

## Re-engineering of professional associations

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*Aslib has developed from being a Professional Association supporting learned journals, to a business producing timely and competitive products supporting a Professional Association.*

I am here to talk to you about Aslib, the Association for Information Management. It is not going to be a sales pitch although, of course, I hope that by the time I have finished you will be as excited about us as I am! There are a number of areas that Evelynne has arranged for us to cover today and I want to address two of them in particular. Challenges for libraries and information centres in the year 2000 and the vital role of professional associations in the documentation and information fields.

The title of my paper is as succinct a way as I could think of in describing how Aslib has, as an example, re-engineered itself over the last few years, recognising of course, that this will be a continuous process now that we are in a global competitive environment. It is an appropriate time to be looking at ourselves because this year is Aslib's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Information Management and most of the disciplines and practices which will be discussed today are relatively new. Certainly, information management only became a discipline some 60 years after the birth of Aslib. 75 years ago, the Association of Special Libraries and Information Bureaux (Aslib) was formed by Special Library members from the UK Library Association under the impetus that the challenges facing special libraries would be more critically addressed by a dedicated Association. It was a modest professional association with a few hundred pounds turnover, supported by a house journal, but even so within three years they laid a marker for the future by producing the Aslib Directory of UK Information Sources - a landmark product which is, proudly, still with us today. How and why did Aslib changed to become a business, producing timely and competitive products supporting a professional association, and how relevant is Aslib to today's professional needs? I hope that my short story will underline the crucial but often unappreciated role that professional associations are playing today and how they could be even more effective and mutually beneficial to the business community and society at large.

We describe ourselves as a world class Corporate membership information association. World class because we are in 70 countries and our 2000 Corporate members reads like a Who's Who of leading organisations throughout the world, universities, government agencies, and leading businesses from AT&T to Erickson, from Barclays Bank to Deutsche Bank, from KPMG to CAP Gemini, from Total to Shell from Glaxo Wellcome to Zeneca.

I do not have the turnover of Aslib in 1924 but I do know that a quarter of a century later in 1950 it had only risen to £6000. Another quarter of a century later it had risen to £630,000, this was, of course, a substantial sum of money for a professional association. Not in the league of those associations that have professional accreditation such as accountancy or electrical engineering, but substantial where membership did not confirm certification and, was therefore an arbitrary choice, a matter which I will discuss later. It was clear in those early days that earnings from business and grants were crucial to maintain the association's professional services but already membership dues had fallen to 63% of turnover.

10 years later turnover had modestly grown to 1.1 million, grants had virtually been extinguished because governments were tightening their fiscal belts and accordingly the share of membership rose again. You could say in the first 60 years there was modest organic growth, something that could reasonably be said of most associations. Life was reasonably comfortable until the 80's, huge growth and crashes, globalisation and the cult of efficiency and cost cutting. In the last decade many associations have been forced to merge or have failed. In 1990 Aslib was a well regarded global association - but insolvent.

One of the principal reasons, if not the reason, why Aslib was in trouble, despite its history, was that it was run by information professionals with such little business acumen, that even contracts for the supply of services were so appallingly weighted against them that they were losing literally hundreds of thousands of pounds. It was becoming clear that Aslib was now a business and needed to be run by business people, leaving the professionals to get on with their work. At that time i.e. in the late 80s Aslib had become the Association for Information Management, reflecting the new discipline, but keeping Aslib, as a brand name well established throughout the world. Also at that time competition expanded and private sector companies saw the opportunities for servicing this new dynamic market place. In looking at ourselves from a business perspective you could have argued that you would never have invented an Aslib type organisation. As a professional association we were trying to provide products and services in 4 quite distinct areas of business, publications, training, consultancy and recruitment, whilst also providing professional support to its members.

That was a tall order in the developing competitive environment of the late 80s and 90s but it also provided a new opportunity for capturing more of a bigger market and that we set out to do. It soon became evident that this new market, whilst recognising our skills, was confused by the fact that we were both an association and a charity - two areas where business perception is quite negative, associations don't have thrusting management and charities don't need to earn a profit. In fact, it was worse than that, Aslib was interpreted as the Association of Libraries, a pejorative in business dynamics. In our old traditional market, the library and information world, academics and information professionals look positively on the 5 elements of our name *Aslib*, the *Association for Information Management*, a *charity*, but our new markets, saw *information* and *management* positively but looked upon *Aslib*, the *Association* and *charity*, extremely negatively. That is why we have launched a new trading name, *Information Management International* with the sole purpose of branding products and services for the new market, in a way acceptable to them whilst continuing to brand products for our traditional markets, as Aslib. I do not know whether there is a direct correlation between that action and our huge increase in operations, but I do believe, and I always have, that what we have achieved with our brand and perception is what a great deal of the information management profession needs to achieve, that is a commercially dynamic perception. Today our turnover is over £3 million, up 200% in 8 years.

At this stage one might argue as to why we continue with our costly professional work and representation. Why not focus on core areas of business as most organisations are being forced to do. Well although running an association with a business has its challenges, it also has its advantages, advantages which it is extremely difficult to put a monetary value on, but which are nevertheless an asset. We have always offered a holistic solution to our members needs and this we are trying to roll out to our new customers. Our new customers can have information management tools, services and products sold to them in combination, hard copy or electronic publications, training sessions in house or on site, consultancy to show the direction in which they should go, recruitment to provide a supporting human resource. Our professional work creates a feel good factor, it endorses Aslib products and services and encourages government and special patrons - all this attracts more customers. And this is reflected in market studies, Aslib comes top within professional associations regarded as most relevant to business information work. We also come top in training, double the percentage of the number two organisation.

What else does the Association role provide us with?

Well, some 2000 Corporate members who have literally millions of employees who are potential customers. We have over 10,000 clients and customers, we have 4 journal editorial boards, 12 Special Interest Groups, 3 UK Branches and, of course, we are members of the ECIA, FID and GIA. That is real networking strength which provides us with a powerful customer base. In return, we provide the Aslib lobby. If you just take intellectual property rights as one example of our lobbying, you have Aslib communicating with MEPs, WIPO delegates, UK and EC government representatives, all the time pressuring to change, influence, improve decision making amongst other things, WIPO protocols and European and UK IPR Directives. We are explaining to our members and readers, the effect of these actions such as the recent Marks & Spencer versus the Newspaper Licensing Agency court action, and all the time we are doing this, we are improving ours and our members' knowledge and ability to influence. And of course, it is our business products, our magazines, journals, seminars, our mailings etc. which are the vehicles, but which also benefit from this knowledge.

What are the challenges?

Well it is definitely a challenge running a business as a charitable institution, and so we are working to find a way to de-charitise ourselves. Because we do not professionally accredit any group, we have no 'lock in' of our members, their membership is perfectly arbitrary and amounts simply to whether they perceive us of being of value to them, and whether it is worth obtaining membership discounts on our products. Because we were at one time insolvent and are a charity we have negligible capital resources and until we de-charitise that will remain the case. The future intention would be to float the business in order to obtain development capital but this can only be done when we are not a charity. Our business is still extremely seasonal because of membership and journal subscriptions, making cash flow extremely problematic. Because we are who we are, we are expected to innovate, to lead, to set the pace, after all, we are the leading Corporate Information Management Association in the world. That takes large resources, human and financial, whilst judging this against a fiscal return is extremely difficult. Similarly, with modest resources we are not playing in the high salary stakes for our key business managers, whilst having to compete against the best in the world.

I want to finish by briefing describing some of the work and products which we have developed and are developing against the background that I have just given you. One of the positive aspects of being a professional institution and "honest broker", is that NGOs such as universities are comfortable with us and, because of the pressure on them to develop their revenues they are keen to work with us to develop commercial products. A couple of years ago we entered into a government competition inviting projects which enhance information flow. With the University of Southampton we developed a current awareness service for British Official Publications, there are some 9000 of them produced every year. BOPCAS, British Official Publications Current Awareness Service, was developed in a year with the government grant following our successful bid and was launched under our new Trading Name at the On-line Show in December. The service is web based and parcelled for selected sectorial interests and already some 50 to 60 subscribers are on line. We aim, within the year to have 200 subscribers with an annualised value to Aslib of around £100,000 in the first year.

4 years ago as part of our programme to innovate, lead, set the pace, etc. we invested nearly £100,000 in an Internet development programme, a substantial sum of money for us. We found it extremely difficult to sell internet product at that time and one could be forgiven for believing it was a wasted investment, other than us being seen to be Internet worldly. But we were then able to demonstrate our expertise in bidding for 4<sup>th</sup> framework money. We won a 3 year contract to develop NECTAR, *Networked Electronic Storage and Communication of Teleratics Applications Results*. The results are so spectacular that we have been given a number of extensions to the contract. There are some 45,000 visits to the site every month. Buoyed by the positive reception to our work we bid for the content element of the European Commission database jewel, CORDIS, a 4 year contract worth some £3.5 million. Against Olivetti, Italy, Smurfitt of Ireland, Longman Pearson Cartermill of the UK and others; Aslib won.

What of the future?

We have always supported international initiatives for the advancement of the information management professional. We are now also supporting the man and woman in the street, the citizen. We are enthusiastic supporters of the European Council of Information Associations and provide the secretariat, we are members of FID and we provide the Honorary Treasurership. We are members of the Global Information Alliance and so on. We are keen to use our expertise in developing markets for other fellow associations to our mutual benefit, wider markets for us and greater influence for them. We have a huge creative resource, think of the articles which are written for our 13 journals and magazines every year which could be re-packaged for other organisations to our mutual advantage. Think of the shared training opportunities, our clients already include Anderson Consulting, Pricewaterhousecoopers, Shell, SOROS, Unilever, European Parliament and many many more. But we have only scratched the surface of companies and organisations in the ECIA countries. I should like to see a better future for us all by capitalising on the work we already do by strengthening our organisation and collective lobby in the fast changing and hostile environment that we are in. We must squeeze the pips of our effort to get more value.