Editorial

A recent article suggested that with software developments in searching software making it easier for end-users to search systems effectively without assistance, the position of information intermediary is under threat and these individuals would be well advised to develop other skills [1]. Writing, layout and design and oral presentation, making full use of available audiovisual facilities were some of the skills suggested by the author. "The library schools should be teaching all of this now-including editing and voice projection" he concluded.

This article throws up two questions for consideration. The first one concerns the thesis of the article. Is the author correct to say that intermediaries will be no longer required? The demise of the intermediary has been argued by a number of authors over the years but it is only relatively recently that online systems (e.g., OCLC FirstSearch) have been specifically developed to be used by end-users. Intermediaries have prospered and thrived during the 1980s, although quite obviously CD-ROM systems, with their emphasis on end-user searching, have had an effect upon the situation. The other question worth considering concerns not the thesis of Owen as such but the whole issue of the views of practitioners on course curricula. Are the views of those outside the educational sphere worth considering? After all many (although certainly not all) who expound about library/information schools and what they should teach (and there have been many over the years!) may know little about the academic context and the constraints and pressures brought to bear by parent institutions, accrediting bodies, etc.

It would be foolish, though, to discard entirely the views of practitioners, even if they do not fully understand educational contexts, not least for the fact that they are the potential employers of graduates. That the views of practitioners are recognised as having value is well demonstrated by their presence on faculty boards, accreditation committees, etc.

Practitioners are often in the vanguard of developments and perhaps no more so than in developments concerned with computers and automation. Developments in this area of activity have been rapid and show every sign of continuing this way. Library/information faculty face major problems in keeping abreast of these developments and ensuring that this knowledge is passed onto their students. Students who follow courses which have not kept abreast of developments will face real difficulties in finding employment if they are not familiar with modern software/hardware and have proven ability to use it effectively. As libraries, for example, start to move their management systems to open systems with client-server software, etc., those seeking employment as systems librarians will not be successful if their knowledge is limited to the now outmoded proprietary

systems.

The problem, though, is how to keep up to data with rapidly altering fields of knowledge. The published literature inevitably lags behind the developments so other avenues need to be followed. Research and consultancy are well recognised ways of developing knowledge. Secondment and sabbaticals are other ways of becoming involved. Those in institutions implementing new systems can and should endeavour to become involved with procurement committees. The problem, though, that many faculty face is that there are very strong pressures on individuals to run more and more courses (to generate revenue) and allowing staff time away from the institution as with secondment, for example, means output for the parent institution for the period of secondment is nil or at least rather less than when an individual is in post. The hoped-for benefits of a period of secondment will take some time to be realised and require thinking and measurement over a longer period than one year. It is not easy to convince administrators that investments take a while to reach maturity but the arguments need to be made. If they are not, many courses run the risk of becoming largely irrelevant to the developments in the world outside.

References

[1] Tim Owen, Rewriting the rulebook, *Information world review* 87: 9–10 (1993).

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