



Librarians and the "The Skills Imperative"

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I thought the following excerpts from "The Skills Imperative: Talent and U.S. Competitiveness" in Issues in Science and Technology - Online, Fall 2001 (http://www.nap.edu/issues/18.1/p_van_opstal.html) and my comments about them might be useful in the current discussions (bolding for emphasis is mine):

"...access to quality education and **lifelong learning opportunities must be increased for everyone.**"

The role of the library in lifelong learning is generally little understood by managers and seldom discussed outside library circles. Libraries are the leading provider of lifelong learning. Although this role is not widely recognized, it is recognized and supported by many true leaders in society. Recognition of this role was behind Andrew Carnegie's investing the lion's share of his fortune in building public libraries in virtually every city of any size in the United States in the early part of the last century. It is also behind the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's current investment of several hundred million dollars in grants to school and public libraries.

Libraries are the lifeblood for independent research and self-initiated, self-directed education and training, as reflected in Carl Sagan's comment, "I think the health of our civilization, the depth of our awareness about the underpinnings of our culture and our concern for the future can all be tested by how well we support our libraries." Lifelong learning using library resources and networks begins where formal classroom education and training leave off. Libraries are, in fact, the primary source of learning and information for those who perform such education and training, or as I frequently put it, "where they experts go, when they need to know."

"...[in the nineties] to an unprecedented degree, intellectual capital drove economic prosperity. Machines were the chief capital asset in the Industrial Age, and workers, mostly low-skilled, were fungible. In the Information Age, precisely the opposite is true. **The key competitive asset is human capital, and it cannot be separated from the workers who possess it.**"

The failure of management to fully understand the preceding is what has led to the closing of libraries based on the concept of "it's all on the Internet." Knowledge and skills in information identification and organization is the human capital librarians provide. The much talked about levels of frustration encountered by individuals attempting to use Internet search engines demonstrates how that human capital cannot be separated from librarians who have invested years of education and experience in understanding information production and information organization and in honing search skills.

"Our competitiveness rests, as Carnevale and Rose noted in *The New Office Economy*, on "**value-added quality, variety, customization, convenience, customer service, and continuous innovation.**"

The listed attributes providing the underpinning for competitiveness are provided by librarians and library staff.

Value-added quality

Mn/DOT produces and acquires considerable numbers of information resources.

Librarians and other library staff add value to these resources by:

- Creating web-based applications that provide employees with desktop access to electronic resources
- Organizing print and audio-visual resources so that resources can be efficiently located when needed
- Providing systems and services for sharing resources to minimize duplication and costs of acquiring and maintaining resources
- Identifying, cataloging, and preserving important resources to ensure future access to their information content

Variety and customization

These attributes are what make libraries the leading provider of lifelong learning. Other avenues of education and training require considerable preparation and are limited to topics with an audience of sufficient size to warrant the work involved

in identifying qualified instructors, developing curricula, teaching plans, instructional materials and presentations. They also require scheduling, registration and the commitment of specified times which might not be most convenient for the learner.

Learning through the use of library resources and networks is provided on any topic needed by the individual learner. It is tailored to the learner's background, current level of understanding and current needs. The librarian and the learner negotiate exactly what resources are needed and the time available and/or required to meet the learning need.

Convenience

Virtually all libraries strive to make use of library resources and networks as convenient as possible. All but the smallest of public and academic libraries and most special libraries do so through heavy use of the Web to provide access to resources on a 24/365 basis.

Customer service

While this is not the strong suit of large research and academic libraries, customer service is the hallmark of special libraries, including Mn/DOT Library. Libraries in corporate and agency settings that devote their primary efforts to organizing resources rather than serving customers are generally short-lived. The hundreds of thank you notes and customer testimonials received by Mn/DOT Library attest to our placing emphasis on customer service.

Continuous innovation

Special libraries contribute to an organization's efforts to innovate by providing staff convenient access to the information on the latest development in their respective disciplines on a continuous basis. These services fill the gaps between the intermittent learning opportunities offered by conferences and seminars. In addition, special libraries, due to limited staffing and resources, are among the most innovative of organizations and Mn/DOT Library is considered among the most innovative in an innovative field. Examples include:

- 1974 - Among the earliest libraries adopting the use of online database searching
- 1977 - Began using ARPANET, forerunner of the Internet for e-mail communications
- 1983 - Acquired one of the first six authorized PCs in Mn/DOT and within one month had automated circulation system up and running
- 1989 - Began using CD-ROM-based databases and publications
- 1991 - Began using the Internet and Gopher services for accessing information
- 1994 - Among the first few offices within Mn/DOT creating websites to improve customer service
- 1995 - First MN state agency library to barcode resources for inventory and circulation control
- 1996 - Created dial-in services to enhance library access for city and county engineers
- 1996 - First Mn/DOT office to use networked CD-ROM servers to improve access to information resources
- 1998 - Instituted In-depth Research and Information Service
- 2001 - Collaborated with National Transportation Library to begin work towards first-ever regional network of transportation libraries

"Department of Labor studies find that a 1 percent increase in worker skills has the same effect on output as a 1 percent increase in the number of hours worked. Hence, **the ability to raise the skills and education of every worker... is an economic requirement for future growth--and an urgent one,**

Libraries are the leading providers of lifelong learning and have the potential to meet the individual learning needs of every worker. They cannot reach this potential if managers continue to view libraries as nonessential luxuries whose primary purpose is to store old books. Especially in the field of transportation with its historical benign neglect, at best, of its information resources and services, increased investment in libraries and library networks is essential to provide workers with increased skills and to drive needed innovation.