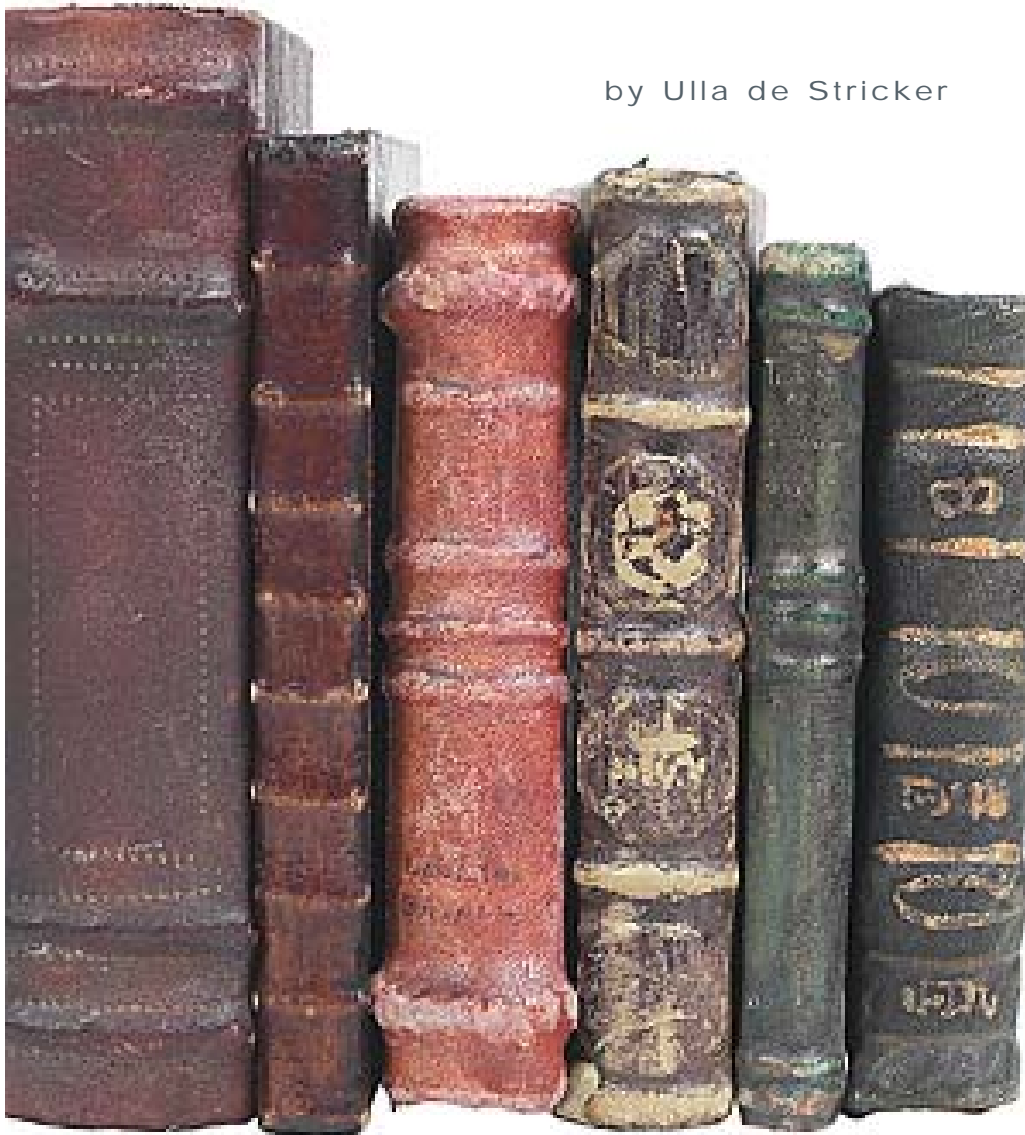


what enterprise librarians actually do

by Ulla de Stricker



We all know what an accountant does and a surgeon's work is well appreciated - just as their educational credentials are no mystery. A librarian, on the other hand... isn't it a bit fuzzier?

From time to time, it surfaces in conversation that divergence might exist between common perceptions of librarians' activities and the realities of what they do. Inasmuch as business intelligence professionals stand to gain from

the professional support of librarians, and members of both professions stand to gain from collaboration, it is less than optimal for them to have inaccurate impressions of the work of their counterparts. This article attempts to clear up some misperceptions that somehow seem to have survived about the work of librarians.

The profession of librarianship spans a wide range of specific domains, from

preservation-and-protection related work (think rare books, the personal papers of authors or statesmen) to web-and-virtual work (think digital libraries, Google product development). A standard distinction is made between those working in public and academic libraries versus those working in corporate and government settings; I focus here on the latter. Their corporate or government work places are often named in ways that confuse employees; "Information Centre" can be interpreted to mean IT support; and "Research / Knowledge Centre" can connote a variety of services for organizational employees. Because of that vocabulary confusion, I prefer the term "Enterprise Libraries" to mean entities devoted to supporting appropriate information practices for the enterprise's knowledge workers.

WHAT ARE SOME BELIEFS ABOUT LIBRARIANS?

Anecdotal and personal experience indicates there is a perception among some business professionals that librarians generally:

- are members of a 20th Century profession no longer needed;
- are primarily custodians;
- are helpful when it comes to serving up large quantities of information on request but don't have a feel for what the requestor will find meaningful;
- do not have business insight or use analytical skills.
- are competent but not necessarily

expert users of advanced technologies (enterprise search, data mining, etc);

- have academic credentials in history or literature and became librarians because they “liked working with books”; and,

- tend to be reclusive personalities happiest to work independently.

As is the case with many a stereotype, a kernel of truth gave rise to it in the first place. To this day, some who choose the career believe that becoming a librarian will enable a worthy work life rendering responsive service “without having to sell anything, least of all myself.” The ironic reality is that solid outreach (usually referred to as client relations management) is a constant feature of an enterprise librarian’s life because the constantly changing clientele is largely unaware what he or she is able to offer.

WHAT DO TODAY’S ENTERPRISE LIBRARIANS DO?

The roles of enterprise librarians cover a gamut from research-centric activities (seen for example in the libraries of pharmaceutical companies and large consulting firms) to “embedded librarians” who work in close collaboration with business teams (seen for example in technology startups and economic development environments). A key feature is a strong element of proactivity and research analysis. Not only is information offered up “before the client knew he needed it,” it also includes interpretation and analysis that surprises many. Detailed familiarity with many specialized information sources enables enterprise librarians to produce comprehensive, in-depth research reports with special attention to the reliability and credibility of individual sources.

A recent illustration appeared on 30 July 2006, in a *Washington Post* article entitled “The Post’s Unsung Sleuths” (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/30/AR2006063001542.html>). In it, author Deborah Howell details the accomplish-

ments of “news junkies who see themselves not just as librarians but journalists analyzing original documents, tracking people down, finding leads, using obscure databases.” She offers examples of how these librarians, using their own custom-built data banks, connect tiny bits of information buried deep in disparate sources to ferret out intelligence leaving recipients’ jaws on the floor.

Such articles are welcome among librarians who often find themselves in need of painting an accurate picture of their professional work. They are frequently called upon to remind other business professionals that enterprise librarians in fact:

- possess two-year Masters Degrees in Library and Information Science, MLIS (variations: “Information Studies, MIST” and “Library Science, MLS”) with a strong emphasis on information technology and architecture, Web design, interface usability, and the like - from faculties that are accredited on a regular basis through a rigorous process (<http://www.ala.org/ala/accreditation/edpol/educationalpolicy.htm>);

- commonly also possess Masters or Doctoral degrees in relevant disciplines (sciences, social sciences, commerce, law). Librarians with MBAs are especially sought after;

- focus their efforts on helping their enterprises’ knowledge workers “get a grip on information” - whatever that entails in the organizational environment;

- conduct research to discover, and then evaluate, new sources of information for their suitability, quality, reliability, and weaknesses. Train business members in the appropriate use of such resources - with an emphasis on any caveats and omissions. (In the old days, when print-published information was generally trusted because it was assumed to have been vetted and checked thoroughly before going to print, librarians could feel confident citing and referring their clients to such sources. Today’s Web profusion presents a com-

pletely different situation and calls for new skills in sifting through and separating the trustworthy from the trashy.);

- set up and maintain special-purpose portals leading knowledge workers directly and conveniently to the most appropriate information sources in those cases where self-service is called for;

- monitor the “world out there” for any developments that may have a bearing on the business teams - whether such developments deal with an already-discussed topic or not. Often, daily briefings for different client groups are a feature of such monitoring. (i.e. “This is what you need to know today.”)

- support their organizations by leading teams addressing corporate memory or enterprise search challenges, setting up retrieval taxonomies and handling records management issues;

- negotiate complex license deals with content providers and manage user access, user authentication, and reporting of usage (which they analyze for clues as to adjustments in the license, new content to acquire, etc);

- ensure their organizations’ information practices are in accordance with copyright legislation and content licensing terms;

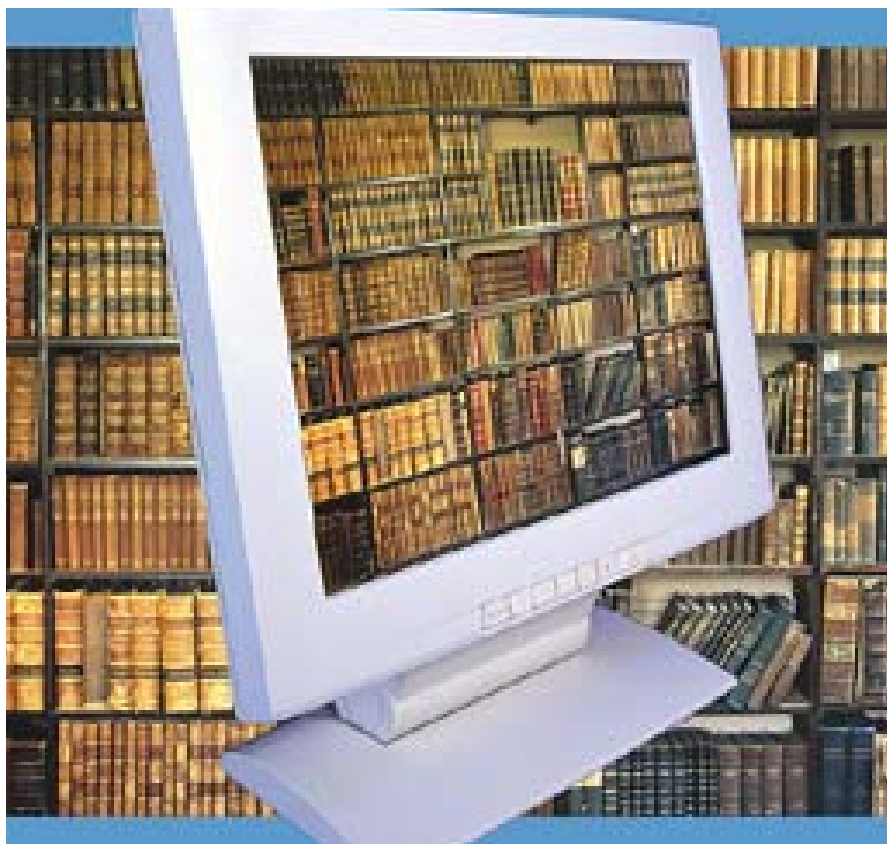
- undertake complex projects associated with corporate archives digitization, streamlining multiple data repositories, and the like; and,

- manage organizational intranets and external websites.

However, perhaps most importantly, they are partners with the business professionals in that they:

- are team members – as opposed to service providers – working closely with business units to diagnose and anticipate needs and deliver tailored information to suit the precise stage of the business process in question;

- follow up with clients to learn how well a “service interaction” met the needs and to explore what next steps might be desirable (e.g. setting up a current awareness monitoring program for the



duration of a project); and,

- connect people with information and people with people. “Without being alerted by the librarian, I would never have discovered...” is a common reaction to this brokering aspect of the enterprise librarian’s work.

Finally, enterprise librarians are trend-and-anomaly hounds: Using their specialized research and information synthesizing skills, they prepare in-depth reports shedding light on all aspects of an issue, industry, business, market, person, etc. – often using little known sources and professional contacts developed over years of work – to point out what’s going on, what can be anticipated, and what doesn’t “look right.”

WHAT’S AN ENTERPRISE LIBRARIAN WORTH?

The value of an enterprise librarian’s services – like that of other professionals’ services – is difficult to specify in dollars, but business case illustrations of

productivity increases and risk protection can be made.

The work knowledge workers do not have to do for themselves when the enterprise librarian is looking out for their information needs can add up to a lot of time.

When the enterprise librarian sees to it that any and all relevant information from any and all appropriate and authoritative sources are fed to the business intelligence professional at the right moments... the latter is not only freed up to apply his or her professional skills to the fullest but can do so with the right information at hand. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to encounter a real-life instance of the old adage “three years of hard work can easily save an hour with the librarian”.

There is considerable upside in avoiding the risks arising from using some types of information sources without the proper skills.

Collaboration between an enterprise

librarian and a business intelligence professional can yield astonishing results – in terms not only of time saved and risks avoided but more importantly in terms of new discoveries made. We each have our expertise domain - joined together, they hold significant promise of business advantage.

THE BOTTOM LINE FOR BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE PROFESSIONALS:

If there is an enterprise librarian in your organization... see him or her. Chances are that beautiful music – I mean research collaboration – will be made. Even seasoned business intelligence professionals on top of their game might be amazed at the quality and sophistication of the services the enterprise librarian can deliver.

If there isn’t one... seek out consulting/freelance research librarians. Check out the services offered by members of the Association of Independent Information Providers (www.aiip.org/AboutAIIP/directory_home.asp), by consulting members of the Special Libraries Association (www.sla.org/consultonline/), and by large urban public or university libraries (as an example, see Toronto Public Library’s Custom Research IntelliSearch service – www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/ask_fee_index.jsp).

Better yet, investigate the possibility of creating an enterprise librarian position... I’d be happy to help write the job description and help you recruit the right candidate!

Ulla de Stricker’s consulting firm specializes in strategic planning for information services (www.destricker.com). She obtained her MLS degree from McGill University “quite a while ago”. Ulla can also be reached at (905) 338-0357 or ulla@destricker.com