The Future of Consortia

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I am very pleased to be invited here to address this vital and, what seems to me, to be a thriving body of professionals working together for the benefit of their clients. I have long been interested in consortia and how they operate and if and how they add value to the organisations concerned. There is an emerging literature on this topic which I hope that you, as Gulliver leaders, will commit yourselves to.

Library consortia have, more or less, been an integral part of library organisations for as long as many of us can remember. They are a vital and continuing part of the horizons and working fields of library and information professionals. Consortia are clearly a vital part of our present operating

environment. Do we, however, understand why this is the case and what we should be doing about it?

The motivation for the existence of library consortia is, by and large, twofold. Firstly, librarians share a desire to work together, to work collegially, to share and to make information readily accessible. Secondly, librarians seek to achieve economies and savings for their organisations.

It is interesting to note that in many ways the public library sector and the special library sector are leading the academic sector as all libraries respond to the challenges of the digital environment. Eric Wainwright who would be know nto many of you is one of the most thoughtful librarians I have come across. University libraries in this country have placed much credence on the creation of 'Information Commons which are essentially gatherings of internet-enabled computers. This Eric regards, as hardly a "conceptual breakthrough". He talk about "the future of the academic library lies in how it well it meshes with a whole range of related university services. Libraries do not exist separate from their universities"[1] Both the public and special library sectors have faced this reality already, often painfully. The trend to 'learner-centered' and 'knowledge centered' approaches are clearly at the

[1] Eric Wainwright "Strategies for University Academic Information and Service delivery" Library Management IN PRESS

forefront of university planning, although not necessarily in the library. Clearly the environment we are all seeking to create is what Bennett calls the 'learning commons'[2] in which collaborative learning experiences are possible. I argue that each library sector, no matter how they are resourced or have responded in the past, needs to be able to add that learning or knowledge value for their clientele. The question is how to achieve this within one's own organisational environment, an amalgam or some new edifice.

The future of organisational relationships, particularly in the not-for-profit sector, is changing rapidly and making it even more important to understand the actual nature of consortia relationships. Current favoured work behaviour may or may not be the most productive behaviour for the future.

Changes in all working relationships require adaptation in style, re-alignment in structures and, often, the acquisition of new operating skills. It is readily recognised that many of these implications occur on a daily basis around us. It is also easily observed that the rate of the changes is occurring more swiftly than in the years previous. *The Future of Work* by John Malone[3] draws the conclusion that the nature of organisational relationships is moving into a mode which is characterised by collaborative styles of behaviour. He

[2] S. Bennett Libraries designed for learning Washington, DC., Council on Library and Information Resources. http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub122/contents.html
[3] John Malone The Future of Work. Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 2004.

highlights that these changes are being found to be necessary because of the demands of societal complexity and the realisation that not only are not all the answers known at the 'top' of an organisation but that we need to find ways to utilise the knowledge levels of the organisation to overcome the 'top-down' management strategies. Organisations are constantly restructuring in order to respond to one pressure or another. Restructuring occurs so frequently that new terms are required to describe this process. The term "re-alignment" is now used as a means of diverting attention to the new purpose. Researchers such as Malone talk about the capacity of organisations to make decisions locally with access to remote and, of course, local information. In this decentralisation is a vital direction. But decentralisation requires not only an empowering of local points of service but also real and fundamental re-examination of structures and delivered services. By this I mean that there is a real opportunity with the sharply decreasing communication cost structures to now adopt different organisational patterns. These patterns will result in some services being discarded from the current delivery suite and others being delivered in a collaborative fashion. Too often the spectre of industrial relations diverts organisations from fundamental re-examination of their service offerings. Industry in Australia has recognised that constant analyses of business activities are required if the whole organisation is to function effectively and profitably.[4] Libraries have been extremely reluctant to adopt

[4] The AFR 19 October, 2004: 17 reported that the major Australian banks are likely to outsource their

these shared services practices, but the move may be imposed on them through various government initiatives to achieve whole of government savings and services. There is a discernible move to make more formal arrangements for services which are not core functions of a library. The latest example of this is the company incorporation of the LCoNZ which is providing a shared integrated library system to a number of major libraries. [5] The public libraries in Auckland are also working their way toward a shared system but through a different organisational framework.

Malone critically notes that in any such process: "…as organisations become more decentralised, as knowledge work becomes increasingly important, taking advantage of people's true intelligence and creativity will become one of the most critical capabilities of successful businesses".[6] The skills of library and information people are core. Clearly librarians do not today have the skill sets needed to provide the whole range of pedagogic and technological support needed ….If these services are to be planned and delivered in an integrated way, then the staff involved should be located and organised sp

cheque processing operations as a joint venture. This strategic alliance is to cut the costs of back-office processing for a range of services. "Cheque processing costs…are expected to fall by more than 30% as a result of the joint venture."

[5] Sue Pharo "Crossroad, traffic lights or roundabouts? Library Management 25(3) 2004

[6] Op cit p. 153

that they have on-going interaction with each other."[7] This is, of course, if they are set in one organisational structure.

The imperative for librarians in the development of cooperative structures has never been profit. Often times, looking t allied disciplines can reveal something of the lessons we need to learn. Dealing with the not-for-profit sector leads us to literature[8] by Alexander[9] and the results of that study that successful management/leadership has five main characteristics:

1. systems thinking
2. vision-based leadership
3. collateral leadership
4. power-sharing
5. process-based leadership

Systems thinking concerns a rigorous departure from the thinking which would dominate the individual perspective. This is perhaps thinking of all the users of all the libraries rather than the users of individual libraries within consortium. Systems thinking, as evidenced by Evans, can also include creating knowledge databases of user need and what they might do with information. It may also include staying with the Big Picture as long as possible in order to avoid the simple fix, the obvious solution thus missing the future perspective which is what might be needed in three years time. Systems thinking can lead to very different conclusions.

[7] Eric Wainwright op cit.
[8] As quoted in G. Edward Evans "Management issues of consortia: part two" Library Management 23(6/7) 2002: 275-286
[9] J.A. Alexander "Leadership in collaborative community health partnerships" Nonprofit management and Leadership 12(2) 2001: 159-75

A soon to be published article[10] details many of the studies into cooperative and collaborative activity. Finnerty identifies that of all the joint library activities taking place in New Zealand less than 10% have a written policy and only 22% have a written contract. This degree of informality has all the hallmarks of cooperative activity rather than formal and committed collaborative activities. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents to this study wanted more joint activities. Given the gap between the desire for more of this activity and the lack of real commitment to such activity, it worth asking whether librarians really do know how to move these activities forward. There is a recognition we like working together and that there can be benefit but we do not want to cramp our institutional powers and responsibilities with serious and contracted arrangements.

The recent conference[11] drew the following list of opportunities and challenges for library consortia:

Opportunities for Consortia

- To motivate libraries to remain relevant to patrons and users
- To leverage off vendor experiences
- To influence government and funding bodies
- To purchase well
- To go beyond the sharing of resources and content

[10] Colleen Finnerty "An exploratory study of collaboration in New Zealand Tertiary Libraries" AARL 2005.

[11] Future of Consortia: a conference held by Caval Collaborative Solutions in conjunction with its 25th Anniversary Celebrations. Melbourne, Caval, October, 2003. http://www.caval.edu.au/about/consortia.html

- To create commercial ideas and concepts
- To develop library staff and information professionals
- To better understand users' needs and expectations
- To help libraries deliver their primary goal (for their parent organisations)
- To establish "guerrilla" consortia - specific needs in time

Challenges for Consortia

- Sustainability
- Chasing the very big deals
- Fracturing the market with too many consortia
- Duplication of effort and resource utilisation
- Keeping fresh - not fading nor lurching
- Maintaining flexibility
- Resources required for consortia operation
- Roles and responsibilities of consortia member organisations
- Volunteer nature of participation - sustainable?

Moving into this new world of management and resources sharing arrangements requires different skills and approaches. The *Future of Consortia* conference highlighted in the listed challenges the intense effort which librarians were putting into developing and maintaining consortia efforts while also being acutely aware of the un-sustainability of volunteers as the

only resource. However as Finnerty has evidenced, at least in New Zealand, librarians have not yet been willing to change structures and to effectively adopt different working and power relationships to each other in order to progress their united agendas. Librarians in other countries have been developing in different paths. This is especially in Asia where consortia opportunities are greatest but the conversion to reality has been mixed. Recent workshops in Bangkok, especially at Mahidol University library evidence the growing interest in this part of the world. They can take full advantage of the lessons of others.

This *Future of Consortia* conference highlighted a wide range of activities which one or another consortium currently or could conduct. Implicit in this was the lesson that consortia need to be in the future diverse in the range of services which they offer in order to ensure sustainability… financially and politically. The variety of services offered may not be available in each and every consortium but may be sourced and marketed from a variety of sources. They can in this way be marketed as if coming through individual consortia. Libraries have long been effectively in competition with each other, replicating all their services and facilities as if there were no other libraries in existence. Duplication is now becoming so very expensive. Structurally libraries are probably still not in a position to adopt different models other than to turn to consortia to provide that over-arching presence. Primarily the

conference saw that the consortia should be there in future to enhance, to shape and to assist libraries be closer to their clients.

The challenges are of a different order. There are four main areas of challenge: too narrow; too many; too demanding and, finally, not owned enough.

Much thinking has gone into establishing a role for consortia as buying clubs. This has been reflected in the growth of ICOLC and the various regional spin-off organisations. ICOLC, as the international collection of consortia has been an excellent ground for the exchange of ideas and the development of the 'Big Deal' concept. Equally, it is now the providing the genesis of thinking involving collection development policies of particular digital titles for each community rather than a whole corpus of publisher materials or sets of materials. All this discussion and practice is important for libraries as they seek ways to find "meaningful change to funding models- as opposed to simply reshuffling the funding deck". [12] The Futures clearly involve helping libraries achieve better purchasing muscle and funding strength. Many of the consortia members in this country are in existence to establish content deals. If they are not there solely for this purpose, then much of their effort and

[12] Jeffrey Gatten and Tom Sanville "An orderly retreat from the Big Deal: is it possible for consortia" D-Lib Magazine October 2004:1. www.dlib.org/dlib/october04/gatten

interest goes in this direction. An Australian-ICOLC needs to encourage a wider set of services.

With the pressure libraries are experiencing in their budgets they are openly recognising they belong to too many consortia. These same libraries must now decide between those which they can afford to support and those for which they must forego their membership. Libraries have long been accused of accreting services and not discarding those which are less relevant. Consortia cannot afford this luxury − they must remain fresh, relevant, and even ahead of libraries. Planning to be where libraries want them to be before even the libraries themselves have articulated that need is crucially important, even if enormously difficult, for consortia. Too many consortia do not achieve this, and at the same time libraries support them all…albeit for slightly different reasons.

The Future of Consortia conference was critically concerned that most consortia are volunteer driven and sustained. Great things are achieved through enthusiasm, skill and timing. These things are achieved while performing the day-job. This is not a sustainable strategy for two reasons. Firstly, the volunteers become worn-out and burnt-out. It is difficult to move the enterprise on at that point and it falters. The second sustainability issue is pricing. The free labour and expertise of the volunteers veils the real costs. This obfuscation of real costs affects the sustainability of the consortia, it

denies library administrators the chance to realise the real costs of information access and delivery, and it removes the immediate imperative to engage in real re-structuring in the member libraries. It also denies librarians to argue the real costs of information and how they are best placed to be able to deliver value services.

The four main strategic emphases which the *Future of consortia workshop*[13] saw for the future were:

- Content management that includes access, new products, timeliness and efficiency;
- Market relevance which creates and anticipates demand and in the process creates an identity for those who are members of the consortium;
- Innovative partnerships including those beyond the boundaries of libraries; and
- Capability which will include governance, funding and staffing for the long-term and active support of their library members.

The issues raised in this paper are clearly complex addressing as they do knowledge management, falling communication costs, organisational structural responses, and the place and skill of the individual professional. If

[13] *Future of Consortia* Workshop. Caval Collaborative Solutions, Melbourne, Australia. August 2004.

neglected they will be huge opportunities lost, but grasped they will offer significant new skills and roles in the knowledge and information economies.

Conclusion

The consortium structure of organisational support is a good and supporting one for libraries. It has served libraries well. It will however need to change to remain relevant and ahead of library needs. A consortium is a supporting structure always and needs to be cost effective while anticipating future, sometimes unseen library need. The near future will see a contraction in the number of consortia, a broadening of the services offered by the consortia, more inter-connections between the consortia and a trend toward a formalisation of their structures in order to take the pressure off the range of volunteers. With these developments there will need to be further skill development on the part of librarians and the consortia staffs to learn how to work this new environment most effectively. Librarians at all levels will need to develop new skills. Middle-management will need to be able to work effectively across different organisational structures while achieving results. Senior managers will have to learn new power relationships, to be able to negotiate for results where they do not have total control. A fundamental change of thinking and management style is inherent in all of this. The device of a consortium as a management device will, in my view, become more and

more useful and relevant to libraries but will be, at the same time, different requiring different relationships and service provision. We, as a profession, have the interest and the capability to meet these challenges, to design these extended structures to meet our and our neighbours need and to lead our organisations to better and more effective practice.

Thank you.