Models of Success: Lessons from Successful Embedded Librarians

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ABOUT EMBEDDED LIBRARIANSHIP
Embedded Librarianship emphasizes the development of strong, collaborative working relationships between librarians and information users.
Embedded Librarians are fully integrated into the work of the parent organization.
Embedded Librarians are "a model for the future of reference expertise." --Lee Rainie, Pew Internet & American Life Project

THE RESEARCH
Purpose:
Building on the "Models of Embedded Librarianship" project results, to further explore the practices of successful embedded librarianship programs and enrich our understanding of the strategies and tactics associated with success.

Methodology:
Site visits conducted June, 2011.
Semi-structured interviews with librarians, library managers, information users, and senior managers.
Interview notes and recordings analyzed, case study summaries drafted.

THE STUDY SITES
Six sites:
• Three academic: one research university, one community college system, one for-profit university
• Three corporate: one privately-held multinational, one law firm, one not-for-profit
All successfully operating an embedded librarianship program over at least a five-year period.
Two re-visits of sites visited in 2009

THE FINDINGS
Engagements:
• Most engagements are tactical / ad hoc, not strategic
• Strategic engagements are growing
  • Academic institutions are beginning to make strategic choices about defining information literacy learning goals and focusing information literacy instruction in key courses
  • At a major international law firm, librarians have been embedded in all teams working on a major strategic initiative
Bottom line: Start ad hoc if you must, but work toward strategic engagement.

Nature of the Librarians’ Contributions:
• In higher education, embedded librarians teach information literacy
  • Classroom instruction is being supplanted to a degree by engagement in courseware and the use of self-paced tutorials
• In the corporate environments, embedded librarians perform more diverse tasks, including in-depth research and analysis, news alerting, content management, knowledge management, and some information literacy instruction
  • The primary functions of these librarians are research and news alerting
  • At a forward-looking nonprofit, librarians introduced automated tools to streamline news alerting, thus freeing themselves to take on other tasks.
Bottom line: Deliver the highly professional, value added work your colleagues need, whatever that may be.

Communication and Promotion:
• In academic environments, communication and promotion depend heavily on:
  • Word of mouth and outreach via multiple channels to faculty
  • At one site, the librarians mined library requests and reached out to professors teaching courses that generated heavy reference traffic
• In the corporate sector:
  • None of the sites had a formal marketing strategy
  • All found repeat business to be the best promotion; experiences and tactics varied
Bottom line: Use referrals, repeat engagements, and adjust your communications to the environment you’re in. There’s no “one size fits all.”

THE FINDINGS (Continued)
Evaluation:
• In higher education, librarians are moving from reliance on faculty and student feedback (course evaluations, etc.) toward assessment of student progress on information literacy learning objectives
• In the corporate organizations:
  • The clearest indicator of success at all three sites was continued demand from user groups
  • Two of the three charged information user groups for their embedded librarians; thus willingness to pay was a key indicator
  • Information user involvement in librarian performance evaluations, and other formal evaluation methods were not common
Bottom line: In the academic sector, move toward formal evaluation against learning goals. In the corporate sector, consider emphasizing management coordination and communication rather than formalized evaluation.

Management Advocacy:
• Senior management support was a key factor in all academic institutions and the law firm
• Library management participation in senior-level councils and meetings facilitated the shift from tactical / ad hoc to strategic embedded engagements
• Two corporations have formal processes for contact and coordination between library management and information user group management
• One corporation has established “clusters” to facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing among embedded and non-embedded librarians
Bottom line: Library management has to lead actively across multiple dimensions, including strategic engagement with senior executives, midlevel coordination, and support for staff.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
The Embedded Librarian blog: http://www.embeddedlibrarian.com
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