



Transportation's Information Crisis

Jerry Baldwin, Former Library Director, Minnesota Department of Transportation Library

"Why we need to preserve the profession's memory" is the title chosen by former AASHTO executive director, Francis Francois, for a presentation at this year's annual meeting of the Transportation Research Board.

In short, his answer is that without such a memory the profession lacks an "important tool for understanding issues and making decisions." It will lose the information needed to select "actions to address future issues affecting transportation," he said. Mr. Francois also asked the question, "Where does a professional turn to find the... information for which he or she has a need?" and answered, "A first answer to this question would be a good transportation library." He went on to say "There are, in fact, some of these libraries in existence, but not as many as there used to be... In recent years we have seen a number of industrial libraries maintained by private sector entities closed and their contents discarded. The same has occurred in some public agencies, especially where budget cuts have occurred."

A more graphic picture of this problem was painted by Lee H. Rogers at an earlier TRB annual meeting in a presentation titled "Have we lost the message before gaining the knowledge?" In his paper he claimed "In our haste at development, markets, and change we may be losing the underpinning of our profession... a growing trend has developed in U.S. government agencies and private firms to disband and scale down comprehensive professional libraries... Consulting firms and planning agencies have purged their offices of book, reports and documents... In many U.S. government agencies, the security procedures and remote locations of libraries and resource centers have discouraged professional use of such resources. With the decline of outside users, such resources are ultimately considered by agency management to be redundant and subject to discard."

In a section of his paper labeled "Examples of myopic actions," he states "From the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development to the World Bank to the U.S. Agency for International Development to the U.S. Department of Transportation and U.S. Department of Commerce, reports, evaluations and studies within transportation have frequently been dumped within a decade of their release... [thereby] losing "valid professional resources for measurements of success and evaluation of evolving transportation needs... Trade organizations evolved from public orientation for their industry to lobbying groups [resulting in] disbanding libraries and resource departments as a budgetary consideration."

He continues, "The real issue is not what has already been lost but to raise professional concern about what can be done to safeguard the materials that remain. Once books and physical materials are discarded they cannot be retrieved. One of the current concerns is the loss of about 60 percent of the floor space of the [U.S.] DOT library."

Getting back to Mr. Francois' presentation, he suggested that the information needed to provide the profession's memory "will be there only if some transportation professional has preserved it."

The only organized group of transportation professionals actively involved in the systematic development and preservation of the profession's collective memory is transportation librarians. Mr. Francois recognized the importance of these professionals by stating "There are some state departments of transportation that have established libraries, some of which have better collections and larger staffing than others. [I]t is growing more difficult to maintain these facilities because of cost, especially when the agency management and the jurisdiction's elected officials are not aware of the importance of the collection... "

This fixation on the highly visible and readily tallied costs of transportation libraries and lack of knowledge of their difficult to measure benefits and savings lies at the root of the problems noted in the presentations by Francois and Rogers. It is easy for managers to see the considerable amount of space occupied by a well-stocked, well-staffed library. It is difficult to determine the space saved throughout an organization by the corresponding reduction in the need for small collections of information resources scattered among dozens of offices and departments. It is easy to calculate the total dollars invested in library staffing and purchases. It is difficult to calculate the costs of hundreds or even thousands of employees attempting to find information without professional assistance. Enormous amounts of staff time can be wasted searching the Internet, travelling to remote libraries, and calling colleagues in often futile attempts to locate, borrow or purchase articles, reports, magazines and books needed to perform needed research, carry out daily work assignments or investigate innovative practices.

Libraries have costs, but ultimately libraries save an organization money. More importantly, libraries and librarians add considerable value to an organization and its information resources. A library reduces an organization's overall space needs and the costs of acquiring information resources by providing a centralized collection of materials that can be shared throughout the organization. Most importantly, librarians enhance the value of every employee. Librarians are educated and experienced in the skills and expertise needed to identify, locate and acquire information and information resources as efficiently and inexpensively as possible. An organization that takes advantage of these skills frees up the time of its other staff that would otherwise be spent searching for and acquiring information. This time allows them to use their skills and expertise to study and analyze the information and apply it in improving the organization's activities and decision-making.

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Francois asked another question as to whether the transportation profession needed to increase its efforts in relation to library and information services. His answer - "I think the answer is clearly, yes. If we do not, then much of the information will be lost or forgotten. And the transportation profession will lose an important tool for improving the quality of their work."

Published 2002