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Acquiring Minds Want to Know

The Art vs. The Business of Librarianship

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The current discussions of outsourcing, re-engineering, and doing more with less demonstrate the fundamental shift in the way that librarians are being asked to provide their services. The clash that sometimes occurs between the library service culture and the business culture of providers of services to libraries has moved within libraries themselves, and we are seeing the same clash develop as the strain of meeting expanding needs with shrinking staffs forces a re-examination of library practices and processes.

The business culture is becoming pervasive in libraries, reflected in the move to justify or cut costs and current staffing, while still providing an acceptable level of service. The business culture values streamlining and economy and it revolves around processes and work flows. On the other side we have the art of librarianship that develops from years of experience and a honing of instincts and skills. Art is not easily quantified and studied. It values individual skills and decision making.

These days the art of librarianship is running smack into the business of

librarianship and is getting rather bruised. There is room for both — but the balance between the two is not easy to find. Some library functions such as acquisitions have for some time been a part of the business culture; recently more and more library functions have been embracing a business perspective.

Librarians are all being asked to model workflow and costs and to seek possible alternatives to the way we have always done our work. In this process, however, we find that measures of success of service are not always easily quantifiable or subject to routine workflow modeling. Yet we must try, not just to satisfy the library administration, but also to survive and to continue to offer our services. Reallocation of funds, not finding of new funds, has become our way of life. And as the world with which we deal is also becoming more dependent on negotiating terms and contracts for services and information, we have to have the skills (and data) required to interact with this business world. The clash in cultures, and maybe in some cases values, is becoming more acute as many librarians struggle to come to terms

with changes occurring around us.

In order to survive the current trends librarians need several things: 1) a lot more information about what we do, 2) library systems that provide much more data about processes, transactions and their costs, and 3) skills in negotiating and evaluating providers of services and products, including contracts and licenses.

How many of us, despite having integrated library systems, still have to keep some manual statistics? How many of us pay to use external databases without an internal, automated means to track and verify usage? We need systems to evolve to a stage where they can provide this kind of information on a regular basis. Systems also need to be flexible so that we can change what we track over time as we learn what is important at any given time.

If metering becomes a routine way that businesses will charge for transactions and services, librarians should have the internal means to track usage by staff and patrons to verify that charges billed to libraries are accurate. Usage statistics and costs should

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also help identify patterns of use and compare costs with comparable services if desirable, and also with charging back to patrons if necessary. Even if we negotiate flat rates for services, we need some means of monitoring whether what we are paying for is a good deal.

The topic of negotiation brings us back

to the marriage of art and business in librarianship. Negotiation requires skills in using and understanding numbers, but also in assessing and interacting with people. Not all aspects of librarianship can be treated with cold hard statistics. Interactions with people will remain a major part of what we do, either in offering services or negotiating

for them. As times change, part of what will guide us is our instincts and things that cannot be measured or even always understood and agreed upon. The art has to remain, but we must also be prepared to back up our services with an understanding of numbers and costs of doing our business. 🌿

