Libraries for the new millenium: implications for managers

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This anthology by various authors on topics that all library and information service managers are currently grappling with in the face of the seeming convergence of almost every aspect of change as the new millenium approaches, is billed as 'indispensable reading for senior library and information service managers and decision-makers in all sectors', and I therefore approached it with a great deal of interest from the perspective of a practitioner attempting to solve these very issues. As such, the book is an admirable attempt to put into perspective the inevitable changes that the electronic era is bringing to libraries and information centres on the theoretical level, but offers very few tangible and practical solutions to the challenges ahead.

While the case studies are relevant to several specialised areas of practice, the authors often fall into the trap of describing current practice in overlong passages – the 'how I run my library good' syndrome – so that the essential questions of how to implement and manage change is left for a cursory overview in the form of questions posed by the authors at the end of these chapters. The reader is left with a growing sense of frustration at having yet again to answer these questions with seemingly little attempt on the part of the authors to offer meaningful solutions. Overall, the coverage of topics is broad and interesting, but there is no synthesis in the form of editorial comment, and this reduces the book to the format of yet another set of (albeit excellent) conference-type proceedings with contributions by different authors on different topics along a similar theme. It is very hard to read the book as a meaningful whole – dipping into various chapters at random is the only way to tackle it, and this again contributes to the sense of frustration at the lack of answers provided. Inevitably there are sections concerning electronic developments that are already out of date, and allowing the various authors to comment on the chapters authored by co-contributors would only have added to this problem with the inevitable time delays that this would cause, in spite of the benefits of electronic communication. Nevertheless, it would have been interesting, for example, to have seen the comments of academic practitioners such as Steele, who notes that 'future education will be customized rather than centralized' (p.157), or Walton and Edwards, who discuss the reality of staff stratification and diversification, on the suggestions regarding the training of future information workers espoused by Van Brakel. It seemed at times that such interaction and synergy could have contributed in a very meaningful way to some of the questions that the reader is left pondering.

There are some excellent opportunities for debate posed by various authors, however. Grygierczyk, for example comments that

> 'there are no handbooks, extensive check lists or limpid instructions that could assist you in building a digital library. This is quite understandable, in view of the increasingly rapid development of new technologies' (p.84),

and moots the idea of using pilot studies to control this dynamic environment. The dynamism of the digital library will itself propel the service forward, so that the 'building' will never be completed. This is in stark contrast to Batt, who asserts that it seems 'highly likely that within a timeframe of, say, 20 years, most public libraries will not look greatly different from today' (p.204).

Lancaster, Barker and Griffin offer excellent overviews of the current state of the art in their relevant sections, without offering much in the way of solutions for future challenges. Griffin's observation that

> 'library managers are in the middle of a technology flux which is being compared in scope and consequence to the invention of and use of the printing press' (p.142)

is reassuring in that it confirms what most practitioners already know, but his checklist of suggestions for library managers offer platitudes such as 'learn new vocabularies', or 'encourage interaction among staff', (p.143), all of which are already facts of life in the day to day practice of a modern information service. Klobas's discussion of knowledge management is also excellent in itself, though again offering few new approaches. Her observation that

> 'Librarians can take advantage of the opportunity provided by knowledge management by promoting themselves as knowledge managers and information analysts, unbounded by library walls' (p.61),

is an already often-heard tenet expounded at great length by many within the profession.

Overall, Walton and Edwards in their superb and clearly-stated report of the IMPEL2 project, Steele, and Van Brakel offer the most practical suggestions and models as guidelines for library and information managers in the next century, and the themes that seems to emerge most often in

coping with change, as could be expected, are flexibility, adaptability and vision.

Although it is perhaps inevitable that the contributors to the book are highly Eurocentric in outlook, given the nature of the technologies and projects that are being implemented and discussed, it would have been of great interest in a work entitled *Libraries for the new millenium* to see how these issues are being handled by the new world information specialists in the developing and emerging nations. Apart from this omission, the book covers a balanced range of well-presented topics on a highly topical theme, and offers many good definitions and debating points from which to begin a serious attempt at finding solutions. In looking forward to libraries for the new millenium, this work carries the subtitle 'implications for managers' – perhaps its sequel could be entitled 'solutions for managers'.

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