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LIBRARY PARTNERSHIPS PLEASURES AND PROBLEMS

Associations such as the European Association of Health Information and Libraries (EAHIL) are perhaps partners on a grand scale, and we speak about human networking, which I would take to mean a group of friends or colleagues known well enough personally or through e-mail, to request help from each other. In this article I propose to discuss a very much narrower concept of partnership, one that you might find in business or some of the professions - two or more, libraries, who share specific objectives and agree on ways in which each partner can contribute to achieving their shared aims. A partnership thus requires greater commitment from its members and is limited in size.

Library partnerships can be great fun as well as beneficial, but it is necessary to weigh up the costs and the benefits. Haines (1) at the EAHIL meeting in Oslo made this point:

"...However, whilst benefits may accrue from networking, they are rarely free. There are many costs to co-operation, not all of which are readily apparent."

And the last point is all too true. At first sight a scheme may seem to benefit a library with little or no cost, but, if for example, it involves receipt of material, the sorting, indexing, cataloguing etc. will necessitate extra staff time. The material may be valuable but the "hidden" costs need to be identified as well as the more obvious ones.

There are three important factors which go to make a partnership successful:

- o The thoroughness with which the preliminary negotiations are undertaken;
- o The backing they receive from their institution and other influential people or organizations either within or outside their institution;
- o The commitment of the partners to the project, with a written agreement.

Preliminary negotiations

When the Medical Library at Makerere University became a partner with the University of Leicester's Clinical Sciences Library there were no in depth negotiations just a few e-mails and due to technological difficulties at the time (1991) some of these did not get through. The result was that the expectations of both partners were never fully explored. Thus photocopies were sent from the UK on request, but no other requests for help or advice were discussed nor was there any feedback from Uganda which might have been useful in furthering the project. There were no procedures for reporting receipt or chasing up requests for information. So messages or photocopies that were lost between the UK and Uganda, were not queried as quickly as they should have been. The partnership succeeded in some ways but the quality and depth of it was insufficient to make it sustainable in that form and a new start was needed.

This took the form of a new library partner from Case Western Reserve in the United States. The Librarian of the Health Sciences Library was funded to visit Uganda where he was able to discuss the problems and needs with the Ugandan Librarian face to face. Priorities and procedures could be sorted out; specific arrangements could be made with regard to equipment. All this took time to sort out even after their meeting, but the provision of faxes as well as photocopies met the users' needs a great deal better than before. The objective was realized.

Commitment

If a partnership is to be successful there must be commitment to the partnership objectives by all or both partners. Thus a degree of honesty and openness during the preliminary negotiations is necessary. It is very important to be realistic about what you have to offer, what it will cost and what you hope to receive from the partnership. These issues should form the basis of a written agreement.

Equally it is important to find out if the aims and objectives of the proposed partners are the same. If, as with a project on a particular bibliographic, health database, some of the participants have a commercial end in view, whilst others do not, the partnership is unlikely to be successful. Commercial considerations, local politics and other influences may prevent the sharing of data, expertise etc.- whatever might be necessary to fulfilling

the partnership's objectives. It is best to find this out at the beginning and to accept that some partnerships may not be viable despite the disappointments which such a decision may cause. In practice this means that the objectives of the partnership need to be drawn up early in negotiations, so that the role of each partner and the commitment involved in it may be determined at an early stage.

Institutional Backing

Institutional backing is vital to the success of partnership projects. It is necessary in that the institutions are likely to be bearing either all or at least some of the costs. The IFLA *Guidelines on Library Twinning* (3) suggest that forming a small committee within each institution can be very helpful, not only in obtaining the interest of senior management, but, if chosen carefully, in drawing in expertise which could enhance or broaden the partnership's effectiveness.

But if you are looking for support, it is important to prepare your case in some detail beforehand. An outline and reasons for proposing the project, information about the other partner(s); the role you and they expect to play; the benefits accruing (these should be directly or indirectly related to your users); and the costs involved.

Senior management need to be impressed, but your own library staff are as important. Some may wish to be more involved than others, but as with all matters of this kind, they should be kept well informed and the effects, if any, on their working practices or workload monitored. The greater the degree of delegation and involvement the better. As with any other service, the partnership will need to continue even if a key staff member is away.

Types of partnership - equal and disparate

Library partnerships are often categorized as equal or unequal. My own feeling is that there is a continuum and that no partnership should be regarded or allowed to be "unequal". Disparate, "essentially different, diverse in kind"(2), they may be, but a partnership which allows a situation in which one partner gains all the benefits and the other apparently gets little or nothing in return, is unlikely to realize its full potential. On the one side it may be difficult to justify the costs to the institution and on the other it is demeaning; worse still it may unwittingly create dependency, a situation of

which African health science librarians are only too well aware with regard to donors(4).

There are plenty of examples of more or less equal partnerships - union catalogues, exchange of material for collection building, research etc. But even these probably have a degree of disparity - the expertise of one supplementing and complementing the resources or expertise of others during the course of the project.

In the example of the bibliographic health database, which began so disappointingly, two of the partners, with similar, non-commercial aims, came together later and decided to amalgamate their bibliographic data. One side provided the technical assistance to mount it on WWW, the other contributed bibliographical material from its specialized medical and health science resources. The chief benefit to both partners was the same - a fuller database for their users, though the contribution from each side was different.

In other examples both the contributions and the benefits are different. For the receivers of equipment, photocopies, journal subscriptions etc. the rewards are obvious and tangible. But what of the donor? Their rewards must be different, and in my experience too little thought is given to the donor partner. Since the reason for the partnership in the first place is as a result of inequality in material resources or expertise in certain areas, there is likely to be little material help that the donor will want in return, though this is not always the case. The main reward must be in feedback; feedback that the donor partner can use to demonstrate the success of the project and gain the recognition of its work from the organization to which it is attached. Anything that enhances the profile of library and information services is beneficial to them in the long run. Such feedback may also be used in in-house training. The different experiences of other libraries is a valuable aid to viewing our own practices from another perspective. And good ideas are not confined to information-rich countries.

Feedback is so important that it needs to be more than a mere counting of items sent, people trained etc. It is in this aspect of the partnership that the receiving partner can make a real contribution, benefiting both themselves and their partner. For example, if photocopies are being provided, further data on their usage might be collected from the end-user by the receiving library as part of a needs assessment exercise. Data on journals requested, if

they were found useful etc. can help the receiving library make a specific and well supported case for improving the number of journal subscriptions. Hard data may not achieve all that is wanted in the short term, but it is more likely to make proposals successful in the longer term.

It is the principle of equal effort and commitment towards achieving the overall aim that counts. The evaluation of the partnership, the benchmarks, the impact of the information received should mainly be carried out by the receiving partner but the results can be advantageously used by both sides the partnership. Data collection and evaluation is probably one of the most important aspects to be covered in the negotiations.

Types of partnership - distant and local partnerships

There are many ways in which the concept of partnership could have an impact in Europe. Better communications between countries and the use of electronic technology in the management of information have opened up vast new areas for enterprise in research, training, sharing data, general liaison. Distant partnerships are less easy to manage than local partnerships; there may be cultural differences, breakdown or delays in communication and a hundred and one other difficulties which cannot easily be sorted out by arranging a meeting or by making a telephone call.

Local partnerships on the other hand are likely to be easier to manage and hence gain management backing. An attempt to develop a strategic health information plan for Leicestershire was difficult, not because of technological or communication problems but because the concept was ambitious - attempting to make very different information services for health promotion, nursing and medical education, and clinical practice see themselves as parts in a continuum for the health and care of the population. It was not so difficult for the librarians, but it has been difficult to convince senior management, who are used to 'their own' traditionally compartmentalized services.

Sustainability, cost-effectiveness, and 'something better than nothing'

In some partnerships the question of sustainability and the creation of dependency does not arise. In those cases where there is a recognisable 'receiver and donor relationship' with regard to material or financial help, it is important to reflect on the long-term consequences of the partnership. Such schemes at library level cannot continue for ever. So it is probably

best to agree a review or termination date in the agreement, and to ensure as far as possible that the help given is given as a supplement to the institution's provision and not as a substitute for it. Elements of training incorporated into the project ensure that something of lasting value has been exchanged and a strategy of evaluation which will strengthen the receiving library's negotiating power is also important. There are no sure and tried solutions, but there is room for thought and imagination.

Any project needs to keep costs as low as possible, but the cheapest options may not be effective. We need to determine the level of finance required for an *efficient* delivery of service between libraries. For instance, if photocopies are not received in time, they may not be used at all. So the whole transaction has been a waste of money. Fax copies may be more expensive, may even require the equipment but in our business timeliness is important to the user. If we do not deliver an acceptable level of service to the user, the image of the library is damaged. Cost effectiveness is thus more important than cost.

Lastly, "something is better than nothing" - it is only better than nothing if the receiver wants it! Donations of unwanted books and periodicals can be an embarrassment to the receiver and may be costly to dispose of. This is not to say that donations of material are not helpful, even older periodicals may fill in gaps, but it is vital that your partner is consulted beforehand.

Conclusion

Effective partnership is about communication; agreeing what is wanted by both or all sides, evaluating progress, and remaining in touch no matter what the problem.

Information-rich countries helping information-poor countries are valuable both in Europe and in other parts of the world. Such partnerships are often overshadowed by the material needs of library users and can be costly. The liaison partnership being developed by SatelLife UK is designed to support librarians in their efforts to service their users needs rather than provide direct help and is deliberately low cost.

Also it would be good to see EAHIL libraries involved in more joint research projects. As technology revolutionizes our role and methods of working, the need for such research in optimizing our present and future services for library users must be a priority.

References

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