

# Cooperation Between a University Library and Students Active as Information Brokers

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## 1. Introduction

At the Vrije Universiteit of Brussels, the faculty staff members stimulate the students in applied economics and commercial engineering to join a small group and set up a small company during their two final years of study. Thus, motivated students can gain some practical experience, which is clearly more valuable than abstract exercises. To allow the students to start their business, every new company receives 250 000 Belgian francs (about 6000 \$ at the present exchange rate).

## 2. Students active as information brokers

After discussions between members of the faculty and of the central library, the students were offered the possibility to start exploiting the infrastructure and collection of the central library. Two students finally prepared themselves in the course of one year to establish a fee-based information service (focusing on business information). Their normal studies included the application of microcomputers in a business environment; additionally they participated in a 15-hour course on on-line information retrieval at the inter-university postgraduate school for documentation and library science at the University of Antwerp. In the meantime they made up a business plan which was accepted, so that they could start commercial activities under the name DATAMIX.

## 3. Advertising and marketing

In order to advertise the fee-based information service initially, about one hundred companies were contacted by telephone. This led to about twenty more detailed contacts and about ten assignments.

Advertising the project in small specialized, regional business journals was also tried out, but turned out less successful.

## 4. Information sources

Hard copy information sources were found to be most important. These are consulted at the university or in the centre of Brussels in specialized business

and government libraries. Also information stored in external databases was used. To access and consult those remote databases, the students were allowed to use the library's documentation and hardware (microcomputer + modem working at 1200/1200 baud + matrix printer).

### **5. Business results**

In October 1986, after only one month of activity, the small company was expanded to four students, of whom three were active as information brokers. At the end of March 1987 the fees received totalled the equivalent of about 2000 \$. Activities are slowly increasing now and will probably be continued during the next academic year. The students consider their present searches for information as a practical exercise which prepares them for a complementary business activity in their later career. So at least up to now this modest experiment turns out successful.

### **6. Conclusion**

A university library can offer a rather original contribution to the training of some students as described above. In this way, a rather exceptional relation may be growing between a non-profit library and a growing new, commercial information company. Clearly all this can be considered as an indirect cooperation between a university library and private industry.

### **The author**

Paul Nieuwenhuysen holds a licentiate in physics, a certificate in biophysics and a doctorate in science as well as a special licence in documentation and library science. His present appointment is scientific collaborator in the University Library of Brussels Free University, Belgium. He has published over 20 refereed scientific papers and two dissertations. He is a Board Member of the Scientific Libraries section of the Flemish Library and Documentation Society.