

ASpB Best Paper Award

The Best Paper Award of the *German Special Library Association* (ASpB e.V.) and *EBSCO Information Systems, Lange & Springer*, was presented for the first time at the 28th Workshop and Training Conference "Special Libraries Today - Competition and Cooperation". The Best Paper Award is endowed with prize money of DM 1000. The Special Libraries Association offers this prize as encouragement for professionally presented lectures and informative papers in the German library scene.

Attendees at the conference were asked to choose the best paper according to predefined criteria such as successful design, attractive style of presentation and innovative orientation. The winners of this year's award are Barbara Burghardt and Silvia Grunwald, owners of the Liber@ction company (Hanover and Munich), whose paper entitled "From librarian to information manager - Two years of experience as independent businesswomen" was enthusiastically received by most of the attendees. These committed and motivated information professionals presented an informative paper on a field of work rather unfamiliar to special librarians.

FROM LIBRARIAN TO INFORMATION MANAGER - TWO YEARS OF EXPERIENCE AS INDEPENDENT BUSINESSWOMEN¹

By Barbara Burghardt and Silvia Grunwald

Abstract: The presentation "From librarian to information manager - Two years of experience as independent businesswomen" gives an insight into the working environment of freelance librarians.

Attention is focused on the field of activities and cooperation with customers. The most important aspects are attracting customers, the aims of the projects and negotiations. Previous experience and future challenges will also be presented.

The question is then finally discussed from the standpoint of a freelance librarian of how studies of librarianship at a university for applied science prepare students for the different facets and new fields of employment in the information age.

1. Company Portrait

The Liber@ction company was founded in 1998 by Barbara Burghardt and Silvia Grunwald, graduates in librarianship from Hanover University of Applied Sciences.

In addition to the fields of library organization and web design, the company's range of services has been expanded during its first two years of existence to

¹ Paper presented at the German Special Libraries Association, AspB, bi-annual conference March 6 -9, 2001 in Hannover, Germany: winner of Best Paper Award

include office organization and also the implementation of extensive literature searches.

In *web design*, the major priority has been shifted from the creation of internet sites to the updating and maintenance of existing presentations.

In *office organization*, procedures and services are worked out together with the customer for designing his workplaces. This includes both practical procedures such as establishing systems for maintaining order and filing systems, as well as advice on how existing systems can be more effectively used or improved in order to achieve the greatest possible efficiency of existing operations.

Literature searches are performed in the field of library catalogues (CD-ROM, card catalogues, online searches), the internet and, if required, also in commercial databases. If desired, the relevant literature can additionally be procured.

The main emphasis in these freelance activities is placed on *library organization*, which is subdivided into the two fields of retroconversion and library support. In those projects which have already been completed, the conversion of card catalogues was first performed and the associated revision of the holdings, after completion of which ongoing library support was undertaken on an hourly basis to deal with the daily business arising in a library. The libraries involved have holdings ranging from about 5000 to 15000 units.

2. Customer Acquisition

2.1 Target group

It is difficult to determine a precise target group since potential customers include all those who wish to access information professionally or privately.

As far as customer acquisition is concerned, this means that both those involved in scientific work as well as university institutes and also small and medium-sized enterprises and large concerns will be addressed. Enquiries have already been received from private individuals with a view to updating their libraries or cataloguing a literary estate.

2.2 Publicity

The term "information management" has many meanings and is therefore frequently not clearly defined for the customer. Consideration must be given to this fact in publicity for the product or service. The job profile of a librarian as an independent entrepreneur can be communicated most effectively to the customer in a personal conversation on the spot. This can arouse interest in the field of activity

and show the prospective customer what could be changed for the better by implementing a project.

It is important to make the planning and structure of any project transparent to the customers since this will involve costs for them and they will initially react in a rather reserved manner. If the foreseeable improvement in their daily work is made clear to the interested parties then this may dispel any reservations they may have about a possibly time-consuming and cost-intensive order.

Nevertheless, the most important and effective publicity is a personal recommendation from satisfied customers.

3. Project Framework

3.1 Objectives

In project implementation, clearly formulated goals are indispensable both for individual phases and also for the project as a whole. They serve to orient and monitor the work currently in progress or already performed.

Before the objectives can be laid down, the actual situation must be analysed: where are the difficulties at the present point in time, why has the project been initiated and where should the innovations lead?

The goal of the two librarians, irrespective of the projects in hand, is that the customer can work permanently and independently with the product supplied, whether this be a database, the restructuring of a library or a new office filing system.

3.2 Negotiations

If cooperation has been decided upon, an intensive discussion is held with the customer, in which the customer's wishes are clearly articulated and compared with the realization of these wishes by the specialist.

In this connection, a possible solution is developed for the customer including the desired elements for future use; at the same time, attention must be paid that the project has a fixed time and financial framework.

In addition to specialized questions, within the framework of these discussions future working conditions are also clarified. Smooth handling of the project requires well equipped workplaces with computers and working facilities and access to the premises outside the institution's opening hours is also meaningful.

4. Cooperation

4.1 Project leader

An important prerequisite for the smooth handling of all organizational and specialist questions is the appointment of a project leader by the customer. The project leader serves as a link or translator between the staff of the institution/company and the librarians. Although cooperation with all members of staff is indispensable (see "Staff motivation") nevertheless it has proved useful to have a contact who is responsible for the project and interested in its success. Positive and also negative feedback can thus be exchanged more effectively and any possible difficulties rapidly removed.

4.2 Staff motivation

Since the project is implemented with the aim of making work within the institution easier it is important that for the realization of the project that the staff's interest should be aroused since they will be the future users. On the one hand, including the staff reflects a broad spectrum of opinion concerning the expectations associated with the project and, on the other hand, different ideas will be gathered which may be useful for the project.

Innovations are presented to the staff at regular workshops in order to arouse their interest in the project and to keep them informed about the stages of the commission.

5. University Course and Professional Experience

The following points refer to a course of university studies from winter 1994 to summer 1998 and are intended to reflect the extent to which this course provides a suitable preparation for the requirements of work as a freelance librarian/information specialist.

5.1 Economic and legal aspects

The lectures on business administration provided insights into processes such as workplace description or handling budgetary control lists, i.e. the work undertaken by librarians as employees in large libraries.

Less attention was paid to economic aspects to be considered in business enterprises such as quality assurance, project management or budgeting.

Law lectures considered, for example, the structure of the public budget and the basic principles of the legal system as well as of EU law. Alternative classes on

legal issues of relevance to business administration would be a meaningful addition.

Freelance work is undoubtedly only one example of the later requirements of a library profession, nevertheless in future the librarian in the private sector will increasingly take on the function of an information manager so that an extension of the above-mentioned aspects within the course of studies should be discussed.

5.2 Social skills

The extent to which a course of studies should undertake to impart social skills is undoubtedly a question of principle, nevertheless experience has shown that the aspects discussed in the following - not only in dealing with customers but also among colleagues - are of great significance.

a) Conflict management

Whether in large libraries or in a one-person library; there are always colleagues and superiors. Conflicts are unavoidable - the important thing is to identify these conflicts and solve them. Awareness of the possibility of holding discussions or the existence of a project group may already simplify relations between the different attachment groups.

b) Empathy

It is often very difficult for outsiders to reconstruct your own thoughts. It is therefore important that you should not regard your own way of thinking as obvious but you should rather learn to understand and translate other people's thought structures and needs.

A special aspect in this connection is the information discussion. The means of conducting such discussions were dealt with during the university studies, especially in the "Communications" course: the lessons learnt there are of assistance in linking one's own way of thinking as a librarian with the customers' expert knowledge in conversations with them.

c) Job profile

Whether we like it or not, the term "librarian" continues to evoke an antiquated job profile.

It would be helpful to already tackle this problem during one's university studies and to look for means of counteracting this image. A starting point could be the consideration of how the curriculum and professional activities could be described possibly leading to a change in the name of the course and qualification.

5.3 Expertise

The university studies provided the specialist equipment for taking the plunge into freelance work or an information specialist's field of work: ranging from solid training in fields such as cataloguing and performing searches through the provision of basic library knowledge such as signature systems, basic principles of acquisition or interlibrary loans up to insights into special areas such as music libraries, user research or the structure of the library system in Germany.

Placements and jobs as student assistants also proved to have a very positive effect so that insights could be obtained into different library operations meaning that from the very start it was possible to approach freelance activities and the world of work in a realistic manner.

Know-how obtained in the various database systems, classification systems or working procedures meant that from the start comprehensive and detailed advice could be offered to the customers.

The library landscape is at present experiencing a period of change as is the curriculum of the university course. It is to be hoped that the job profile of the librarian, information specialist or information manager will develop in such a direction that due to its major contribution in coping with the flood of information the profession will maintain its considerable reputation in the information world!

Dipl.-Bibl. Barbara Burghardt
Bethlehemstr. 16
30451 Hannover
Germany
e-mail: barbara.burghardt@t-online.de
www.liberaction.de

Dipl.-Bibl. Silvia Grunwald
Wirtstr. 26
81539 München
Germany
e-mail: silvia.grunwaldt@t-online.de
www.liberaction.de