EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE SPECIAL LIBRARIES

Paper produced by the ALIA Special Libraries Working Group and AGLIN Think Tank July 2021 Information resource for ALIA Members and selected stakeholders.

Background

The ALIA Special Libraries Working Group and AGLIN Think Tank met at ALIA House in Canberra and online, on 29 July 2021. It involved 11 library and information professionals working at all three levels of government, in government, agency, law, health and parliamentary special libraries.

The purpose of the discussion was to tackle the challenging subject of shared library services. Often viewed as a threat, the group met to explore the pros and cons, the barriers and opportunities, and to produce a paper setting out the considerations which should be factored into any proposal for this way of working. This paper is intended to inform ALIA Members and selected stakeholders rather than for wider dissemination although it is publicly available on the ALIA website.

Between the 11 participants, their combined years as library and information professionals totalled more than 250 – evidence of the expertise in the room. Participants were able to speak to broad, recent and current experiences of solo library operations, collaborative service provision, shared IT, joint use libraries and consortium purchasing.

Introduction

From small libraries run by one or two qualified librarians through to sizeable library and information services employing a team of professionals, special libraries are constantly evolving to meet the changing needs of their users. Special libraries have readily introduced new technologies and new ways of working to deliver greater efficiency and effectiveness. This drive for improvement comes from a positive base.

In government circles particularly, new ways of working can focus on a shared service approach which is less about looking for better outcomes and more about political expediency. The term 'shared services' is a loaded one and can form a barrier to a deeper discussion about useful collaboration. Shared services can be code for cost cutting, staff reductions, or indicate an outsourcing mindset rather than a genuine desire to take advantage of real synergies. Instead, we talk about a networked or cluster model.

- A networked model in this paper is a collaboration of like-minded library managers working together to make their individual services more efficient and effective by sharing some functions and resources, while remaining separate.
- A cluster model is where a set of small libraries is merged into one unit, providing services to a number of client entities.

This paper sets out the position for special libraries in relation to networked or cluster models and offers factors for consideration by management and the library team if this approach is tabled within the organisation.

The Think Tank discussion and this paper were prompted by further closures in government libraries and reductions in special library budgets. There is no doubt that this is a challenging time and we need to ensure that where services are combined in some way in order to achieve efficiencies, there is a clear, positive and deliverable outcome.

Collaborative working already exists for special libraries, the most successful and high profile national examples being the National Library of Australia's Trove discovery platform for digitised collections and Libraries Australia, enabling interlibrary lending. At a state and territory level, there are also the examples such as Queensland's GRAIL (Government Research and Information Library), the Victorian Government Library Service and The Law Library of Victoria. There have also been examples where shared services have been imposed and have not been successful, to the detriment of library users.

Considerations

The right partners

There have been discussions and some attempts to bring together different types of libraries to gain benefits from a networked model, for example special libraries with a university library or health libraries with public libraries. Most have either not progressed or been abandoned after a trial period. In the school sector, there are joint use school and community libraries which carry their own challenges around serving two very different audiences in a single space.

By contrast, a number of similar libraries sharing elements they would struggle to afford independently can work well. One example of this is Unilinc, which operated on a fee for service basis for member libraries in Sydney, working on the same IT platform, sharing technical support and some collection functions.

Service to the end user

The best but least affordable cluster model is when back-office processes such as administration, technology and procurement are brought together in a central hub while other library and information professionals remained embedded throughout the organisation, close to executives, researchers and policymakers. This model can provide economies of scale while preserving the specialist knowledge and subject focus which ensures the best possible service. It is especially suited to organisations that undertake a significant quantity of research.

On paper, it is easy to document a process for library and information professionals in a central hub to remain connected to their clients through regular meetings, for example. In practice, taking library and information professionals out of the team environment removes the opportunity for staff to spot knowledge gaps as they occur, to get ahead of information needs, become subject matter experts, provide tailored alerts to the latest research findings, and to remind people about the resources that can be accessed through the library rather than buying a new subscription at not-insignificant cost to the organisation.

Skilled and sustainable workforce

Most special libraries run lean; staffed by a small number of library and information professionals with little time allocated for training and professional development. In a sector which has experienced enormous change, not least as a result of digital disruption, ongoing learning is essential if staff are to keep up to date with generic library and information topics, hone their specialist subject knowledge, and be able to offer the best, most pro-active service to their clients.

A cluster model which brings together several small teams can create a window of opportunity for training and professional development, in terms of time, expertise and affordability. There is the increased likelihood of coaching and mentoring. It can also be configured in such a way as to provide the potential for career development and promotion – something which is hard to achieve in a very small standalone team.

Being part of a small team means that library and information professionals need to be across all the skills required. This can make for a more varied and fulfilling role rather than being boxed into a single back-office task, for example cataloguing, as part of a combined team.

Economies of scale

While open access could, in the longer term, lead to free access to much of the content which is currently behind a publisher paywall, at present consortium purchasing is an attractive concept if it offers economies of scale and a better end price for all parties.

Again, while this looks good on paper, there are a number of factors to consider.

- Most small libraries, even when they combine their budgets, have little power to negotiate discounts with global publishing companies whose main business is with universities. Library teams are good at negotiating access, contingent liabilities and other contract features, but anticipated savings may be minimal or non-existent.

- Consortium purchasing comes with additional costs in terms of partner consultation and governance. There has to be a management structure for the consortium. The underpinning agreement must be negotiated and there will need to be ongoing consultation and decision-making, requiring regular meetings and formal communication channels. There may also need to be a degree of IT reconciliation to ensure access through the partner platforms. This additional workload may well outweigh any possible saving.

- There is often a power imbalance between smaller and larger members of the consortium. This can mean smaller members having to make compromises about the items available for their collection, for example. It can also lead to larger members feeling that they are subsidising others.

- In some circumstances, a 'like-with-like' approach will be beneficial, with special libraries requiring similar resources coming together to negotiate a better deal. However, publishers' packages are geared to university libraries (as noted above) and require special libraries to buy a bundle of titles across a range of subjects, to achieve

the best price for a small proportion of the total. Special libraries look inefficient when much of their catalogue is made up of irrelevant materials and there could be an opportunity for libraries within an overarching organisation to work together to buy one bundle and distribute it across several subject areas.

- Joining a consortium inevitably means ceding some control. This can lead to problems such as valued subscriptions being cancelled or delays caused by other partners' approval processes.

- Stepping into a consortium is a long-term commitment. It is hard to untangle arrangements with providers, including ongoing access to materials previously subscribed to by the consortium.

There are models in the library sector for this kind of arrangement. Council of Australian University Librarians and National and State Libraries Australasia have successful consortium purchasing arrangements, as do health libraries within states and territories.

Many masters

Where a single library service serves a number of departments, typically in a government setting, it must work even harder to justify its value and it will need the capacity to respond to different reporting requirements. Some clients may require complex analysis of the service, others a simple 'cost per request'.

As with consortium purchasing, a cluster model will require a formal agreement and an added layer of consultation and governance. There will need to be clarity about the expectations of different clients, justification for the fees charged to each organisation, service level agreements and return on investment reports.

In this model there will inevitably be a focus on more general resources to cover the needs of all, rather than specialist resources responding to the needs of the few. Staff will need a broad knowledge of all the subject areas covered instead of developing a deep expertise in the subject areas of a single department.

Visibility and relationships

There is a strong sense of ownership of a library within an organisation which is diluted when a library service is provided remotely. It is easier to keep resources top of mind and carry out information-related training for other staff when the library is embedded in the organisation.

Marketing a centralised service requires more library staff time providing outreach services, visiting different locations, which impacts on the perceived cost saving of bringing library staff together in a central hub.

Government shared service models can often focus on the transactional nature of the work and ignore the value of relationships between library staff and library users. Where library staff understand and are involved in the work of the team, they can greatly enhance outputs by providing data which might otherwise have remained undiscovered.

Strength and sustainability

Machinery of government changes (MoG) disrupt government library and information services. Licences for published materials are negotiated on an annual basis but MoGs can occur at any time of year, changing the collection requirements of a reconfigured department.

While this is an argument in favour of a fully shared model for the whole of government, it adds a further disadvantage for cluster models, where there is one library service for several departments. A department may disappear overnight and with it, the proportion of funding from that partner in the cluster. This will mean renegotiating the original agreement with the remaining partners causing disruption and potentially resulting in an increased funding request.

Security and IT

In some areas of government and other organisations there are significant issues around security of information. This not only affects areas of national security and confidential research in government, but also relates to industrial espionage. The information provided by library staff to their clients is often a clue to the research and development activities of private companies.

For all organisations, there is the issue of security of IT platforms. Sharing electronic resources through a networked or cluster model requires ease of access across different systems, the ability to accommodate publisher Digital Rights Management (DRM) requirements and relies on each platform having compatible firewalls.

Summary

The Think Tank agreed that while networked and cluster models had positive advantages conceptually, in the real world there were significant factors which could reduce or eradicate theoretical benefits. Each situation will be different and will require a nuanced approach and it is hoped this paper will provide perspectives to guide any such discussions.