Book Reviews/Boekresensies

Entrepreneurial librarianship: the key to effective information services management

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Guy St. Clair has a distinguished background in management consulting and training; he is also editor for the *Information services management* series, published by Bowker-Saur. The titles in the series reflecting, as they do, aspects of customer service and Total Quality Management are indicative of the extent to which a pro-active approach to information service provision has become the tenor of the post-industrial age. In his introduction to the series, St. Clair outlines the problem that, whilst the focus of professional training for all professional information workers is on the concepts of service and organization of information, the acquisition of management skills is frequently neglected. The astute practitioner may gain from reflecting on experience and combining this with a planned approach to continuing professional education. It is in the spirit of supporting the latter endeavour that this series was conceived.

'All professional information workers' is a phrase on which it is worth dwelling. There was a time when we were deeply engaged in an earnest debate about whether there was a difference between the work of 'librarian' and the, then new, coinage of 'information scientist'. It was a debate marked, generally, by bad temper and obfuscation topped off with more than a suspicion by the bystanders that power and prestige were at the root, rather than any serious concern with customer service. The development of information technology has largely extinguished the discussion and St. Clair dampens the fire further by emphasizing that the intention of the series is to benefit all who care to consider themselves part of the community of information workers, be they librarians, information managers, information providers, information brokers, information specialists or information counsellors. The key consideration for all within this professional domain is the provision of an appropriate information service to defined groups, coupled with advice to users on how to make best use of the resources of the 'information age'.

That management should be considered a neglected area of professional education is, at first, a surprising thought. Management has, after all, long been considered one of the trivium of core courses which can be found included, in whole or in part, in the syllabi of all professional

programmes, textbooks and professional papers abound and yet practitioners often complain that they feel ill-equipped to cope with the managerial demands of their work. What can have gone wrong?

Perhaps one answer lies in a lack of clarity about the objectives of teaching a course in management. It is often asserted that no one becomes a manager by taking courses in management; there is some truth in this if one accepts that management is largely about doing rather than reflecting on what is done. The teaching of management has tended to concern itself with the theory of organizational structures, procedures and bureaucratic conventions whilst neglecting practical approaches to solving the day-to-day needs of the tyro professional. Even when courses have included sessions on working with groups, exercises and discussion of case studies, the sense of purpose has been largely missing or difficult to perceive. The frequent complaint by middle-managers is that their training in management during professional studies did little to equip them for the demands of the job.

One could respond to such complaints by suggesting that the purpose of management is implicit in the teaching and only becomes explicit once a practical need is encountered. That, however, is to miss the point. If management courses do not *inspire*, as well as instruct, there is little to commend them. A few handouts and some guided reading could be considered sufficient to provide a necessary background for most people: but this is not what the teaching of management should be.

Guy St. Clair captures an important quality which one would wish to see inculcated by professional education: a constant preoccupation with the quality of management in the belief that attention to this will produce services of quality. Implicit in this is the recognition that the maintenance of quality requires choice based on need and performance. It does not mean doing everything; it *does* mean choosing to use resources to provide those services for which there is a demonstrated need and for the provision of which there are resources available. Such choices are invariably hard and often uncomfortable, especially when a cherished aspect of service is shown not to be effective or no longer capable of satisfying a strongly-expressed need.

Entrepreneurial librarianship is, as St. Clair explains, about making such choices. It is about working in a world economy where the comfortable assertion that 'we're ok' is not sufficient justification for continued funding. The development of the information society has been forecast as either providing the salvation of the library and information services sector or ushering in its annihilators. It would be foolish to anticipate either outcome but there is a present sense of opportunity and urgency which is captured by St. Clair:

> '... we have no choice but to assume an entrepreneurial stance and to look to do something different, for merely doing better what is already being done will leave us a profession standing absolutely still' (p.xiv).

St. Clair argues not for displacement of the values, or characteristics, which have always been important to the profession: tenacity and high standards of service to customers remain as key parts of his thesis. He argues for the combination of these characteristics with those of the entrepreneur: vision, space to exercise initiative and a willingness to take risks, coupled with a strong desire for success. The combination can lead to successful management of information services.

The notion of entrepreneurship will raise the hackles of many people coupled, as it often is, with notions of reckless exploitation and a cavalier disregard for rights and responsibilities. St. Clair acknowledges the problem but suggests that the essence of the entrepreneurial approach is to go to the *customers* and determine from *them* how the information services might affect their *lives* (St. Clair's emphasis). Disregard for others is, then, not the peculiar province of the entrepreneur – it is a characteristic which can, unfortunately, be found in the most settled organizations and practiced by the most urbane of managers, to whom the epithet could scarcely otherwise be applied.

The book consists of thirteen chapters with an index and extensive bibliography covering both monographs and journal articles of the last twenty years. The focus of the book is on convincing the reader of the need to develop and use the entrepreneurial skills already nascent in the staff of an organization. Early on, in Chapter 2, what is often seen as the central problem of entrepreneurship – attitudes to risk taking – is tackled with Drucker's model being taken as a major theme. St. Clair uses several case studies of extant information services to illustrate attitudes to risk; he comments that many of the case studies reveal that the real risk resides in doing nothing.

Later chapters deal with the need to establish standards and an organizational culture supportive of entrepreneurship. The need to convince and counter critics is also well-expressed, though I found this to be rather less convincing than the rest of the book: it seems to suggest that the entrepreneur has adequate information about needs and standards and is having to cope with a few, somewhat obdurate, objectors whose arguments are not well-supported. Whilst this may sometimes be the case, wise managers should always regard their own assessments and understanding of need as being imperfect and should encourage staff and others to voice and share opinions.

The final chapter draws out an important thread: St. Clair comments that the writing of the book has been very much influenced by his own concepts – concepts which will not be shared or appreciated by all in the profession. He then explores a set of observations about professional progress which, even if one does not agree with the conclusions, should offer thinking readers scope to interrogate their own understanding.

This is a stimulating and exciting book, well-produced and with clear diagrams: it will be a dull person who reads it without being filled with a sense of enthusiasm and, perhaps, occasional indignation. If it makes us think it will have served its purpose well.

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