

Relevance from reality

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RELEVANCE FROM REALITY

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Introduction

Lifelong learning has been recognized as a key issue for both individuals and organizations in staying competitive. Learning new skills and maintaining the obtained knowledge has become acknowledged as such an important issue that business companies and public organizations have started to add human resource accounting to their financial data. At the personal level, lifelong learning sometimes requires taking a long step in a new direction -- perhaps even to a new profession. More often it means, however, updating the personal knowledge required for the successful accomplishment of everyday tasks.

Learning new skills and updating old ones can be obtained by attending formal or experiential educational opportunities. There is an abundance of education offered to those willing to study. The methods vary from short seminars and lectures to entire academic programs. Although lifelong learning is usually considered to mean studying in educational organizations, I broaden the term to include all different ways of learning. For some people, learning by doing is more suitable and I think it will, in certain cases, lead to the goal -- increased competitiveness and better working motivation -- just as well.

I still remember my enthusiasm when I first heard Dr. Leenamajja Ojala talk about lifelong learning in the 1992 FID Conference in Madrid. She names skills, creativity, speed, flexibility, and dedication to work as key issues in competitiveness. According to Dr. Ojala, Japanese society is a good example of lifelong learning, because the public school system gives a good basic education and companies spend time and money in continuing education.

Dr. Leenamajja Ojala also states that everybody is responsible for their own competitiveness. Therefore, it is essential that we as information professionals use every opportunity to develop our skills. With this attitude we keep our everyday work from becoming routine which causes frustration and prevents creativity.

Background

The arguments in this paper are based on my personal working experience in different organizations. Mostly I concentrate in my latest sojourn in the industrial sector.

My career in the information field started in 1984 when I got a job at the Technical Research Centre of Finland (VTT) to be trained as an information specialist. That was my first step into lifelong learning after graduation. For two years I worked in the Information Service of VTT and attended a nine month course at the Centre for Continuing Education that is now called The Lifelong Learning Institute Dipoli of Helsinki University of Technology. The principles of its functions are still the same: The Institute organizes courses and professional development programs in fields within the expertise of the university. In those days, many information professionals in Finland started their careers in the Technical Research Centre and it was common that they left VTT after a some years to work in industrial companies.

In 1986 I was offered a job in the information service of Imatran Voima Oy (IVO), a large Finnish power company. This experience in the industrial sector lasted until 1990 when I moved to Lappeenranta and started working in the University Library. Energy technology has always had a major role at Lappeenranta University of Technology (LUT). Many of the LUT students work in IVO for the summer or do their diploma thesis there. I really felt that I had something to give to those students whom I now served in the Library. In addition, Lappeenranta University of Technology also has a long tradition in combining technology with economy. Experience with an industrial information service also helped me understand the information needs of the students in the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management and later the Department of Business Administration which was founded in 1992.

In early 1990's, Finland was hit by a severe economic depression. Financial sources seemed to completely stop. For years no one changed jobs or had courage to look for something new to do. The University had economic problems as well. It was difficult to finance even normal functions and even harder to get funding for traveling or education no matter how essential it was. Many things had to be done the hard way because of a shortage of money. Among the employees, including me, there was a social demand for something refreshing.

Working in an industrial information service

In the spring of 1997 one of the information specialists of UPM-Kymmene Corporation at Kaukas, Lappeenranta left her job to substitute as a market analyst in the Business Development Department of the same company. UPM-Kymmene is one of the largest paper and pulp manufacturing companies in the world. The Kaukas information service needed a secondment to take care of her tasks. In this situation, I was offered a chance to gain new experience in the forest industry and update my knowledge of industrial information services at the same time. The possibility to trade jobs for a relatively short period was interesting and I expected to gain a lot of new ideas for my work serving the library customers and teaching the students information retrieval.

The LUT Library serves undergraduate and postgraduate students, those participating in continuing education, researchers, students from other local schools, industrial

companies, and the general public. The Library staff is already very busy and therefore it was obvious that an eight month period without one information specialist would be impossible. However, a professional information specialist was willing to be my substitute and I could start my eight month "lending period."

Differences in the working tools

There was very little time to become acquainted with the job. During one afternoon my colleague, who I was supposed to substitute for, and I went through the most important tasks and concentrated on those that were the most unfamiliar to me. That was like jumping onto a moving train but I really enjoyed it.

In the "mechanical" part of the new work the biggest difference was the software with which I was completely unfamiliar. Instead of using Word or Word Perfect for word processing I had to learn Ami Pro. For telecommunication I had used Reflection but my new computer was equipped with Procomm Plus. LUT uses a teamwork software called GroupWise while the UPM-Kymmene Corporation has chosen Lotus Notes. The benefit of all this was that I really had to think about how software works and what it is used for. Basically, all programs have the same properties but they work a little differently. The various actions just had to be found.

The Internet is not nearly as widely used in the business world as it is in universities in Finland. It took weeks before I was allowed an Internet connection. In the UPM-Kymmene Corporation data security is taken very seriously and all Internet connections go through a firewall computer. The firewall slows down data transfer. Therefore, all online searching is done by using a modem using the traditional command languages. The online host WWW-pages are not used at all.

With access to the Internet I was able to share my experience with customers. I also had many opportunities to teach end-users how to use search engines like Alta Vista or Infoseek or where to find relevant information. In searching in the Internet, some of the requests were not within my previous expertise. Once one of the company doctors was writing an article about electronic information sources in the field of occupational health and he came to interview me on the subject. I had to study the subject carefully before the interview. Afterwards, I promised I would give a lecture to the other doctors and occupational safety personnel on the subject. I was pleased to do it, although it was three months after my return to the University.

Internal databases are very important and widely used in UPM-Kymmene. Lotus Notes gives excellent possibilities to share information with people in different locations all over the world. In a business environment, information must be delivered quickly and accurately and for that purpose databases with restricted access work wonderfully. In the late 1980's when I worked for IVO there were already some internal databases in use but the software was not yet very sophisticated. In the universities they are used mainly for administrative purposes or to store research information.

Differences in searching

In the University Library the number of online searches has decreased during recent years while end-user consulting has become a more and more important part of the information specialists' work. In UPM-Kymmene both managers and employees request searches instead of searching themselves. I really enjoyed "real search language", complicated profiles, and powerful search tools which are rarely used in e.g. CD-ROM databases. I could also refresh my knowledge about those online databases that are seldom used in university libraries. For example, risk reports are never retrieved because of their prices, but they are very important to companies.

In a public information service, all searches are confidential. Therefore, very little information is stored about the subjects or profiles. In companies it is different. For example, in the company I worked in, information about searches was stored in an internal database in order to be used if something needed to be checked or someone asked the same question later. Also, for other repeatedly occurring questions, there are internal files to fulfill information needs.

There was also a change in the subject category of search requests. In the University most questions deal with different technologies but now I was responsible for business information. That included both online searching and SDI's. News data were a new responsibility to me and I spent long hours e.g. with the Reuters news service trying to figure out problems in both technical matters and subject categories.

Differences in indexing

The Kaukas information service has its own electronic library catalogue and other related databases based on TRIP. They have their own keyword lists for indexing. I understand why this method has been chosen: it requires less work to create or update. Moreover, there are actually no suitable classification systems for forest industry literature. The UDC which is used in university libraries in Finland is too general. But I really missed the benefits of a hierarchical classification.

At first I did not know the vocabulary very well. Therefore it took time to index the material. In addition to books, research reports written by the company's own research staff were also indexed and marketing surveys were even abstracted. The amount of acquired material was much greater than I had expected.

Back to the University

At the beginning of this year I returned to my position in the University Library. Again I jumped onto a moving train only this time the speed was not as fast because of the holiday season. I had a few days to stumble with forgotten passwords and lost UDC skills.

I have now had four months time to think about the benefits of my sojourn. Firstly, I am very happy because of the break in a succession of busy years. The time in Kaukas was just as busy but in a different way. I am also very pleased to have had new colleagues who welcomed me warmly and made me feel as a part of the team even though I was a temporary worker. The good personal relations have continued regardless of the different organizations.

The experience gave me a deeper knowledge of the forest industry in general and the paper industry in particular. Now it is easier for me to communicate with the customers - students, researchers, and business information services - in that field. Now I also know much more about the business environment that our students enter when they graduate. It has changed a lot during the last seven or eight years. I have noticed that students and their teachers really appreciate hearing about the possibilities that modern business information services offer. It also pleases me to be able to advise future engineers and economists about the reality they face in the near future.

The cooperation between the University and UPM-Kymmene Kaukas has always been very strong. The University Library and the Kaukas information service have also had close connections over the years. Some members of the staff at Kaukas teach or study at the University and many of the former LUT students work for the company. They have now found their way to me in the Library probably because they feel I speak "their language".

The skills I learned and the knowledge I was able to update are also very important. The fact that my customers at Kaukas asked different questions than the customers at the University gave me an opportunity to examine many databases that I don't normally use in the Library. Also, the contents of business related databases became familiar to me. I try to transfer as much as possible of this knowledge to the students during our tailored information retrieval courses.

Conclusions

The only stable thing in life is change. To stay relevant and competitive in today's world we must keep up with it. In university libraries and in particular in technical university libraries it is essential that information professionals know the reality where they send their students after graduation and where their customers live. This knowledge can be acquired by staying in close relationship with the business world. Changing jobs can be one way towards that goal.

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