November 2011

ATG Interviews John G. Dove

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Recommended Citation

Gilson, Tom and Strauch, Katina (2011) "ATG Interviews John G. Dove," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 23: Iss. 5, Article 15.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5989>

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President, Credo Reference

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *Credo Reference has only been in business since 1999 but has a fascinating corporate pedigree. Can you talk briefly about the company's history?*

JD: **Credo**, then known as **Xrefer**, was founded by **Adam Hodgkin** (previously philosophy editor at **Oxford University Press**) back in 1999 as a free site of ready-reference information supported by advertising. In 2002, **Bela Hatvany**, known widely in the library world for his role in founding **CLSI** and **Silverplatter**, invested in **Xrefer** and funded the redeployment of the platform. Under his influence, **Xrefer** would become an online reference product for libraries. In 2003, I came in as CEO. Having worked for **Bela** as President of **Silverplatter** in the mid-90s, I knew what it meant to build a company upon the principles of service to the library world. **Mike Sweet**, who had a finance role in one of **Bela's** other companies (**Coreweb**) came into **Xrefer** in 2006 as the CFO and assumed the CEO role in August of 2008, while I continued on as President. The board of directors consists of **Mike Sweet**, **Bela Hatvany**, **John Huysmans**, and myself. What **Mike Sweet** brings to **Credo** is a rare combination of business acumen, a collaborative work-style, and a deeply held commitment to build a company where talented people can bring their best selves to work every day.

ATG: *Why did you change the company's name from Xrefer to Credo Reference? What's the significance of Credo as a name?*

JD: **Credo Reference** is a perfect name for our company. Besides its common meaning, as in "a belief," **Credo** resonates with *credible* and even with the slang phrase, "street cred." We wanted a name that librarians would be glad to include in their library and that students would value and trust. **Xrefer**, as a name, was problematic for several reasons that could be obstacles to business growth. The name was difficult to pass by word-of-mouth; it wasn't a word; and beginning with an "x" ensured it was near the bottom of every list of library databases. Realizing this, I tasked **Jenny Walker** (**Xrefer's** VP of marketing at the time) with renaming the company. Her work in establishing this new name for the company and our distinctive logo has been widely praised.

ATG: *The company has grown considerably and offers some innovative products in the reference space. Is there a vision/philosophy that governs your efforts?*

JD: We are not unique in thinking that the needs of the user must be paramount. What sets **Credo Reference** apart is our belief that the role of reference goes beyond the finding of facts and figures — we see our role and responsibility as providing the technology to affect the

learning environment and improve information literacy. Users today are overwhelmed with the amount of information available to them and students are finding the initial stages of their research harder today than it was for previous generations. Reference content has been developed for centuries to address precisely this problem by giving context and vocabulary to the newest entrants to a field of study. **Credo** is all about inventing the best ways to use innovative technologies to fulfill research needs with both content *and* context. Librarians are at the nexus of information seekers and the information that best serves their needs. **Credo** is all about empowering librarians with the means to completely engage their knowledge and skills in the effort to improve the information literacy of learners.

ATG: *It takes a strong commitment on the part of employees to ensure success. How would you characterize the corporate culture at Credo? How has it evolved and impacted the company's efforts?*

JD: Our corporate philosophy is based on **Bela Hatvany's** core belief that a successful company is an ecology of diverse constituents — investors, employees, customers (libraries), users (patrons) and providers (publishers) — that will be healthy only if each constituency experiences themselves as well-served through their relationship to the company. **Credo** employees have a particular role in maintaining this culture of service to all constituents of the company. We are expected to be passionate about serving others and to maintain positive collaboration with others in our ecology. In doing so, we seek to come up with transcendent solutions that ensure success for and successful relationships between all our constituents. Solutions need to serve all the constituents in a

balanced way and, of course, need to be commercially viable, or they won't be sustainable.

Like many companies, **Credo** provides profit sharing and stock options so that employees can share in the value that they are creating. But **Mike** has introduced a number of things which uniquely contribute to a positive company culture. Every Friday morning we have a Breakfast and Learn where staff members or outside guests share an important part of their work. We also have service projects where all staff spend the day doing a community service project for a local library or school. One of the unique things **Mike Sweet** introduced three years ago is called "Be Good; Do Good." This is a voluntary program, and not everyone chooses to participate. If you choose a health or fitness goal for yourself and achieve it on your own terms (an honor system) you get a \$500 bonus. Three years ago one young mother who didn't want her daughters to experience her own fear of swimming decided to set her goal to swim a quarter mile in a pool. This year she has just finished one of two triathlons she's doing with an open-water swim.

ATG: *And can you tell us about your staffing? How big is your staff and your administrative structure?*

JD: I think it's a very exciting time at **Credo Reference**. As we expand our products and services, our staff is growing to support these changes. We have more than doubled our staff since 2008 and expect to grow even more in the coming months. What is really wonderful is the great diversity in expertise and backgrounds — we have librarians and technologists, people with backgrounds in finance and in education, Web marketers and writers. It is a great mix.

ATG: *Your product line has greatly expanded since the days of Xrefer. Can you talk a little about your current offerings? How do the individual pieces complement each other? What is the strategy behind your product development?*

JD: Since early in our history, **Credo** has focused on two core issues: discovery and connection. As a key step towards supporting these capabilities, we made the transition from "ready-reference" content to in-depth subject encyclopedias and unique reference materials from atlases to videos and images, all of which combined to form **Credo General Reference**. Our particular emphasis has been to support the core subjects of undergraduate education, though we continue to bring choices of content for **Credo** suitable for all library types. Feeding this content into platform features like the **Credo Concept Map** to its **Related Resources Linking**, we set the bar high for

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connecting titles and library resources for the benefit of users. The launch of **Topic Pages**, an all-in-one starting point for students to begin their research process, further combined quality research, images, and additional library resources such as databases and the library catalog. The nearly 10,000 **Topic Pages** provide great overview, background, and vocabulary information from **Credo Reference** content. As our e-reference offerings further developed, **Credo** launched Publisher and Subject Collections, which enable libraries to further augment their collections with subject-specific and publisher-specific reference titles. Today there are 38 Publisher Collections and 8 Subject Collections, all of which are available for perpetual purchase and subscription.

You can see that **Credo Reference's** products have developed around our mission of promoting information literacy and research effectiveness. Since each offering has built on past success and allowed libraries to realize their possibility for impact and to address challenges, we are enthusiastically looking forward to launching our next product, which will combine our current content with information literacy tools and services.

ATG: *According to your Website, Credo "provides libraries with General Reference and Publisher and Subject Collections offerings which can be customized to meet their institution's needs." How can libraries mix and match these various collections? Can you be more specific about your subscription options? What do you base your subscription pricing structure on? FTE? Budget Size? Why?*

JD: Our flagship product, **Credo General Reference**, is offered as an annual subscription. This service, currently at 560+ titles, or 3.4 million entries, and growing, offers broad coverage across all major subject areas, giving libraries an easy way to ensure they offer their users a well-thought-out collection. **Credo General Reference** also includes our nearly 10,000 **Topic Pages**. They provide a simple and smart way for libraries to extend their services and high-value online resources while managing costs. The **Credo** Publisher and Subject Collections enable libraries to build deep and authoritative reference eBook collections, based upon their unique needs, either by publisher or by discipline or by both. Pricing is based on library type and size (FTE or population served).

ATG: *You offer both subscriptions as well as perpetual purchase. Can you tell us how that works? What do you mean by perpetual purchase?*

JD: **Credo General Reference** is offered on a subscription basis. Our Publisher and Subject Collections, offered standalone OR alongside a subscription to **Credo General Reference**, are available for subscription or Perpetual Purchase. Perpetual Purchase is a one-time purchase that gives libraries the same perpetual rights as if they had purchased the hard copy of a title, but with all the added benefits that come with the **Credo Reference** technology. All options offer

against the grain people profile

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BORN AND LIVED: Oak Park, Illinois (through 18). Oberlin, Ohio (through College). New York City (through '69 and Woodstock). Boston, Mass. ever since.

EARLY LIFE: Newspaper boy (10 years), Ranch hand (haystacker) 5 summers at Marys River Ranch in Deeth, Nevada.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: All my career has been centered around online presentation of information and the enhancement of learning. I joined a start-up on Wall Street (**Interactive Data Corporation**) in 1968 that had 200 people and a super-computer focused on effective searching and presentation of financial information. In the early 90s I worked for the strategy company, **Symmetrix**, with teams that applied both technology and organizational principles to the challenges of creating learning organizations. In the late 90s I was President of **SilverPlatter**, an experience that introduced me to both **Bela Hatvany** and the library world. Just before joining **Credo Reference** I worked at **Harvard's Kennedy School of Government** in a program of executive education related to e-Government.

FAMILY: Fifth of five children. Mother: Library Researcher at **Encyclopedia Britannica**, Father: Biologist and Social Scientist.

Married for 37 years to **Gloria**, one of the best teachers of young people on the planet. Our two sons aged 28 and 33 are both teachers, fluent in a foreign language, athletic, musicians, avid readers and excellent cooks (and they have serious women in their lives who appreciate these things).

IN MY SPARE TIME: Reading, running, motorcycle touring, and playing piano.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *Lila and Zen* and *The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by **Robert Pirsig**; *The Worlds of Reference* by **Tom McArthur**; *On Followership* by **Robert Kelley**; *War and Peace* by **Leo Tolstoy**.

PET PEEVES: None. See below about "positive thinking."

PHILOSOPHY: I'm a fundamental fallibilist (**Karl Popper**) meaning that I believe in questioning everything and then building on what works. But I try to be open to the possibility that I have it all wrong.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Featured in a training film by the **American Management Association** as an example of a leader who exhibits "Positive Thinking."

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: To see in full-fledged adoption the following virtuous cycle: reference content on the open web draws uninitiated new learners into libraries where they benefit from accessing the truly valuable resources that librarians assemble for their benefit and thereby give financial returns to those who produce such valuable resources.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: The power of the expanding network on the web will build on the local and institutionally-specific knowledge and skills of librarians to enhance the online experience of the general population of life-long learners everywhere. 🐼

unlimited use both in the library and for remote users. Libraries have on-demand access to usage statistics and free MARC records to download for their catalog.

ATG: *You recently signed a deal with the Ex Libris Group to provide Credo Reference content to their users via Ex Libris Primo Central Index. Does this offer Ex Libris users access to all Credo Reference products? Are you looking to strike deals with other discovery service partners?*

JD: In fact, we have agreements in place with not only **Ex Libris** but also **Summon (ProQuest)** and **EBSCO Discovery Service**.

These agreements allow for our customers to access their **Credo Reference** collections through their discovery system. In addition, our agreements provide for **Credo Reference** content to be treated differently — so that it is not lost at the bottom of a reverse chronological results list. This special treatment of our content shows the importance of offering a clear starting point for research — reference has always filled that role, and we are thrilled to have these partnerships recognize the value our **Topic Pages** provide, especially at the start of a research endeavor.

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ATG: *What do you mean by special treatment of your content? Where would links to Credo content appear in the discovery search display? At the top of the display? As a separate facet?*

JD: Each of our discovery service partners is taking a different approach to distinguishing our content in their searches. **Serials Solutions**, for example, is currently working with us to load all of the **Credo Topic Pages** into **Summon** to give users a reference layer. **Summon** will weigh reference content more heavily to have it “bubble” to the top of the search. **EBSCO Discovery Service** will develop two Credo Reference widgets — one for **Topic Pages** and one for all **Credo** content. The widgets will offer a reference layer on every search results page in EDS. In addition, Enhanced branding and a reference facet will be added to **Primo Central** to provide quick access to **Credo’s** reference material.

ATG: *Portable devices are becoming ubiquitous. Has all Credo content been formatted so it can be easily downloaded to multiple portable devices in a useable form?*

JD: First, I should point out that **Credo**, especially **Credo’s Topic Pages**, which live on the open Web, show really well on the **iPad** — it’s our favorite way to demo them. While the boundary between smartphones and tablets will continue to blur, there are definitely some reference needs which fit into the workflow supported by a cell phone. The more substantive exploration of a subject for a student looking for the big-picture context will naturally require a larger format such as you see in the **iPad**. We will be adding more smartphone features in 2012.

ATG: *You touted Credo Topic Pages as “the Librarian’s Answer to Wikipedia.” How successful are they proving to be in competing with Wikipedia for user attention? What type feedback are you getting from librarians? And more importantly, what is the student feedback?*

JD: First, it’s important to point out that **Wikipedia** has succeeded in capturing user attention beyond anyone’s wildest dreams, including that of those who founded **Wikipedia**. **Wikipedia** has proven the incredible utility of reference content. What **Credo** brings to the table is access to entirely credible sources, much like what **Wikipedia** tries to include when they describe what references make a well-written **Wikipedia** article. **Credo** goes further, however, and this is what we mean by the “**Librarian’s Answer**.” We tightly couple reference content from the top academic publishers in the world to the particular resources of an individual library. We are using authoritative reference content to take users to places they will value, given that these resources are assembled by their institution’s librarians. The audience of **Wikipedia** is fundamentally generic. **Credo’s** content, through the actions of our customers, is focused on the particular needs of an individual library’s patrons.

We get excellent feedback from librarians on this approach. It is also something that they see which distinguishes **Credo** from the many publisher-specific platforms that hope to create a single “sandbox” for students and learners populated only by one publisher’s materials. **Credo** is publisher-neutral, which means that we are glad to pass along users who come our way onto the place they find most valuable to continue their quest.

Student feedback to our **Concept Map** and **Topic Pages** is outstanding. When we do usability tests with students it is not unusual for students to get literally enraptured by the topic at hand. They try out a topic to search for and then get completely taken up by all the various paths that **Credo** opens up for them.

ATG: *Has there been a significant increase in the use of Credo reference sources increases since Topic Pages were added to your product line? How much?*

JD: The numbers are very encouraging. **Topic Pages** generate about 30% more page views than a single entry, and about 30 to 40% more unique visits.

ATG: *Another new Credo initiative we’ve been hearing about is “Libraries Thriving,” which sounds like your effort to create an online community. Other providers have attempted similar efforts with varying degrees of success. Is there anything about “Libraries Thriving” that makes it unique?*

JD: Glad that you asked! Our CEO, **Mike Sweet** initiated the idea of **Libraries Thriving** after a plenary session at the **2010 Charleston Conference**. In this plenary, **Credo Reference** lead a discussion about how publishers and libraries can collaborate and innovate for the benefit of users. The current educational community reflects that spirit, since it is comprised of librarians, educators, researchers, publishers, and library vendors. The community is free to all members and, to address challenges in the current climate, offers an editor-led Discussion Forum covering diverse topics such as “Marketing your Library,” “Information Literacy for First-Year Students,” “Libguides and Subject Guides,” and others; a Learning Community where an international group of librarians, faculty and IT staff engage on key educational technology issues and share their case studies; a free online seminar series covering key technical issues limiting progress in libraries; surveys and research, and more.

The early success of the online community is clear from the diversity of the participation and the newly announced advisory board. The **2011 Charleston Conference** will feature presentations from Learning Community participants such as **Marshall University** and the **American University of Paris**, as well as an **Oxford-style** debate on whether libraries are thriving, in collaboration with **Multi-Grain**. *Against the Grain’s* online community (<http://www.against-the-grain.com/multigrain/>). I’d encourage all your readers to visit: www.librariesthriving.org.

ATG: *You have said that Credo is “100% focused on reference.” Why? A number of people think that reference publishing is a dinosaur in today’s world of Google and Wikipedia. What do you see that others don’t?*

JD: One of the things that struck me after hearing “reference is dead, users want to Google everything” is while this theory sounds logical, it’s not very plausible. Reference locked up in a print volume, or even copied as pdfs to an online representation of the printed page, completely fails to deliver its value. But re-invented into a system where users discover reference content at their moment of need and then are brought seamlessly to a myriad of new places they ought to go next — that is really valuable. It’s a matter of authority, workflow — connectedness, selection, and specificity of purpose. However, it’s not simply a matter of the need for these resources. It’s far more complex than that. Obviously, one of the most discussed issues in the entire library market is that of containing costs. For some, declaring “reference is dead” gives them a simple way to reduce their budget. Something that seems to have been lost in the debates over reference is that libraries themselves are changing, and reference must change with them. We have been doing a lot of work on our strategy for developing solutions to support the changing library environment. Reference is not just about the question, it’s about the service. It’s about making advised resources available at the point-of-use. Some of the difficulties with traditional reference products stem from the fact that they are frequently unavailable or inconvenient to the user. In addition, as a rule, users often bounce in and out of various siloed library resources feeling frustrated. Using our **Credo** technology, libraries are better able to manage their users’ experiences by connecting them seamlessly to other relevant library resources. The technology provides a centralized way to provide a high level of service to each user that is available 24/7/365. They have at their fingertips a comprehensive view of their topic through vast reference content as well as journals, books, databases, and so on that the library subscribes to, all from one centralized resource. This, in addition to our partnerships with discovery systems vendors, offers a powerful opportunity for libraries to differentiate by deploying innovative ways to improve service and manage costs.

ATG: *It seems like all of this technological innovation aims to provide the advisory services formerly performed by reference librarians. Maybe it is not reference that is dead but reference librarians who are going the way of the dinosaur. Your thoughts?*

JD: Excellent question. First I assert that nothing technological can replace the human-to-human assistance that a highly-trained reference librarian can provide to a learner. But we know that not every reference need can be delivered with that care and attention — it simply doesn’t scale to our 24/7, life-long, and distance-learning world. So we have to develop tools and technologies that extend the reach of face-to-face reference librarianship. What surprises me is how most of the vendor world is not asking the right questions. For example, what aspects of a reference interview can inform the quest for better tools to support learners anytime, anywhere? A good part of the answer is that reference librarians know a lot about their local institution and the learner’s goals even before the reference

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Interview — John G. Dove
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interview begins. Good online reference tools need to find ways to capture and present such local context. Another avenue of inquiry towards dramatically better use of reference content in an online world is revealed by recognizing the role reference works and reference librarianship can have to serve the larger goals of the library: to enhance the life-long information literacy of learners who pass their way.

ATG: *Are there any other new Credo initiatives in the pipeline that you can discuss without giving away company secrets?*

JD: I'm very excited about the various initiatives we have undertaken in recent months to build momentum as we enter a new era for **Credo Reference**. We are very well-positioned, perhaps much better than most, to serve as a strategic partner that can help libraries manage these unpredictable times and capitalize on the opportunities that arise from the evolving teaching and learning environment. For example, we have dedicated significant attention and resources to updating and increasing our product portfolio — including the upcoming launch of a new product in the works that is pointed squarely at improving information literacy. I won't give away too much! I can say that as we

move ever closer to a world that demands true information literacy — which I believe to be inevitable at this point — we at **Credo** think it behooves us to listen very carefully to the various issues being discussed, particularly the most critical ones. When we do this our products do not become merely products, but solutions.

ATG: *John, we appreciate you taking the time to talk to us about Credo Reference. We have learned a lot, not only about the company and the products you provide, but we have also gotten a sense of how you and Credo view reference and its future.*

JD: It was my pleasure. 🌳

ATG Interviews David Burleigh

Director of Marketing, OverDrive

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *Can you tell us something about yourself? How long have you been with OverDrive? What other experience have you had working in the library market?*

DB: I have been with **OverDrive** since 2006 as Director of Marketing. My background is in healthcare, professional services, and high-tech manufacturing. This was my first foray in the library channel. I have a masters degree from **Northwestern University** in Integrated Marketing Communications.

ATG: *Although OverDrive was founded in 1986 as a distributor of interactive diskettes and CD-ROMs, the company is now a major provider of downloadable digital and audio content to libraries. What are the main factors contributing to this successful evolution? How were you able to anticipate the growing demand for this type of content and then tap into the market?*

DB: We've always believed in digital media, which we define as digital books, eBooks and audiobooks, music and video, now moving into interactive books, streaming media, etc. It's all we've done since our founding. There are many factors that have contributed to the evolution, including publishers' ability to provide their popular content in popular formats, which has been largely driven by agreement within the industry on standard formats, and improved hardware and software. As a leading distributor in this space, we work with our partners closely to determine which new models and features will best serve the growing numbers of users.

ATG: *You mention that OverDrive is a leading distributor in this space. Who are your main competitors and what do you bring to the table that they don't?*

DB: I'd rather not have attribution about who our main competitors are, but you can

undoubtedly name them. Our competitive advantages are that digital distribution is all we do, and we have long-term relationships with more than 1,000 publishers and 15,000 public and school libraries worldwide. Feature-wise, we are known to have the best selection (largest catalog), best service (training, support), and best user experience (apps/compatibility, all formats on one Website, and integration with library's ILS and OPAC).

ATG: *Up until now, OverDrive's main market has been public libraries, but recently you announced that you were expanding your delivery network to school and academic libraries. Can you tell us a little about that? Is this in the pilot phase, or is this a fully developed service? Does it differ in any way from your public library delivery network?*

DB: **OverDrive's** eBook & audiobook services for schools (including K-12 and academic, not to mention corporate libraries) are based on a similar platform serving more than

15,000 public libraries worldwide. We're now up to a few hundred schools who are lending eBooks & audiobooks to their students. It's a logical extension of the public library platform, specific to schools, serving a growing need. It's a fully-developed service with more than 100,000 eBooks & audiobooks for children and young adults covering popular bestsellers to a variety of subjects including foreign language learning, study guides, history, and more.

ATG: *How many total books does OverDrive offer access to? Aside from fiction titles are there subject categories that OverDrive is particularly strong in?*

DB: Our title count is now upwards of 600,000 across all subjects and genres. This includes music and video, but the vast majority are eBooks and audiobooks. Our catalog includes titles in 52 languages.

ATG: *Will you be providing textbooks, or is the emphasis on eBooks that support curriculum and research goals? Is this primarily a K-12 effort or will you be making a big push into the academic library market? Will consortia pricing be available?*

DB: We offer many eBooks and audiobooks that support curriculum and research goals in both K-12 and academic settings, as well as popular eBooks and audiobooks for recreational reading, but not textbooks at this time. We currently provide services for districts and for individual school buildings.

ATG: *When you say academic settings you appear to be focused on K-12. Are there any specific collections/services intended for the college and university market?*

DB: We do supply the libraries of **McGill University** in Montreal and **University of Pittsburgh**, as well as a number of smaller state and private two- and four-year colleges,

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