

The Role of Libraries in Economic Restructuring

SARA FINE*

This article describes some of the ways in which libraries, both academic and public, can become key players in the process of economic restructuring and development. In Eastern Europe, for example, we have seen powerful waves of political and economic change sweeping over one country after another, demanding that long-standing economic theories be revised and old ways of conducting business be reconsidered. New schools of business and management, modelled on Western schools of business, are coming into existence. In all of these processes, the primacy of the need for information to support transition and growth is unassailable. This article discusses some of the information needs of modern economic life and argues that support for libraries and the training of librarians in the skills to develop business-related libraries, easily accessible by communities of users, is crucial to the health of business education programs, the communities of small businesses and, therefore, to the general economic health of a country.

INTRODUCTION

The transfer of scientific and technical information has for a long time occupied the attention of researchers, librarians, information specialists, industry and governments around the world. Scientific and technological achievement has been the major discriminator between developed and developing countries. As we have seen in recent times, however, the waves of scientific, technical and industrial developments are not the only major forces that effect a growing demand for easily accessible information.

Many countries around the world are in the process of economic restructuring and development. In Eastern Europe, for example, we have seen powerful waves of political and economic change sweeping over one country after another, bringing with them both hardships

* Professor, School of Library and Information Science, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, USA.

and opportunity, demanding that long-standing economic theories be revised, traditional ways of thinking be reordered, old ways of conducting business be reconsidered.

But times of economic hardship are also times heavy with dilemmas and insistent, conflicting demands for scarce resources. One such dilemma profoundly challenges the information professions to respond: in order for an economy to grow, information is essential, not only for major industrial producers but for the small business enterprises that form the basis for economic health. Without a strong level of independent entrepreneurs and small businesses, economic development cannot be sustained. The ability of the small business sector and the customers it serves, as well as the non-profit and volunteer sectors of a community, to solicit data relevant to decision-making, to obtain access to it at acceptable costs and through non-expert and non-restrictive processes, and to learn to use it effectively, is crucial to growth and stability. The dilemma is that in times of economic instability, the means to provide information to the small business community seems a low priority and is, therefore, poorly supported at the point when it is most urgently needed.

Support for libraries is a case in point. The theme of modern librarianship, universally faced with limited resources, is to avoid duplication of materials, resources and manpower, and to ensure the most efficient and cost-effective means of meeting user needs and demands. Librarians have the skills to build collections of information where no such collection exists, to pull disparate data together so that new information is formed, to organize it so that it is useful and usable, to add to its richness and delete the obsolete, and to provide access to information wherever it is located. Librarians around the world are developing the means to transfer information in a variety of ways, to apply technological management to its use, and to serve as the human mediator between a vast array of information resources and the needs of individual users and groups of users. These are the skills inherent in the practice of librarianship that can be exploited as invaluable assets in an unstable economic environment.

The focus of this article is on two inter-related arenas in which librarians can become critical players in a climate of economic restructuring; one is the academic library arena, the other the public arena.

THE BUSINESS SCHOOL LIBRARY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

As governments plan and change, and as the economies of developing countries continue to shift ground and struggle to survive the crises of

transition, other institutions must follow suit, and thereby struggle with their own transition crises. For example, it is now clear that if countries in economic transition are to maintain momentum in moving toward a free market economy, competitive in the international marketplace, universities and schools of management will need to redefine their historic and traditional role and to become engaged as active partners with the business community by educating a new breed of professionals. In one country after another there are already major efforts underway to revise existing curricula, re-educate educators, and recruit a new breed of students with new talents and ambitions. New institutions for teaching Western management and business methods are being established, devoted to the education of young managers who will be able to assume leadership in future economic enterprises. In countries undergoing economic restructuring and development, educational institutions are changing as rapidly as they can to keep pace with the winds of economic upheaval.

But modernizing the teaching function alone is not enough. Teaching must be supported by an up-to-date, dynamic and adaptable library operation, and information-literacy must become an integral part of the curriculum if faculty and students are going to successfully maneuver in international economic waters. The international transfer of information has become just as critical to the business education community as it has always been to the scientific and research communities.

The heart of the educational institution has always been the library. In Eastern Europe, for example, the tradition of the library as the heart of the university is a strong one. Rare and valuable old collections that reside in European libraries are the envy of American scholars. But the idea that the library is the linchpin of business education and the breeding ground for technological innovation is a new one for economically developing countries, a tradition-in-the-making. For example, a review of Hungarian and Polish universities and colleges and their programs in business administration, and a review of other existing libraries and special collections, reveals that there are no libraries in either country, academic or public, that can adequately support the goals of economic restructuring or the education of future managers. In addition, a review of library school programs and curricula in these countries indicates that at this time library schools are not prepared to provide specialization in the area of business librarianship.¹

On a visit to Hungary, the author visited the library of the International Management Center in Budapest. The Center, a joint venture between the Katz School of Business of the University of Pittsburgh and the Hungarian business community, provides intensive and high

level training in Western business theories and methods to young Hungarian managers. The Center is beautifully housed in the Saccellary Chateau facility; the library of the Center is artful and usable. Its collection, modelled on a small scale after the libraries of Western schools of business and management, is current and appropriate for the training program it supports.

But even this new and up-to-date library is at risk of becoming obsolete. In this age of rapidly expanding information, to be static is to be obsolete. In order for such libraries to grow and flourish and to remain a viable resource for faculty and students, they must be provided with two things. First of all, libraries must receive priority attention from policy makers and funding sources. Second, librarians must be provided with the training leading to specialized skills in designing and managing a business school library and its technological development. Business school libraries, like their counterparts in science and technology, must be able to network with other libraries and other types of libraries and information sources; they must have the technological capability to access fluid and constantly changing information; they must develop collection policies that are appropriate to their goals and to the limitations of their resources. One of the major challenges facing librarians today is to make the best possible use of limited resources. Only under such conditions can business school libraries serve their clients, whether as students or faculty, in a free and competitive marketplace.

Business school libraries have another potential and related function. As students become professionals, they often turn back to their business school library for information. To serve the goal of economic development and support efforts to vitalize the private business sector, business school libraries could also be designed to serve as "libraries to business". There are various ways that the business school collection could be expanded to be relevant to the business community. Its facilities could be opened to the community, or special collections could be developed and housed in a neighborhood public library, thereby making business information more accessible to community users. Libraries are not only important for the education of future managers, they can also become an important resource for students as they themselves move into positions within the business community.

Large companies can afford to support their own information centers. The systems to access information on foreign companies and markets already exist for the use of those who know how to get it.² But business school libraries could become free and accessible sources of information for small businesses as well.

The first arena in which librarians must become key players is in

business educational institutions, first by providing support for the education of future business managers and entrepreneurs, and then by taking an active role in teaching information skills as an integral part of the business education curriculum. The second is in providing direct service to the community of small businesses by expanding the role of the public library and the populations it serves.

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

It has become clear to countries seeking entry into the world marketplace that economic growth requires access to a whole range of information from local, national and international sources to meet the needs of both big and small businesses. The development of systems to acquire and transmit information—and to construct new information—is one of the most complex tasks in the process and is a crucial factor in the success of any level of economic enterprise. The problem is compounded by the necessity to sift through the increasing volume of information available and to cull the relevant from the mass. Not only is such information needed by government policy makers and industrial decision-makers, it is needed by small businesses and individual entrepreneurs as well. The economic health of a country is inexorably dependent on the economic health of its communities, and a healthy community information infrastructure is strongly linked to successful economic efforts to attract new businesses and industry to a region. A changing economic environment demands decision-making that is based not only on intuition, experience and wisdom; it also demands that decisions be based on varieties of information, much of which is in an ephemeral and constantly changing state.

The centrality of information as an essential economic tool is a clear and unquestioned concept, so clear that a major component of large corporations is concerned with the management of information flow. For the small business person, the reality of information is often cloudy and obscure. Where do people engaged in a small business enterprise turn for information? How do they access it once they know it exists and that they have a need for it? In fact, how do they become aware that such information is available if they don't know of its existence? How do users sort out pertinent from irrelevant information, and, once they have the information they need, how do they learn to use it effectively? How do communities of small business people generate and share new information, and how do they turn raw data into information that is relevant to their collective needs? How do they learn of the experiences of other communities struggling with similar issues? Who

are the professionals to whom they can turn who have the skills and experience to supply response to the urgent information demands of economic enterprise? Where are their resources housed, to whom are they available, and how can they best be exploited to the maximum benefit of the information user? These are the questions that librarians need to respond to by standing up and saying, "We are here, ready to become partners in economic recovery. This is what we have been trained to do."

In essence, the public library can become a most important resource for the community, providing freely accessible information, without charge to the user, that is relevant to the particular community it serves.² An example of such a public library-based community information service has been developed and is successfully operating in one American community.

The service is called NeighborLINE. It is housed in a small public library located in a low-to-middle income community, ethnically mixed, the target of major city efforts at revitalizing its small businesses. The population served at the branch library includes small business people and entrepreneurs as well as the general community of readers and information users. NeighborLINE can be described as a one-step storehouse of facts, figures and technology to help communities help themselves solve their social and economic problems. The basic collection includes a core of practical publications, including government publications, and access to the most current relevant periodicals.

The service is designed to supply such information as local housing occupancy and vacancy patterns and current real estate values; ways to identify new funding sources and alternative financing strategies; the changing nature of the marketplace and economic trends; legal issues that affect business decisions; employment trends and career opportunities; product information and consumer concerns; demographics and vital statistics, census information, and other business and economic data. As in other modern business-related libraries, the collection will include information on foreign markets, the availability and location of scientific and technical information, and other business and economic data. As in other modern business-related libraries, the collection will include information on foreign markets, the availability and location of scientific and technical information, statistics on energy and the environment, economic issues affecting and affected by trends in agriculture, local-specific information on individual businesses and on local neighborhood opportunities and products.

As user needs are identified and funds become available, other resources will be added to round out the information flowing through

the system and to the community of users. One of the goals of the service is to develop directories of information, allowing users a greater awareness of what information is available and where it is stored. The service is fluid, changing as community life and individual needs change. Indeed, it changes as the community that spawns it changes.

A key component of the service is that it supplies the public with computer access and the use of electronic telecommunications facilities, without charge to the user. Small businesses can generally ill afford such facilities for themselves, and this service makes the tools of business available at minimal cost through sharing. In a period of economic austerity, public use of business-relevant technology which is housed in a public facility, under the direction of trained information professionals, is a way of exploiting limited resources to their fullest potential. One of the spin-off effects of the service is that business people become technology-literate in the most effective way: by using technology in dealing with their own personal business needs.

The service offers paid and volunteer staff specialists to manage the service and assist users. Library school students participate in the program in order to gain library experience and sharpen their skills in a community information specialization. The participation of students provides the service with dependable staff, working under the supervision of a graduate school faculty. At the same time, future professionals are being prepared for positions as community information management specialists. We have found that this arrangement has begun to have an impact on the curricula of schools of library and information science and telecommunications as well as graduate departments of public policy and urban development, economics, business and sociology, and we have begun to see the development of inter-disciplinary programs between university departments in the management of community information.

For the future, plans are underway to help other communities to develop similar projects, eventually leading to a nationwide public library-based, demand-driven, decentralized information-sharing service and communications network for the citizens of our various communities, both urban and rural. By sharing their information and pooling their experiences, communities enter the business of helping themselves by helping each other. The public library then has the potential to become a force for community, and national, development and growth. The facilities are already in place; the information specialists already have the basic skills.

There are other ways in which a library-based community information system can affect the direction that community development

will take. First of all, the library can become a "community memory bank", a repository of experience and events that affect the community's present and future. In a fast-paced development effort, many programs to support specific economic targets will be launched; some will succeed, others will fail. In order to gain maximum benefit from those programs, whether they succeed or fail, there needs to be a record of those experiences so that further programs and projects can make use of those experiences. The record must be open to the public and their use actively promoted. The information contained in them must be shared across invisible geographic, political and economic boundaries.

Another dimension of this concept of community information exchange is that it provides grass roots enlightenment. A central issue in the success of a democratic, free enterprise system is that the community of citizens be informed and involved: informed enough to make considered decisions and involved enough to participate actively in the process of economic development. This project makes the public library a central player in the informing of the citizenry.

The library can have yet another information role to play by providing a crucial referral function. In the context of a community information exchange system, the "database gateway" function is, in essence, a "pointing" service, pointing out where local information can be found in its original sources and where international database information exists and can be accessed. Eventually the database gateway concept will lead to the development of directories. In concept, the library not only stores available information but provides direction to the existence of other information and where to turn to find it. With the development of document delivery technologies, a clear trend is emerging for the future toward the actual delivery of such documents to users through the capabilities of the library.

The role of the public library as an information switching point can go beyond service to citizens and citizen groups. The collection, combination and dissemination of economic information to the various levels of government (i.e., from local to national, from national to local, as well as to business and labor, the media, volunteer sector groups, scholars and researchers, and to the general public), could become a valuable, necessary and well-accepted function of the public library. The library can become a conduit for information from abroad that affects the local marketplace, an even more critical need today for managing our economies, our societies and our personal affairs than ever before.

The most effective way to keep a true exchange of information alive and dynamic and to maximize its use and benefit is to bring it close to people and their communities.

There are many questions yet to be addressed about the role that libraries can play in the socio-economic changes underway. For example, what is the role to be played by the national library in providing information to support economic development? What relationships need to be developed between types of libraries, and how can they work together most effectively? What are some other applications for the model proposed (e.g., the concept of an agricultural extension service and the notion of the farmer as a small businessman)? What effect does economic restructuring have on library schools and their curriculum? What kind of training can be provided to practising librarians to update their skills and where can support be found to support such training? What kinds of information gathering devices need to be put into place to allow public libraries to collect non-traditional kinds of information? What is the role of government in providing such information to libraries? How can librarians make themselves more visible in the economic arena and project the image of the library as a vital institution that can serve new kind of clients? What kinds of processes can be put into place to assess the information needs of various communities for new kinds of services?

There is no question that libraries are expensive. They must be fed and nurtured; they must be weeded of the obsolete and the useless. They must be constantly updated as times and conditions and social values change. In order to be cost effective, they must co-operate with each other so that each will have potential beyond its own resources. They must avoid the duplication of materials, resources and manpower and develop the most efficient and cost effective means of meeting the increasing insistence of user needs and demands. The librarian of the future must be versed not only in classification theory but must understand the value, potential and limitations of information technology. The librarians must understand what technology can and cannot do, what value can be purchased at what price, which systems can be integrated with other systems. Technology is too expensive and too invasive to make mistakes, a lesson that has been hard learned by many developing countries.

If the role and the potential of libraries are undervalued in an economically developing country, if the training and retraining of practitioners is not supported, if the concept of the library as a community information resource is not recognized and demanded by the community of small businesses, if the specialized knowledge of the business librarian does not become a visible resource to the business community, then a potential asset in economic growth will not be realized.

The public library must position itself in a role of new relevance for those who make funding decisions by becoming a visible actor in the

larger picture of economic development. In so doing, the library becomes a prototype, a model for other public/private partnerships to achieve the common goal.

CONCLUSION

The concepts herein proposed have been implemented and tested in a variety of ways and in a diversity of communities across the USA. The underlying principle, the right of citizen access to information, is consistent with Western political, economic and social philosophy and history and, therefore, the concepts proposed are compatible with the social system in which they operate. As information production and diffusion become more and more integral to the economic functioning of individuals and communities in Western societies, the demand for vehicles for the dispersion of that information to broader audiences will undoubtedly continue to grow.

These concepts must be viewed in the social and political context in which they can exist and thrive. On one level, the relevance of information dispersion to economic development in Eastern Europe may be self-evident. After all, access to information is not only the luxury of an affluent society and a healthy economy. On the contrary, information is an essential tool in hard times, an essential tool for economic recovery and growth. But equally significant, information is itself a tool for social and political change and an essential tool for democratization.

Information has impact beyond itself. At this point in time, it is impossible to assess the impact of the massive influx of information on the changing societies of Eastern Europe. The political changes taking place within Eastern Europe are happening so fast and in such unpredictable fashion as to obscure the more subtle dynamics of concurrent social and economic change. As situations stabilize and patterns of information need and use and the impact become clearer, the role of libraries in the economic development of Eastern Europe may also become clearer. Until that time, it is impossible to make any firm pronouncements on what libraries should become. It is only possible to point out possibilities for bringing Western notions of information delivery to our Eastern European counterparts, to urge that they observe and monitor the changing face of information use over time, that they reconsider the traditional role of libraries as passive repositories of information, and that they consider some of the ways suggested here for actively bringing information to those who need it for their own survival and development.

REFERENCES

- 1 *International Handbook of Universities*; IFLA (1989).
- 2 *International Guide to Library and Information Science Education*; IFLA (1985).
- 3 *The World of Learning 1989*. Thirty-ninth Edition. London: Europa Publications Limited, 1989.
- 4 Holt, R. M. (1971). *Focusing library service on the economic community: an evaluation of an LSCA demonstration project in Pasadena and Pomona*. Del Mar, California: Raymond M. Holt and Associates, 1971.