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In the beginning

Information management has been the focus of my career from the start. As a chemist nearing the end of PhD research, I'd already determined to work in industry. Sadly in 1970, the graduate milk round told me that female graduates were not welcome!! "We don't employ them"!! By chance I met a Unilever colour chemist who had moved from the laboratory bench into information science. Staying connected to chemistry whilst providing a service really appealed and I identified the pharmaceutical sector as a worthwhile and exciting home. Luckily information departments were expanding and several offers ensued. My first job with Wellcome Research Laboratories more than lived up to hopes and expectations.

It's difficult to imagine a world where computers were largely being used for financial data management. However, information professionals were at the forefront of identifying the potential of IT for information management, as we see with social media, text mining and visualisation today. I spent my first couple of years coding chemical structures for input into Wellcome's first database of its own research output. Neither the absence of direct connections to a main frame nor the need to send searches to another site via paper forms hindered us from supporting medicinal chemists to identify chemical structures that just might confer biological activity. The next stage was to computerise biological data enabling Wellcome to identify links between structure and activity. And then came text management enabling the indexing of R&D reports, stimulated by ICI's development of Assassin - software which they generously sold to competitors.

Two hallmarks stand out from this first job. Firstly the mutual respect and partnership between information scientists and R&D staff -we all knew we were essential to drug discovery. Secondly, the professional camaraderie with colleagues in other companies which ensured that we could all "stand on the shoulders of giants". The Chemical Notation Association brought us together with the aim of improving the software we used and the Pharma Documentation Ring extended professional horizons to Europe and to patents and literature.

Developing my career

Having found a satisfying niche but with a manager twenty or more years from retirement, and me with ambition, stimulated a move to Glaxo Group Research as Head and then Director of Information Services. The opportunity involved continuing involvement with research data management and the challenges of setting up R&D Archives and Records Management policies as well as managing Libraries and a team of information research analysts. With a great team and with support from senior management (if convincing business cases could be made) we computerised the library; established end user searching of the scientific literature; developed corporate databases of publications on Glaxo products; implemented competitor watching services; started help desk (IT) support for staff; and led investment in word processing and document management. As the Internet came on stream we developed the first Glaxo Research web site to attract young scientists.

We were successful because we tracked the information needs of the business closely, monitored the horizon for relevant external developments, and developed effective partnerships with our stakeholders. The job was great fun and gave me my first foray into information architecture design.

Mergers are always challenging and the Glaxo Wellcome one was no exception but, as part of a larger UK/US team, we sustained our existing services, merged the key internal databases (a herculean task), designed a vibrant Intranet, and entered the field of Knowledge Management – fiancé was tougher but that increased the satisfaction as we won new investment. Networking CDROMs was one project – now overtaken by IT events – as were the new libraries we designed!

Next?

The disadvantage of working as a senior manager in a blue chip is that no longer do you work on service delivery. Whilst strategy, stakeholder management, team leadership are satisfying, you are now not capable of doing the day jobs. As merger with Smith Kline Beecham loomed and as I approached the age for early retirement I jumped ship. Moving to TFPL as the board director responsible for Consultancy and Training offered ‘real hands-on’ work in a company totally focused on information and knowledge management. Not an easy transition but survivable. Business development was essential – not winning projects an immediate failure – successful delivery to the client immensely satisfying – and the prospect of repeat work energising. Information and Knowledge Management is relevant to all sectors and ensuring that organisations of all types run effectively on their own knowledge bases and the information they need from the external world is immensely satisfying. Assessing where the problems are and identifying solutions that the organisation will and can support requires skills in research design, analysis, communication (and listening, problem solving, innovation, and persuasion. Every organisation and project is different – equally all organisations share the same problem – the failure to identify that a well tuned information engine must sit at the heart of their operations. Appropriate Information Management is a power for beneficial change.

IM as a career?

Working in IM – and KM – has given me tremendous satisfaction a, a sense of relevance, and a reasonable financial reward as well as a professional profile and the opportunity to work in several opinion forming initiatives. I’m now self employed, still associated with TFPL, and attracting other work. Today IM is more important than ever as evidenced by the expanding information universe we live in. Enabling your organisation to operate effectively, efficiently, safely and legally in this world is an essential job. It’s also a career of change and dynamism. A challenge to keep on top of ICT developments but essential to do so and to argue the case for new IM related activity that really

makes a difference to your organisation. My wishes for the IM profession is that more folk will join in and recognise the value of collaboration within a dynamic professional network – the CILIP IM Initiative will help.

The IM profession

I do hope that those who've spent their working lives so far in libraries or otherwise focused on published information will recognise the attractiveness and career potential of transferring their skills into the information management environment. Turbulence in the job world won't slow down and effective IM won't stop being critical. Just look at IM – learn about it and try it! Don't be afraid of doing something new. Big data beckons!