Information for Industry: The HERTIS Approach

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1. Introduction

HERTIS is a college library network serving further and higher education, and industry. The acronym stands for the Hertfordshire Technical Library and Information Service. It is managed from the Hatfield Polytechnic Library, the largest library in the system, by the County Technical Librarian who is also the Polytechnic Librarian, and works in close co-operation with the County’s Public Library Service. The two services aim to provide comprehensive resources for leisure, education and industry.

Hertfordshire is an English county whose southern borders meet the Greater London metropolitan area. Originally an agricultural county it now has a population of 1 million and varies from rural areas in the north to densely populated urban districts in the south. Two major roads into London, the A1 and M1 and the recently completed London ring road pass through the county. These routes together with fast train services to the centre of London have resulted in a large commuter population and an expanding industrial base. The structure of modern Hertfordshire industry is shown in figure 1. (Figure 1).

2. Origins

HERTIS information services for industry date from the formation of the network in 1956. During the 1950’s the population of Hertfordshire was changing due to the development of new towns and the emergence of new industries. The traditional aircraft industry at Hatfield was expanding, and Watford had established industries based on printing; but pharmaceutical, electronic and technically based companies were introducing a wider range of products.

At the same time the UK government was anxious to make good the education and training gaps identified in post war studies which compared our resources for technical education unfavourably with other countries. The Government White papers of 1956 and 1961 are instances of the positive measures taken to expand further and higher education.

By the early 1950’s the Hatfield Technical college, which had developed initially to provide courses for the De Havilland aircraft apprentices, was expanding its courses to meet the needs of other industries, particularly in the
fields of engineering, science, building, mathematics, business and management. At the same time Hertfordshire County Council planned and opened other colleges throughout the County.

Fig. 1.

VAT REGISTERED HERTFORDSHIRE FIRMS BY SECTOR AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL AT 1983.

Total number of Hertfordshire firms registered for V.A.T. in 1979 = 20196 and in 1983 = 23187.

Until this time the existing County Library Service had been meeting the demands of a largely rural population. They were then faced with providing technical information services to the new industries with no large established reference service, or large central town, as a base.

Library resources for the new colleges were considered crucial but posed an additional problem. The County Librarian and County Education Officer at this time proposed a single college library network with one central fund, and managed as a cohesive unit, to provide a technical library service to both the colleges and the community as a whole. This would complement the existing public library service and give Hertfordshire a comprehensive network of libraries planned to meet local needs.
During its formation the aims of HERTIS were set out, providing a basis for important developments. The commitment to librarians playing an active part in the educational role of the colleges, for example, resulted in the appointment of tutor librarians and, where appropriate, subject specialists. All college libraries were recognised as public reference libraries to fulfil their County role, and, significantly for this paper, a specific aim was included to provide an information service to industry.

From the beginning the emphasis of the industrial unit was on providing a dynamic information service relevant to industrial users. An early and crucial decision was the appointment of an information officer. An engineer by training his job was to promote the use of information by visiting companies and relating the service to their needs.

The success of this policy quickly became apparent as HERTIS industrial services developed. Besides establishing links between firms and college libraries he introduced a membership scheme. This gave firms a contact at Hatfield who would deal with any enquiry quickly. He also initiated links between industrialists and academics and became one of the first Industrial Liaison Officers.

He also established principles which became inherent in the service:

1. The importance of promotion, of demonstrating the value of information to companies.
2. The recognition that information needs are related to problem solving and that the source of information needs to be appropriate to the problem.
3. The importance of a one-stop enquiry point which accepts any enquiry and finds an appropriate source to deal with it.
4. An "information in context" approach, which requires the information officer to attempt to understand the whole problem in order to provide the most suitable answer.

3. HERTIS Now

HERTIS now comprises the Hatfield Polytechnic library and 12 other college libraries, including 3 specialist colleges of agriculture, building and art (Figure 2).

There are approximately 131 (full time equivalent) library staff employed by the network including 70 (FTE) professional librarians.

The close links between HERTIS, the Hertfordshire Library Service and the County Council can be seen from the following chart, which also indicates some of the complexities of the arrangement (Figure 3).

Core aims are

1. Provision of library and information services to the academic community
2. Provision of reference libraries for the public community
3. Provision of information services to industry
COLLEGE LIBRARIES IN HERTFORDSHIRE
1986

1 Hatfield Polytechnic (2 sites)
2 Cassio
3 Dacorum
4 De Havilland (3 sites)
5 East Herts
6 Herts College of Agriculture and Horticulture
7 Herts College of Art and Design (2 sites)
8 Herts College of Building
9 North Herts (2 sites)
10 St Albans
11 Stevenage (2 sites)
12 Ware
13 Watford (3 sites)

Herts College of HE (not in HERTIS)

Fig. 2
a college library network serving further and higher education and industry

HERTIS
ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

Hertfordshire County Council

Education Committee

Further and Higher Education Sub-Committee

Polytechnic Director F E College Principals

HERTIS Advisory Committee

County Technical Librarian
(also Polytechnic Librarian)

Deputy Librarian

The Hatfield Polytechnic Library

F E College Libraries

HERTIS College Unit

Hertfordshire Library Service

Public, School and Hospital Libraries

Cultural and Recreational Facilities Committee

County Librarian

HERTIS Information for Industry Unit

Herts Libraries' Commercial Information Service

Senior Information Officer

Academic Services Librarian

Technical Services Librarian

College Librarians

Colleges Unit Librarian

Fig. 3
HERTIS Information for Industry is the modern version of the original industrial services. It is a subscription service which aims to provide a “second tier” service to its members. This means in-depth enquiry work, rapid response time and being closely involved with member companies. The service has to work to financial targets outlined in its business plan and aims to be self financing by 1988.

The basic services to members are document delivery, an in-depth enquiry service; regular meetings and seminars plus a regular newsletter. Document delivery includes books, journal articles, conference papers, reports, standards and patents. These may be supplied from HERTIS stock or obtained from other sources. The aim is to supply material within a time scale suitable for an industrial environment.

The enquiry service deals with work ranging from technical data to market research information, from literature searching to tracking down an expert.

Inevitably on-line services play an important part but the skill of the information officer in helping to analyse the initial problem is crucial.

The unit also manages a Databank of Hertfordshire Companies and provides a mailing list service based on this information. The Databank is a joint project with the County Planning department who need to maintain current information on local industry.

Additionally services have recently been added to the scope of the unit which are available on an ad hoc basis. Desk research or information projects, such as client analysis, is available making use of the skills of specialist staff. Consultancy work is also increasing, particularly in setting up and maintaining small in-company information units. This work is taking us into the area of records management.

There are now 320 member firms. The target figure for 1988 is 350, which is the number estimated to be manageable with present staffing levels.

Also operating under the wing of the unit is the Commercial Information Service which is jointly funded and managed by HERTIS and the Hertfordshire Library Service. This is a free service to provide swift and reliable answers to commercial enquiries from the total resources of the county using staff with appropriate expertise.

The enquiry point at Hatfield is continuously manned during business hours. Enquiries which have steadily increased since the introduction of CIS in 1981, are mainly in the area of supplier and company information.

Together HERTIS Information for Industry and the Commercial Information Service handle approximately 750 enquiries each month. Many of these are relatively straightforward but 10% require a significant amount of time and expertise. About the same percentage will require contact with other organisations to help obtain complete information. Of the 250 loans made to member companies roughly 50% will come from HERTIS stock.

These services are supplied by a staff of 4.5 professional librarians, a senior clerical officer, a databank project officer and a part-time secretary. Advice and expertise is given by other HERTIS staff when required. Management
information is collected to monitor change in demand, effectiveness and costs. There is also an advisory users group which meet regularly to give opinions on the present performance of the service and comment on proposed developments.

Publicity and promotion remain important activities. At the basic level leaflets, information literature and exhibition boards have been professionally designed. Links with the many business organisations in the area are well established, and are being cemented by a recently introduced Business Advisors Forum initiated by the service. In addition to providing stands at business exhibitions the information staff speak at business meetings, attend business clubs and provide articles for the industrial press.

An increasing activity has been the number of firms who have invited the service to address managers meetings, or other selected groups, on the potential and accessibility of information.

Underpinning the whole service is the close co-operation between HERTIS and the Hertfordshire Library Service in the area of service to industry. Promotion is often undertaken on a joint basis, for IFI, CIS and HLS.

4. The Future

HERTIS is now working on a development plan for the Polytechnic Library, the college libraries and for information services to industry. Many external factors will affect the way the industrial services are planned for the future, some of which will have obvious bearing on developments. Others will influence future attitudes.

For example the emergence of smaller industrial or commercial units in the economy has meant that fewer companies have discreet functional departments. This means that one person may be looking for a variety of types of information needing to make increasing use of information sources. Whether these sources will be libraries or other networks will depend on the visibility of library networks. While industry is putting increasing importance on “information” there is also a blurring of the division between technical and commercial information needs. Whilst there will always remain the need for technical information at the research and development level, market assessment and product support requires a mix of marketing and technical background.

Developments within HERTIS will offer opportunities to add value to the service. An electronic network linking all the college libraries and allowing remote access to industrial users is planned for implementation in 1988/9. Many members are already aware of the benefits this could offer. The continuing introduction of information technology and its use to access information will also affect services available. The use of on-line databases is well established, the use of databanks, CD-ROM and interactive video is increasing.
At the same time developments within the library profession are significant. In the UK the Library and Information Services Committee has recently published proposals for geographical regions to plan resources held and obtained by public, academic and industrial libraries.\textsuperscript{4}

There has also been a change in attitude to fee based services, examples being the British Library’s Business Information Service which plans to introduce charges, London Business School which successfully introduced a commercial service 2 years ago and Warwick Business Information Service which is well established.

Professional librarians and information officers are beginning to gain confidence in the value of their information handling skills and there is a rapidly increasing number of independent information consultants.

Finally the attitude of the Polytechnic and the colleges to their potential industrial partners is becoming increasingly outward looking and market orientated, increasing the amount of contacts established between organisations.

The aim is to maintain the free services to both academic and industrial users at the highest possible level, while the membership scheme will continue to provide a means by which firms can buy the time of information officers to provide additional services. To do this successfully the scope and benefits of the scheme will need to be more clearly defined. Both staff and customers need to be confident of what “value added” means. Presentation of packaged information or evaluative reports need careful consideration, especially in regard to the availability of experts to undertake specialist work.

The marketing of the skills and expertise of information specialists as consultants in the area of record and information management is an area that is expected to develop. It is a natural progression from organising library resources for information retrieval to helping companies organise their own information.

The planning is still at an early stage and developments need to be justified in terms of costs and benefits. The question of who pays, public or private resources, will be determined by how far the local economy can support services to industry. How much industry will pay will depend on the real benefits available and how well they are communicated.

Whatever direction the plans for HERTIS services to industry take the commitment to promotion of information and its value will remain.

The author
Angela Abell holds the degree of Bachelor of Arts, is a Chartered Librarian and a Member of the Institute of Information Scientists. She has held the post of Senior Information Officer at Hatfield Polytechnic, U.K., since 1985 having previously been Engineering Librarian at Huddersfield Polytechnic. She is a member of the Council of the Library Association and also a member of its Industrial Group.
References