his problem.

In the area of organizing information, information companies are setting up libraries or information centers for government agencies, and for small, medium and large-sized private industry. Here too, the worlds of library science and computer science must be examined for relevant methodologies to suit each situation. What indexing method should be used - and should it be a manual or computerized system?

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What kind of information does the client want manipulated - alphabetical or numerical? What method of coding and editing is needed? How does the cost differential and user oriented effectiveness compare between systems?

When the client perceives his information problem, he has no idea what manual library techniques are relevant, or that computer scientists may have developed an answer to his problem. The information company performs the role of impartial problem solver who can assist the client in getting the most value for his dollar. This often involves adapting a computer program already on the client's system to maximize benefits. The information professional fills the role of middleman between the diverse information sources and techniques, and the average user.

This role as middleman or communication link is carried on by the information professional on another level as well. Specialists from both the library science and computer science occasionally need a communication link with each other. A librarian in a special library may suspect that the implementation of an automated system would assist the library staff in providing better service, but be unable to conduct a detailed systems study of the library's routines, or adequately investigate the suitability of the various systems now on the market. Or a specialist involved with a computerized data base may wish to discuss user needs and requirements with the information professional.

Although there is an important role to be played by individuals or organizations there are some problems to overcome.

(1) Information brokers are an unknown type of service. People are puzzled about their work. They don't maintain a computer center, run a library or compile data bases. Much of their time is spent talking to individuals, small groups or conferences. Word of mouth is, as in almost any business the best advertising source since the services seem to defy a 30 second promo or a snappy jingle.

(2) The information professional's image is overshadowed by the aura of physical entities of information processing (libraries, computers, books) with little recognition of the intellectual aspects of providing only the most relevant of each of these.

Where this image exists, I submit that the information professional has failed to meet his primary obligation - the design or adaptation of information services to meet the particular needs of a client. Too often in the past, the solution to an information problem has been imposed upon a situation and not fitted to it.

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Packaged computer programs, traditional catalog systems or standard reference tools are often unsuited to the sophisticated requirements of 1977 information clients.

(3) There is a lack of recognition of the true value of information and acknowledgement of the legitimate role of the information specialist.

The public cannot be expected to know the intricacies of information technology or its potential for every day use. As with most professional services, the contact must be one to one, the information specialist acting as guide, a teacher and enabler.

Clients do respond to a professional approach, even more to professional services that increase efficiency, save time and enlighten decisions.

We come then to what is perhaps the most crucial problem of all -

(4) Keeping current professionally.

However tempting it may be to use last year's solutions to this year's problems, information professionals, much less their clients, can ill afford this luxury.

There is no easy solution. Reading of journals in this and adjacent fields, attending conferences, seminars, training sessions, making visits, phone calls and taking initiatives in research - all these must be part of our professional lives. We should discourage persons from entering this field who cherish the 9 to 5 work day or expect tangible results from all work-related activities. How professional we are can be equated with our efforts to, ourselves, be informed.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, the role of the information professional is twofold 1) to act as a "middleman" between modern information sources and technologies, and the average user, and 2) to act as a communication link between specialists in the library science and information science field.

The information professional has not yet been widely accepted - nor is the true value of information fully understood by those who would benefit by its use. The image of the information professional is still categorized as "librarian" or "computer programmer". It is the responsibility of the information professional to keep current

professionally, and dispel the incorrect image by providing a truly responsible professional service, where the solution is closely fitted to the situation.