

THE EMERGING NEW USER: VILLAIN OR VICTIM?

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ABSTRACT

Information technology can only fulfill its goals if those designing it and those using it have common goals. And the predominant goals must be those of the user. In the past these goals were reasonably easy to identify and fulfill. But today, there is a new segment of users with information technology skills and highly specialized needs. These users are testing long-held views on the "ownership" of information, the technology used, the accountability for its selection and support, and the all-important information management policies. New strategic approaches are a fundamental part of the answer.

The information avalanche will not abate. The amount of information showering down upon us is estimated to be doubling every five years. Knowledge, on the other hand, is growing at a far more modest rate. In fact, it may be argued that the amount of information available is stifling our ability to obtain knowledge.

New technology is touted by many to be the answer to this dilemma. It allows fast access to information from all over the world in an extremely cost-effective manner. Consequently, libraries now have systems and databases designed to ease the work involved in locating and retrieving books, periodicals and articles. Why then are users and libraries alike dissatisfied with the progress made to date?

Well, the reality is that not all users are alike, not all libraries or information scientists have the same capabilities and not all equipment is as easy to work with as anticipated. Furthermore, the type and speed of advance is testing library and user policies, planning capability, justification methods and service definitions.

These problems are often brought to a head by the demands of a particularly vociferous group - the emerging new user. Do these users represent the users of the future? Are they the victims of an inflexible system? Or are their demands so unrealistic that they themselves are villains?

WHO IS THE EMERGING NEW USER?

Users of library and other similar services are extremely varied in their requirements and their ability forecast future needs. Until recently, libraries dealt directly with the full array of users and varied the service offered in accordance with the demands of the individual user. But with the advent of relatively cheap and powerful microcomputers, sophisticated users now perceive that they have a choice; they can either access databases such as InSearch directly or they can use the services of a public or special library. Such users can be characterized as having:

- access to, and familiarity with, computer and communications technology,
- highly specialized needs,
- one of more databases or sources that are used frequently, and
- great familiarity with the contents of the database.

For such users, immediacy of access to data in "their territory" outweighs the oft-quoted advantage of comprehensive knowledge of many databases or overall economies of scale. They will refute, unequivocally, the argument that libraries can save time and money.

WHAT DO MOST USERS WANT?

The new users' requirements must be viewed in context. Despite their move toward independence, the demand for more conventional services is increasing, consequently:

- Libraries are hard-pressed to store and access the 800,000 books, 400,000 periodicals and countless other materials published in the world each year.
- Special libraries are growing in size and sophistication (1).
- Technology-based systems, such as UTLAS or CAN/OLE, are expected to be used increasingly.
- "Super libraries" are being formed as a method of posting resources at a local, national or international level.

This represents a dilemma for libraries. On the one hand a vocal minority are pleading for independence. On the other, the requests of the relatively silent majority are growing in diversity as their expectations slowly increase.

These demands are dealt with on a daily basis - requests are usually weighed on a subjective basis. This approach is completely unsatisfactory. With such an array of choices and challenges, libraries must conduct user needs surveys to establish what users really want and the full implications of fulfilling user needs.

WHAT CAN BE SUPPLIED?

The results of such surveys inevitably identify that, although technology constraints such as "user friendliness" receive a lot of attention, the key constraint in satisfying demand is a lack of resources. The key constraints are shortages of:

- funds,
- trained staff, and
- user capability.

It is necessary, therefore, to find an equilibrium between the long-term view and immediate pressures, the full array of user demands and the realities imposed by the constraints. For this to be successful, the "ultimate user", the person or body with budget accountability, must be involved fully.

HOW CAN POLICIES HELP?

Only with such knowledge can workable policies be put in place. Such policies must include the answers to key questions such as:

- What role will the library play in the future - will it be a "wholesaler", the sole service or some blend of the two?
- How will the library be perceived by its community of users - as an expert, a facilitator or a barrier? What can be done to improve user perceptions?
- On what basis should new technology be justified? Is cost justification the major requirement? Should service levels be maintained or improved? How much is "quality" an inherent part of the personal contact made?
- Should user fees be levied? If so, should they reflect total or partial costs? How will they be explained and justified?
- What will be done to train library staff? How can the "technocrats" develop a better understanding of user concerns? How can the "traditionalists" develop new skills? What can be done to combat the decreasing face-to-face contact resulting from the use of new technology?

Such policies must be formulated with an eye to the future (three to five years) rather than, as often happens, in reaction to events. They should influence the organizational design, recruitment policies and overall philosophy of the library.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

The emerging new user is at the forefront of change in library systems. Such users usually challenge and test existing systems and demand change on a piecemeal basis. But to react to such demands on a short-term, isolated basis could result in a satisfied user today and an angry one tomorrow. The major advantage of paper-based systems is their complete flexibility over time. Technology-based systems, even "stand-alone" systems, are far less flexible and come with built-in constraints. Decisions regarding such systems are strategic in nature and must be treated as such.