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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Features

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der, and fewer opportunities for future leaders to develop the necessary skills. But these are times of profound change in libraries, and a strong dose of thirty-something energy, ideas, and even naiveté may be more important than all that experience. Boomers need to remember that JFK was 43 when he became President; Bill Clinton 46. We didn’t have a problem with that! And who among us has felt completely “ready” for every promotion or new challenge they’ve faced? The fear that accompanies being over one’s head is a powerful motivator.

At the TAIGA 2 Forum in Seattle, a group of 20 AUL’s discussed succession planning, and a few comments and questions from that session are illuminating:

• Is our succession planning too focused on old management models?
• Our generation has made administration look tedious, focused on pushing paper and politics.
• Succession planning is needed at all levels, from supervisor to director.
• Do library managers always need to be librarians?
• There’s an enormous need for technical skills, and GenX/NetGen staff integrate those naturally.

“Wake-up calls are flooding the switchboard, folks! We really are getting old.”

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations

— Features

Column Editor: Bob Nardini (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services) <bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

“We had some options in there that literally did nothing.” This confession from a Microsoft product manager to the New York Times had to be the high-water mark for candor in the entire history of the software industry. The quote was included in a January review of Microsoft’s new Office 2007, where the Times’ reviewer reported a major “feature purge” as the most significant feature of the new package.

“Microsoft spent the first dozen years of Office’s life piling on new features,” said the Times, thereby gaining Microsoft a solid reputation for “bloat and complexity.” The company’s aim for the new Office was to simplify, the review went on to say, even to shrink the system.

It’s not easy, of course, for any of us to harbor a lot of sympathy for Microsoft. Over the years we’ve all encountered more wizards, task bars, toolbars, toolboxes, dialog boxes, clipboards, status bars, panes, and views than we can stand — not to mention the hateful Office Assistant. But, even with that, anyone who has taken part in system development must feel at least a shred of compassion for the company. Lawmaking? Sausagemaking?

That saying of ours about not really wanting to know how some things are made? Good clichés really need to be brought up to date from time to time. So let’s modernize this one, to cover lawmaking, sausagemaking, and systemmaking. We know how it’s done for our own users. Imagine trying to do it for the entire world, as Microsoft has to.

Features, like sausages and laws, don’t come from nowhere, even features that literally do nothing. Somewhere in the lineage of every software feature, useful and useless ones alike, there was some kind of encounter between customer and company. A question, a complaint, a suggestion, a survey, a remark, a study, a report. Perhaps a thoughtful description of the user experience elicited from a structured focus group. Or perhaps a tantrum thrown over the phone. Maybe a more thoughtful-than-usual email message. All get taken in. And some emerge eventually into daylight — like laws from legislatures, sausages from factories — though not necessarily resembling the raw materials that came in the door.

In between there’s a series of steps and processes, some elegant, some gruesome, that give us the finished product. With sausagemaking the part you don’t want to know about, according to lore, is the ingredients. Here’s where lawmaking and systemmaking part ways with sausages. With this pair, it’s these steps and processes that you don’t want to know about.

When it comes to laws some of this is public record, either because government makes it so or because either routine journalism or beyond-the-ordinary reporting uncovers the trail. Systemmaking, however, whether as practiced by Microsoft, by a publisher, by a library, or by a library vendor or utility, is mostly conducted privately, in the dark, out of sight, in places no journalist cares about. Which is why it can

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terms of cost of development to us, combined with all the personal and departmental political baggage attached to this list, and with (for a business) an estimate of what level of new sales each change will mean to the company.” They might, after their very first meeting, find the word “prioritization” the embodiment of elegance.

Although it’s doubtful that any WORD user asked Microsoft for a little animated character, it’s easy to imagine how Microsoft’s now-benched Office Assistant came into being. Remember? The smiling, omnipresent, but thankfully short-lived little paperclip riding a magic carpet of lined paper that distracted you constantly with the facial expressions, blinking eyes, turning head, hand motions, and unasked-for advice that some Team at Microsoft programmed in? This creature even had a name, “Clippit,” and would morph, at user option, into a smiling dot, into a robot, into Shakespeare or Einstein, and into other incarnations beyond those.

The Office Assistant, once a standard Office feature, “came to be loathed by many users,” according to Wikipedia. (Entries like this, by the way, are where Wikipedia whips Britannica hands down.) It’s still around, although now, thank goodness, is buried alive beneath a blessed default of “Hide.” Surely this creature was born one day at some Microsoft meeting where a person from Marketing, or a similar department, told product managers or business analysts or developers that users had conclusively described Microsoft Help as impenetrable and inaccessible. Why couldn’t someone do something about it?

Then someone did, probably a person or persons who’d figured out that animation and graphics were the coming thing. So, a group went out and did their work against this finding on Help and by the time they were done, other
groups, taken aback as they may have been by the animated paperclip, did not have the means of killing this thing, since they had no way, likely pressured by a degree of pre-release publicity, to produce an alternative feature that would address this amply documented user need in time for the next release deadline.

There you have it, prioritization. No matter how things turned out in the end, Microsoft actually did quite accurately prioritize — or, more correctly in usage, establish the relative importance of — a better Help function in WORD. In the real world, though, prioritization at some point intersects, or doesn’t (as with the Office Assistant) with the need for concrete features that satisfactorily address the needs, for a business, of both customer and company.

And that’s the trick, bringing the seats in this orchestra into tune. All the cacophonous improvisation from users, field reps, public services and other library staff, developers, trainers, managers and administrators, analysts, and others with a part to play in development and what precedes it? Every one of them experts of a sort, of course. Sometimes, somehow, there’s a degree of melody and harmony in the din. A good listener can hear it. For libraries and their vendors today, there’s no more important point of connection, or missed connection, than this partly covert area, systemmaking.

There’s very little in the world today so irritating, for those of us who spend most of our workday sitting before a computer screen, as a feature that does nothing, or worse, does you damage. But a thoughtfully designed, beautifully executed feature, one proving that a development team has harmonized the point of connecting with users? Few notes are as sweet, either to play, for a development team, or to hear, for a user who feels that this music was written for me.

International Dateline — European Conference Adds Weight to Debate on Scientific Publishing

by Dr. Peter T. Shepherd (Project Director) <pt_shepherd@hotmail.com>

The very fact of a conference on scientific publishing, sponsored by the European Union (EU) and held in the Charlemagne Building in Brussels, was the strongest of signals to publishers and researchers alike that one of the world’s most influential political entities is now very interested indeed in access to, dissemination and preservation of scientific information. That publishers, researchers, as well as librarians received that signal — loud and clear — was evidenced by the attendance of more than 500 delegates, including some of the leading lights from research, industry and government.

The Journey to Brussels

The conference, Scientific Publishing in the European Research Area: Access, Dissemination and Preservation in the Digital Age, held on 15-16 February 2007, was the latest in a series of initiatives from the EU designed to stimulate debate and evolve policy on scientific publishing in the electronic age,