



Why Abandoning Your Information Services Dept Can Be Costly



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Corporate information specialists no longer do what they used to do in the 90s, we know that. But despite this shift, the contribution of an information services department hasn't diminished – it's arguably done the opposite.

Yet, as information is now more easily found online, we sometimes see that organizations give this department less prominence, scrap it altogether, or never establish the department to begin with.

In this article, we explain why abandoning the idea of a centralized team of information experts probably isn't a good idea. We'll outline what subject matter expertise today's library specialists contribute – and how this expertise helps you get more out of your budget, and avoid costly errors.

Co-ordinate information spend via a single pot

Giving employees the freedom to acquire the resources they need when they need it can contribute to organizational efficiency – in some instances, e.g. where a particular tool such as a subscription to a publication is needed by just one or two people. However, in many cases, a lack of coordination can lead to excess spend.

For example, we recently had a case where a client accumulated five hundred individual subscriptions to a publication at an aggregate cost of \$500,000 per annum. So far, so good... except that the vendor informed us that our mutual client could have been covered for the same number of users under a single group subscription license for just \$200,000.

Unfortunately, in the case of our client, because there was no central actor to coordinate information spend, the client had been unable to roll up hundreds of individual contracts to save several hundred thousand dollars.

This coordination of spend is a key benefit of a central information services department, and it manifests in many ways:

- **Coordinated authority:** By directing buying decisions through the library services department your organization can negotiate better rates. Over and above bulk discounts, you can also benefit from negotiating large deals by pooling requirements through a single vendor.
- **Avoiding duplication:** An information specialist can stop unneeded subscriptions that duplicate existing information, or which are not a good fit for your organization. At times, that could involve providing expert justification as

to why a request for spend authorization was rejected or redirected to an alternative source.

- **Foundational services:** Librarians can assess which services are core, foundational information sources for an organization and negotiate an umbrella license at a lower cost. For example, an investment advisory firm should probably have a Wall Street Journal enterprise subscription that covers the entire firm.

Thanks to centrally controlled planning, organizations can spend intelligently – making the most out of an information budget. What's more, your information specialists will simply be better at identifying which products are a good fit for specific teams and the organization as a whole.

The procurement department isn't a replacement

If one of the core benefits of a library department is spending coordination, it's tempting to think that there's another department than can do that – the procurement department. However, your procurement department does not have the subject matter expertise to deal with the nuances of evaluating and buying information products.

Consider, for example, an organization involved in cutting-edge medical research. A competitor who knows what information that organization is searching for in medical journals can get insight into their competition's research trajectory. Search history would be highly confidential in this instance.

An information specialist will know that they need to make sure that a vendor's privacy and confidentiality policies meet requirements to keep search data safe. The procurement team, focused purely on cost, could completely miss this point – and put the organization's success at risk.

Limited subject matter expertise also means a lack of clout. Procurement teams will find it difficult to push back against authorization requests – even if they suspect the risk of service duplication, simply because they don't have the expertise to justify their decision.

Restricted expertise? Beware of glitches

Let's look a bit closer at the subject matter expertise that librarians bring to the table. We'll refer to two examples that are truly unique subject matter areas for information specialists: the correct licensing of sources, and rights and permissions.

Information products have unique, specialist licensing regimes that can be hard to interpret for outsiders, and which require internal control to adhere to. We see it all the time: an organization licensed a product for a specific use scenario, but in practice uses the product differently.

As a simple example, take a single-user license purchased for one individual's use, but where the access details end up being shared by a group. Information specialists

can police usage and either steer their colleagues to usage that is within the agreed terms – or upgrade the license terms.

It avoids a potentially expensive battle with the vendor. Your procurement team, on the other hand, won't fight that battle.

That goes for other key subject matter expertise too. Take copyright violations for example. Innocent accidents can happen and may be overlooked by the intellectual property owner. But, in the absence of professional guidance, these instances of misuse can become systemic and land your organization at the wrong end of a lawsuit.

Watch out, it can happen accidentally

We're not saying organizations are getting rid of information services departments at scale. In our experience, oftentimes, it doesn't happen deliberately – closing an information services department can be a gradual shift brought on by a few key events over a long period of time. For example:

- Librarians may not make an active effort to justify their roles as strongly as other employees and may therefore not be seen as valuable by leadership.
- Key employees retire or move on to other jobs and are simply not replaced because executives were not aware of the value that these employees bring.
- A few underperforming employees who lack the necessary skills to execute in their role bringing an entire department under question.
- Some information professionals get so caught up in mundane research tasks that they don't get the opportunity to illustrate their own value.
- Leadership mistakenly holds on to an outdated view of what an information services department does, and simply assumes that those services are no longer needed.

We'd suggest that organizations should exercise care not to lose their information experts, and always support these teams in their objectives. Without their expertise in place your information budget can balloon, and you could end up getting very poor value out of your spend. Worse, a lack of subject matter expertise can lead to very expensive mistakes.

Experts that can advocate for your needs

Finally, it's worth remembering the utility that your information experts offer to your colleagues. Information sources are increasingly self-service, but many staff members don't use information services on a daily basis and would therefore benefit from some guidance – guidance that only an expert can deliver.

However, as we illustrated, that expertise matters even more when we think about coordinating spending and licensing decisions and looking after key legal aspects of your information use. So don't let those skills drift away accidentally – and think twice about closing the department, especially if cost-saving is the driver. It most likely won't work.

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