Chapter 21
Strategic Planning in Special Libraries and Information Centers

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ABSTRACT

The strategic planning process in special libraries and information centers is described, with emphasis given to the importance of planning efforts being tightly aligned with the business goals of the parent organization. Success in executing the strategic plan is strongly dependent on developing and polishing skill sets needed by persons active in the workforce today, while concurrently growing leadership and technical talent to meet future challenges. Following a discussion of general characteristics that distinguish special libraries and information centers from academic and public libraries, key concepts related to the strategic planning process in an organizational context are presented. A case study of the strategic planning efforts at a special library, the Illinois Fire Service Institute Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, illustrates the process and benefits gained from following the goals and strategies highlighted in the plan. The authors offer insightful recommendations to those involved in the planning process and suggest future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

Because this chapter focuses on the strategic planning process in special libraries and organizational information centers, some background on special libraries is presented here to set the stage for discussing strategic planning activities.

Special libraries and information centers may be found in a wide range of entities including corporations, private businesses, government agencies, museums, hospitals, not-for-profit organizations, professional associations, and management consulting firms (Porter et al., 1997; Reeve, 2009). There are also specialized, subject-specific collections in academia. Special libraries and information centers, where

they exist, are functional units typically tasked with activities such as content identification and licensing, literature searching and analysis, the monitoring of business and market trends, deploying content resources appropriate for specific knowledge worker teams, and advising colleagues on resources and search techniques. Although some of these organizations no longer support a special library or information center, they still employ information professionals who are embedded in other departments. Among other activities, information professionals and special librarians perform in-depth research and analysis, consult on information and knowledge management practices, and actively participate on project teams that contribute to the success of the organization.

The Special Libraries Association (SLA), the international professional association representing thousands of information professionals, expands the concept of the special librarian to information professionals who "strategically use information in his/her job to advance the mission of the organization." SLA further states that "information professionals include, but are not limited to, librarians, knowledge managers, chief information officers, Web developers, information brokers, and consultants" (SLA, 2001b). In our chapter, we will use both "special librarians" and "information professionals" to cover personnel working in special libraries and information centers or performing in this role.

Special librarians and information center directors strive to justify their existence and make their roles relevant in their parent organizations while facing today's challenges. These include, but are not limited to, the current economic situation, shrinking budgets, transformative technologies, e.g., the World Wide Web, social networking, new business models in the publishing industry, new mechanisms for licensing and accessing digital content, globalization, virtualization, the information explosion, a new world of electronic access to information, changes in the information-seeking and information-use patterns among users, and user demand for all sorts of resources and timely services (Balasubramanian, Rangaswamy, & Kanthimathi, 2006; Matarazzo & Pearlstein, 2011a). All of these developments have fundamentally influenced and altered management and service practices in special libraries and information centers.

Special libraries and information centers are generally different from public and academic libraries in the key areas of sponsorship, subject coverage of the collection, users, services, staff, and size. Special libraries and information centers exist because the sponsoring organizations have recognized the benefits to be realized by supporting this function and the professionals staffing it. Their existence is based solely on their proprietor's discretion. As such, they depend on the decision-making of senior management for funding. They are left in a vulnerable position when senior management decides to make budget cuts or reallocate resources. One of the best strategies for protecting them is to proactively document their value in order to illustrate the ways in which the special library or information center is indispensable to its users within the organization. On the other hand, public and academic libraries are maintained because some important institutional or legal document requires library services (Davis, 2009; AdvancED, 2010).

Special libraries and information centers are expected to offer access to resources on specific subjects in response to the demands of highly specialized users and senior management. The subject scope of public library collections is broad, targeting the public's general and recreational interests. Academic libraries collect original documents, journals, etc. for students, professors, researchers and also for reference service. The size of the collection and/or the number of items borrowed are traditional benchmarks for evaluating the success of public and academic libraries (Davis, 2009; ACRL, 2010). However, such statistics have little significance to senior managers to whom special libraries and information centers report since the value of special libraries and information centers is not determined by the collection and the number of items loaned or downloaded. Meeting users' in-depth and dynamic information needs and carrying out the goals and special interests of the sponsoring organization are the most important

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