

France Bouthillier
McGill University
3459 McTavish St.
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

The provision of business information services in public libraries: A review of trends and issues in six selected countries

Abstract: To examine the extent to which public libraries provide access to business information services (BIS), the results of a survey conducted among Quebec public libraries are presented and reveal the scarcity of BIS in this province. In contrast, a typology of BIS offered in six selected countries indicates a great diversity of services.

Résumé: Pour examiner l'importance des services d'information pour le milieu des affaires dans les bibliothèques publiques, les résultats d'une enquête réalisée au sein des bibliothèques publiques du Québec sont présentés et révèlent une rareté de tels services dans cette province. Une typologie de ces services offerts dans six pays indique, au contraire, une grande diversité en matière de service

1. Introduction

What determines the development of specific information services and, consequently access to particular types of information? Which environmental factors (social, cultural, economic and political) affect the decisions of public library managers and municipal governments regarding the nature of the library services that should be offered? Are these decisions mainly based on the size of a library and of its population, the financial and human resources that are available to a library, the support from the municipality and/or the citizens for certain types of services, existing service traditions or are they based on the perceived priorities of decision makers? In principle, library/information services should be developed in response to the needs of a community. In most communities, there is a need to access business information. However, many public librarians do not perceive such a need as a priority. In library management, few attempts have been made to comprehend the relationships between the various factors that could affect the decision making process related to the identification of service priorities. The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which public libraries offer access to business information services (BIS) and to offer some responses to the questions raised above. By reviewing the trends and issues affecting the development of business information services in six selected countries, it is possible to derive some interpretations of the underlying factors that affect the development of information services. This paper presents the results of the first two phases of a five-phase program of research aimed at developing a service model for small businesses in the context of the public library.

2. Context

Accessing business information is often presented as a critical issue for small and medium-sized businesses, but also for job seekers, young entrepreneurs, autonomous workers and individuals interested in economic, financial and corporate information. Most large urban public libraries in North America and in Europe seek to address the needs of these particular clientele. In some European countries, mainly in Scandinavia (Saarinen 1988; Christensen 1988; Andreasen and Holt 1992; Tornholm 1993; Clausen 1996) small libraries have also incorporated BIS to traditional services. However, BIS generate a certain level of controversy mostly because they are considered as being quite expensive to implement due to the high costs of the majority of business information sources. Therefore, one can find in the professional library literature several arguments against their implementation in addition to their prohibitive costs such as the difficulty to serve adequately the business community, the fact that BIS require library resources that are not used by the average user but only by a small portion of the community, and such use of public money for private interest is not always seen as acceptable (Thatcher 1997; Wallace 2003). On the other hand, numerous authors have claimed that such services can play a key role in the economic development of a community (Gibson 1992; Bleiweis 1997; Nevill 1997; Kounas 1997; Vaughan 1997; Price, Whitney-Leigh and Tripp 1998; Lynch 1998).

Considering the value of the latter argument, then why in the province of Quebec this argument did not have any significant influence? One potential reason is the fact that Quebec public libraries have evolved mainly in relation to cultural policies aimed at promoting the francophone culture (Bouthillier 1995). Cultural development has been the major concern, not economic development. Therefore, public libraries have nurtured their cultural role without much consideration for the business community. But can these cultural policies be the only factor to explain the lack of interest for BIS in spite of the growing interest for these services in many other regions? To address, among others, these questions, a five-phase research program was designed and the results of the two first phases are reported in this paper. First, a survey was conducted among Quebec public libraries serving communities of 15 000 inhabitants and more. Second, the analysis of almost 200 public library websites was undertaken to develop a BIS directory or a typology of BIS that could be used at another stage of the research, as explained below.

In the next section, the literature on BIS is reviewed to appreciate their historical development.

3. Review of relevant literature

In some countries such as the United States, there is a long tradition of offering BIS (Kruzas 1965). In fact, they take their roots in the mechanics and mercantile libraries, supported by the business community. The idea that public libraries should have a business section has been promoted by a very influential librarian at the end of the 19th century, John Cotton Dana (1900). As early as the beginning of the 1890s, he introduced BIS at the Denver Public Library in Colorado. He was also involved in the implementation of such services at the Springfield Public Library (Massachusetts) in

1897, and at the Newark Free Public Library (New Jersey) in 1904. Since then, the opening of a new public library branch devoted to business information has been taking place, almost every year, somewhere in the United States (Kruzas 1965; Riechel 1994). The last well known opening has been at the New York Public Library where the Scientific, Industry and Business Library opened its doors in 1996 at the cost of \$100 millions.

England is another country where BIS have attracted a constant interest in public libraries. Business sections were created (Campbell 1981; Webber 1990) in 1917 at Liverpool, in 1918 at Leeds, in 1920 at Birmingham, in 1987 at Wetsminter, in 1989 at Sheffield and at Cambridge in 1992. The interest for BIS in the United Kingdom took a new direction in 1992 when the Department of Trade and Industry promoted the creation of Busines Link, a national network of One Stop Shops for providing effective access to business information in the locality of every firm in England (Stoat and Abell 1995; Rice 1995). This initiative involved various types of partnerships and, among others, with public libraries, thus recognizing the value of their collections and their experience in the provision of business information. In 1994, another government initiative targeted firms in rural communities.

In Canada, government support for BIS has never been predominant, however, a number of large cities have recognized the need for these services such as Toronto where a business reference section was created in 1941, Vancouver where a business and technology department was created within the public library in 1959, and Calgary where a business, science and technology department was introduced in 1968 in their respective municipal libraries. In spite of the recommendations formulated in 1967 by Marjorie Goodfellow, former president of the Montreal Special Libraries Associations, and by Helene Dechief in 1973, Montreal has never succeeded in establishing a Public Business Library or a Scientific and Technical Reference Center on its territory.

In Scandinavia, BIS became a major concern in public libraries in the middle on the 1960s. In Denmark, viewed as the leading country regarding BIS, numerous initiatives took place in cities that could not always be considered, according to North American standards, as large and industrial. For example, Herning introduced BIS in 1981 and has a population of only 65 000 inhabitants (Andreasen and Holt 1992). Silkeborg and Brande have respectively a population of 65 000 and 10 000 inhabitants and both created business sections in 1989. The interest for BIS in such small cities is explained by the fact that the Danish government made special grants for BIS available to public libraries. Not surprisingly, 25 libraries made proposals to receive these grants (Sorensen 1990). Similarly, in Australia and New Zealand, many libraries began offering these services in the early 1990s.

This brief review of the literature on BIS in various countries reveals that these services are not marginal or unusual. A sustained interest for them has been expressed over the last century and more particularly over the last two decades. In addition, one could say that the idea of BIS has been perceived as attractive by a number of national and municipal governments and has contributed to a better recognition of the value of public libraries in addressing community needs.

4. The purpose of the program of research

In 1999, a program of research was designed to identify a service model for business information services that could be appropriate in the context of Montreal in particular, and in Quebec in general. It involved five phases: (1) a survey among Quebec public libraries to identify current projects and past experiences regarding BIS; (2) an examination of public library websites from six selected countries, which were identified in the literature as being quite active in terms of BIS, for developing a service inventory or a typology of services; (3) a number of site visits to selected libraries offering BIS to discuss with library staff the issues involved in BIS; (4) a number of interviews with small businesses in the Montreal area to investigate their information needs and interest for BIS; and (5) a number of interviews with library staff in two municipalities interested to offer BIS in a near future. Regarding the site visits, four libraries were visited in 2001 in Denmark, three libraries in the United States, and two libraries in Canada. Preliminary results pertaining to the third phase as been reported (Bouthillier 2003), and this paper presents the data for phases 1 and 2. The outcomes of the site visits are used to enrich the discussion of these data.

The specific purpose of the survey undertaken among public libraries in Quebec was to identify the organizations that were offering BIS and/or did try to offer them, and the reasons explaining the availability or the unavailability of these services. The purpose of the analysis of library websites was to obtain rapidly an overview of the types of services that were offered to give examples of such services to business people – to be interviewed in phase 4 – seen as potential BIS users and to library staff – to be interviewed in phase 5 – viewed as potential BIS providers.

The rationale for this program of research was that in library management, few studies sought to identify the factors determining the implementation and the viability of specific information services. A better understanding of these factors is crucial to ensure adequate access to information.

5. Business information services in Quebec

To obtain a snapshot of the status of BIS in Quebec, a survey was designed and involved the use of a questionnaire developed by Riechel (1994), which was adapted and translated in French. The questionnaire was mailed to the 80 Quebec libraries serving more than 15 000 inhabitants in 2001. Forty nine questionnaires were returned corresponding to a response rate of 61%. The questionnaire comprised questions on library resources and past/ current experiences with BIS, and was sent to the library director.

In table 1, we can see that, out of 49 responding libraries, 44 libraries reported not offering BIS and only five libraries claimed to offer them. Data regarding the population served, the budget, the number of employees, the size of the collections, the surface area, and the budget spent per capita clearly reveal that libraries pretending offering BIS have more resources and are larger in many respects. Although only five libraries claimed to offer BIS, this number was surprising because none of these libraries were known as being active regarding BIS. Therefore, to verify these claims, an examination of the websites of these libraries led to the conclusion that if these claims were true, BIS were

not very well promoted and publicized since absolutely no indication regarding these services could be found on each website.

| | Do not offer BIS N = 44 | Offer BIS N = 5 |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Population | 42,248 | 74,000 |
| Budget | \$965,349 | \$2,351,437 |
| Number of employees | 13,84 | 31,76 |
| Books | 95,226 | 182,370 |
| Surface area | 2,828 | 6,870 |
| \$/capita | \$22.85 | \$31.78 |
| Books/capita | 2.25 | 2.46 |

Table 1. Comparative data for libraries offering BIS and not offering BIS

In table 2, the reasons that respondents gave to explain the absence of BIS in their library are presented. Interestingly, the most important reason that was given is the lack of demand from business people for BIS, followed by the lack of business information resources in the current collection of the library, the lack of human resources, the lack of municipal support and by the fact that other organizations in the locality seem to offer some kind of BIS. These justifications for not providing BIS are quite interesting because they reveal, to some extent, a passive attitude from public library directors who seem to wait for business people requests for BIS. Without such a demand, it is of course very difficult to obtain the resources that are necessary for offering BIS but, at the very same time, without having the appropriate resources, it is unlikely that such a demand will be expressed by business people. This paradox seems to explain the absence of BIS in the vast majority of Quebec public libraries. Another interesting reason that was provided is the fact that BIS were not seen as fitting well in the library mission. Given the cultural emphasis put in libraries in Quebec as mentioned above, this reason seems to be, indeed, very legitimate.

| Reasons | Number of respondents |
|--|------------------------------|
| Lack of demand from business people | 22 |
| Lack of business information resources | 11 |
| Lack of human resources | 10 |
| Lack of municipal support | 7 |
| Services already offered by other organizations in the area | 7 |
| Other reasons | 6 |
| Not enough SMEs in the municipality | 5 |
| BIS do not fit in the library mission | 2 |

Table 2. Reasons for not offering services

In the questionnaires, the five library directors claiming to offer BIS had to describe the resources that they were using support these services. Here, we realized that the concept of business information, and by extension BIS, can generate various interpretations. For instance, the five libraries reported giving access to a number of magazines such as Maclean, in which one can find a small section on businesses, and such a resource was listed as business information. A bibliographic database including references to newspaper and magazine articles was also considered as business information. In any case, none of the five libraries reported having in their collection journals similar to the Wall Street Journal or the Economist or databases such as ABI-INFORM or Lexis-Nexis, considered as basic resources to have in a business collection.

These results confirmed our assumption that in Quebec public libraries the interest for BIS is very limited, and that business information and BIS could mean different things to different people. In the absence of BIS that could serve as service model in Quebec, almost any small attempts to give access to financial and economic information can be perceived as a form of BIS.

6. Business information services in six selected countries

The examination and analysis of library websites was aimed at extracting examples of current BIS offered in various parts of the world. The data collection took place in 2002. In addition to retrieving information from libraries that were mentioned in the literature as having a BIS initiative, English terms such as *public library* (searches were expanded in certain cases to *regional, county and State library*), *business information services, reference services for business* and the equivalent terms in Danish (*bibliotek, commune biblioteki and erhvservservice*) were used in queries on various search engines. Then, the retrieved sets of library websites were systematically analyzed to find information on the collections, the reference services, the research services and so on. The information was then compiled in tables.

The following countries were selected: Canada (CAN), United States (USA), England (ENG), Australia (AUST), Denmark (DEN) and New Zealand (NZ). The need to gain knowledge on the status of BIS in other Canadian provinces was obvious because other Canadian provinces are always used for comparison purpose for any issue in Quebec. The situation in the United States and England had to be examined given the long tradition toward BIS in both countries. Australia, Denmark and New Zealand were mentioned as interesting countries in the literature and they were also relevant to the study because their population density is less important than the one in the United States and England. Therefore, their municipalities are more comparable in terms of size to Quebec municipalities as opposed to American or English cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Leeds and Birmingham. In total, 194 websites were examined. Table 3 shows the data. One limitation of the methodology is that we concluded that a library was offering BIS only if it was clearly mentioned on its website. In practice, a library could offer BIS without making specific promotion of them.

| | CAN | USA | ENG | AUST | DEN | NZ | Total |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|------------|
| Number of surveyed websites | 41 | 67 | 27 | 30 | 21 | 8 | 194 |
| Services offered: | | | | | | | |
| BIS collection/on-site help | 13 | 34 | 25 | 15 | 17 | 4 | 108 |
| Reference phone line –general | 16 | 45 | 21 | 6 | 8 | 3 | 99 |
| BIS reference phone line | 4 | 9 | 14 | - | 5 | - | 32 |
| Email reference – general | 27 | 43 | 21 | 16 | 7 | 3 | 149 |
| BIS - Email reference | 6 | 9 | 14 | 1 | 4 | - | 34 |
| Reference requests by fax | 3 | 5 | 10 | 2 | 2 | - | 22 |
| Business resource links on Website | 35 | 59 | 19 | 26 | 14 | 7 | 160 |
| Fee-based research | 6 | 4 | 12 | 5 | 8 | 4 | 39 |
| Research – no fee mentioned | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | - | 2 |
| Free research | - | - | 5 | - | - | - | 5 |
| Courses/workshops | 1 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 1 | - | 11 |
| Speakers | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | - | 2 |
| Guides | 3 | 2 | - | 1 | 1 | 2 | 10 |
| Online book club | 3 | - | - | - | - | - | 3 |
| Newsletter | 2 | - | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | 5 |
| List of resources/pathfinders/ recommended readings | 3 | 3 | - | 5 | - | 2 | 13 |
| Information sessions/ business breakfasts | - | 3 | - | - | - | - | 3 |
| Business book reviews | - | 1 | - | - | - | - | 1 |
| Alerts | - | - | - | 2 | - | - | 2 |
| Project management/costing/ start up advice | - | - | - | 1 | 1 | - | 2 |

Table 3. Typology of business information services

Regarding the total results, among the 194 library websites that were surveyed, 108 or 56% indicated that the library had a specialized business collection and offered on-site help, which represents the most basic BIS. The other most prevalent service is to list business resource links on the library website (160 libraries or 82%). Although there is a large number of libraries offering an email reference service for general purpose (149 or 77%), only 34 libraries (18%) provide an email reference service for business purpose. However, among the 108 libraries with a business collection, these 34 libraries represent 31%. A reference phone line is the second most publicized means for handling reference requests: 99 libraries offer that service and 32 libraries provide this service specifically for business questions. They represent again one third of the libraries that offer BIS. Accepting reference requests by fax is not a major trend and this is not surprising given the complexity of expressing and responding business requests without some interactions between the librarian and the user. However, this service seems to be appreciated in England.

Another service that is prevailing is the fee-based research service offered by 39 libraries representing 36% of the libraries with a business collection. The ratio of libraries

providing fee-based services is the highest in England and in Denmark. Only in England, five libraries offer free research services and indicate the time limitations for not charging fees (e.g. 30 minutes or 15 minutes). On certain sites, detailed descriptions of the fees were given (e.g. \$ 30 for a company profile and \$120 for market information research). On other sites (2), no details on fees were given, leaving the potential user of research services with uncertainty.

Many other services were indicated on the websites: courses/workshops (11), guides (10) for starting a project for example, lists of resources/pathfinders (13), newsletter (5), online book club (3), the organization of information sessions/breakfasts (3), invitation of speakers (2), alerts to new publications (2) and advice on specific topics such as project management or starting up a business (2). Curiously, what librarians should know best to provide, business book reviews, were mentioned as a service only in one case.

Although this typology of services indicates a great diversity of BIS made available in various countries, the idea of information services for businesses seems to encompass five major types of services: a collection, email and phone line reference services, a fee-based research service and the maintenance of resource links on a website. These trends are consistent with what is described in the BIS literature and what has been observed in the field during site visits. To serve a business community, a library must have the following features: a comprehensive collection; reference staff must be easy to reach; particular research services must be provided to address the lack of time of business people to undertake systematic research of information; and a library must act as a resourceful agent or as a reference center by providing information and resource links that seem relevant to business people. Several other services are noted but they seem to exist only to entice business people to go to the library (e.g. information breakfasts, speakers, etc.). However, these initiatives are not adding much value to the whole spectrum of BIS and one can presume that they do not make a major difference in the appreciation of BIS by business people given that they remain marginal and available only at specific moments.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The survey conducted among public libraries in Quebec and the service directory that has emerged from the examination of public library websites suggest that public librarians do not all make the same assumptions about the needs of their communities and do not view the importance of accessing business information from the same perspective. As a result, differing sets of service are offered by similar institutions.

In addition, the availability of resources, namely financial resources made available by governments, is a critical factor explaining the presence of specialized information services. However, the quantity of resources cannot explain everything. In Denmark, there was no tradition of BIS and when the government decided to support their development in response to a difficult economic climate, Danish librarians did not know what to propose. Public library directors that were met during site visits mentioned that they examined mainly the situation in English public libraries and adopted some of the premises that were made by English librarians: business managers are ready to pay for information, and fee-based services became a main feature of BIS. However, some librarians felt that it was not consistent with the mission of the “free public library”. On the other hand, fee-based research services do not seem to generate impressive revenues for the libraries wherever they are. In best cases, they help to recover some basic costs.

Therefore, a major issue for introducing BIS is to make sure that sufficient financial resources and human resources are available to offer service quality and services that will be seen as innovative by business people. Another critical issue, which was mentioned during site visits to explain the existence of BIS, is the ability of the library staff, starting with the library director, to establish partnerships with other libraries like in England and Denmark where building library networks was a key dimension in the development of BIS. In addition, partnerships with business associations, business schools and governments were also perceived as critical.

In marketing, we learn that in order to develop a good business plan, it is essential to know well the market that is targeted. Interestingly, in public libraries where BIS were considered as part of planning strategy, no major investigation of the needs of the business community was undertaken to support the particular design of BIS. It is true that the business community, especially the small and medium-sized businesses, is a moving target because they can disappear as quickly as they appear given economic trends. Another issue stemming from site visits and library websites is the challenge of promoting adequately BIS. The websites revealed varying approaches: extensive detailed information on the services versus very cryptic description of some BIS.

Finally, the development of commercial web-based business services, and the fact that Internet is more extensively used by the business community create a certain level of uncertainty as to what business managers expect from libraries.

In contrast to the six selected countries that were investigated, in the province of Quebec, BIS are simply not a trend nor an issue. Quebec libraries claiming to provide BIS offer in fact a very simplistic expression of BIS. Given the research results presented in this paper, the environmental factors determining the presence or the absence of specialized services for the business community seem to be related to cultural differences, library traditions, government policies and the perceptions of librarians regarding the needs of the business managers. Moreover, it becomes clear from the results that the need for the public and the average user to access business information is not perceived as really important in public libraries. Presumably, the need for fiction and for accessing other types of information by the majority of citizens is more easily acknowledged in public libraries and easier to address.

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