

The Business Information Network : Improving European Enterprise through Resource Sharing

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Abstract

The UK Business Information Network was formed in 1990 as an independent self-financing co-operative of public, government and academic libraries committed to delivering quality products and services to their user communities. Promoted as a national resource for business people both within and outside the UK, the Network has subsequently been extended with the introduction of associate membership for commercial information suppliers. In 1992 it was awarded formal status as the Business Information Panel of the UK Library and Information Co-operation Council (LINC) with a remit to review, encourage and facilitate co-ordination of business information provision nationally across all sectors. Its current activities include production of a referral database/directory of expertise and resources; organisation of seminars and workshops; negotiation of terms and conditions

with suppliers; development of quality of service guidelines; and circulation of a regular newsletter. A recent initiative is the creation of an electronic mail forum using the Joint Academic Network (JANET) for business information specialists in university libraries to exchange views on issues of mutual concern. The UK Business Information Network has also established links with organisations and institutions in other countries, and has served as the model for the formation of an equivalent network in Denmark.

Introduction

The UK Business Information Network (BIN) was formed in 1990 as an independent self-financing co-operative of public, government and academic libraries committed to delivering quality products and services to their user communities. The formation of BIN heralded a new era in national planning and resource sharing, characterised by determination to consolidate and formalise existing *ad hoc* arrangements, to build links between public and private sector providers and to encourage entrepreneurial service developments. The British Library played a key role in moving the project forward, but the impetus and direction came largely from the UK library and information services community. In its three years of operation, BIN has evolved in a dynamic and exciting way. The model has already been adopted in Denmark, and is capable of adaptation in other European countries and farther afield.

Background

The environmental factors providing the backdrop to this initiative are familiar to colleagues everywhere: public expenditure cuts; rising literature costs; growth in the supply of and demand for information, and the advent of new media and electronic publishing; promotion of the concept of 'tradeable' information, with the creation of a sizeable private sector information broking industry; the focus on customer care and quality, with emphasis on accountability and value for money. In the UK, seminal reports from government and other official bodies have shaped attitudes and behaviour in the library and information world, notably the ITAP report, *Making a business of information*;¹ the 'FD3' report, advocating planned co-operation through the development of local Library and Information Plans

(LIPs)² and the 'PUPLIS' report encouraging joint ventures between the public and private sectors.³ In the world of business information, public and academic libraries have expanded and enhanced provision, with the introduction of fee-based 'value added' services, in tandem with the phenomenal growth in electronic information systems produced for the business user.

During the 1980s a mismatch between aspiration and achievement became apparent. A review of sixteen major projects sponsored by the British Library Research and Development Department between 1982 and 1986 pinpointed shortcomings in business information provision and barriers to progress: lack of awareness and understanding among the user community, particularly of the information resources held in public libraries; inadequate marketing of services; and shortage of staff with the necessary specialist knowledge and skills to exploit the new media successfully, exacerbated by the continuing pressure on library budgets.⁴ The review concluded that some form of national co-ordination was needed - suggesting a network of regional centres - and a parallel study of the information needs of small firms pointed towards the concept of local access (via the public library) to the wealth of national resources available throughout the country.⁵ A possible model was offered by the existing Patents Information Network, then jointly managed by the British Library Science Reference and Information Service (SRIS) and the UK Patent Office,⁶ but the national library was not in a position to fund an initiative on the scale envisaged. Instead, responding positively to overtures from several public library authorities, SRIS took the lead in setting up a working group to develop and refine ideas put forward by the community, and BIN was conceived as a national initiative embracing many of the features associated with LIPs, but firmly based on the principle of a self-managed co-operative funded by members' subscriptions.⁷

Strategic Focus

The ultimate purpose and national role of the Network is encapsulated in the mission statement adopted by the working group, and subsequently endorsed by the Management Committee elected by the founding members at their inaugural general meeting -

"To improve the performance and competitiveness of British enterprise through the better use of business information".

From the beginning, a commitment to continuous improvement and a significant European dimension were envisaged, reflected in the set of objectives agreed at that time:

- to promote exploitation of business information resources throughout the UK;
- to improve the overall standard of business information provision;
- to provide an effective focus for the development of business information products and services;
- to develop partnerships with information providers in other parts of Europe.

Specific goals were also identified to guide the Network's programmes and activities through its formative years:

- to raise awareness among the business community of the value of business information;
- to establish the Business Information Network as the national public resource for business people, within and outside the UK;
- to strengthen the links between public-sector business information providers, both in the UK and in Europe;
- to devise cost-effective methods of achieving wider access to business information;
- to identify gaps in business information coverage and initiate projects to fill them - for example, information on Small and Medium-sized Enterprises;
- to develop strategies to meet particular nationwide information needs - for example, the Single European Market;
- to exploit the opportunities provided by new technology in the context of business information.

Membership

BIN membership was initially restricted to publicly-funded libraries and information units which had the equivalent of at least one full-time member of staff committed to business information - 'publicly-funded' being defined

here as an organisation receiving more than half its funding from central or local government sources - and there was a flat-rate annual subscription of £375, irrespective of the number of sites or service points involved. The working group acknowledged the significant role of the private sector in business information provision, but wanted a simple structure at the start; they were also concerned that commercial firms might find it difficult to give due priority to co-operating with other BIN members, and that the competitive nature of their activities might be at odds with the public service ethos. However, during the set-up period there was a steady stream of enquiries from accountancy and law firms, brokers and consultants, Chambers of Commerce, industrial libraries, professional and trade associations, publishers and database producers. Requests from the latter to join the Network in a supportive role subsequently persuaded the Committee to admit them as Associates, paying the same rate of subscription but without voting rights or entitlement to other membership privileges (such as reciprocal discounts on services). Three years on, the Committee decided to review the criteria for membership in the light of changing circumstances, and a radical restructuring was approved at the 1993 annual general meeting.

The new structure reflects the wider range of activities and the enhanced strategic role which BIN is equipped to take on now that it is firmly established in the business information world. The key features are a shift from an organisation-based to a site-based subscription for full members (perceived as a fairer method of distributing the financial burden between organisations of increasingly varied size and complexity) and the introduction of a new category of Affiliate members. The changes are also designed to stimulate more active participation by academic institutions, recognising the important contribution of this sector in educating and training the business community of the future. The current membership categories are as follows:

Full membership is open to any library or information service which is part of a not-for-profit organisation (eg public libraries, academic libraries). Membership is site specific, and any eligible organisation may nominate any number of its sites or service points for membership, provided that in every case the site concerned has the equivalent of at least one full-time person involved in the provision of business information. Subscription: £95 per site.

Affiliate membership is open to (a) organisations providing other intermediary business services, ie libraries and information services

which are in the private sector, either free-standing profit-making services or part of profit-making organisations (eg brokers and consultants, banks, Chambers of Commerce, accountancy and law firms, professional bodies and trade associations, industrial libraries) and (b) educational organisations providing business studies or business-related courses in the public or private sectors (eg departments of information studies/library schools). Membership is site specific, as above. Subscription: £95 for organisations with up to ten employees, or £195 for more than ten employees.

Associate membership is open to for-profit organisations which are sympathetic to BIN's aims (eg publishers, commercial suppliers, database producers and hosts involved in the supply of business information). Associate members do not have voting rights, nor are they eligible for discounted rates on services negotiated by the Network on behalf of Full and Affiliate members. Subscription: £395.

Activities

In the first year of operation, priority had to be given to securing the infrastructure of the Network, and especially to the recruitment of a sufficient number of members to justify the appointment of a professional manager and administrative support. The British Library continued to act as a facilitator, providing both professional and administrative support for the initial recruitment drive, which attracted more than fifty members during the first twelve months. Some two-thirds of the initial membership came from the public library sector (representing all parts of the UK) with the balance made up of academic, government and national libraries. This enabled the BIN Management Committee to recruit an experienced free-lance business information specialist to act as Network Manager (on a part-time basis) and later to retain a second free-lance consultant to support the public relations/media activities required to establish the Network's profile. The British Library was then able to reduce its support to a more appropriate level, but with continuing input as an active member, as well as providing office accommodation for the Manager.

Key tasks identified were intended to support and stimulate the exchange of information, and sharing of expertise among members, and thus included the circulation of a regular newsletter, creation of a referral database/directory, and the discussion of training and development needs. The referral database was deliberately designed as a tool to help offset the lack

of comprehensive collections and specialist staff at the local level by enabling members to identify colleagues with expertise in particular areas and to act as human gateways to more specialised services throughout the country. The database contains information on members' resources and services at a more detailed level than other library directories, covering access to online hosts; areas of strength, such as countries regularly researched and language skills; links with other libraries/information providers; significant holdings of statistics, standards, patents, official journals, newspapers, market research reports, company annual reports, CD-ROMs, etc and special services (eg translation) together with charges/conditions of use. Contact names and addresses are given for both central and branch libraries, and a geographical listing and map enables users to locate members by country and then by county. The newsletter (now bimonthly) allows changes in contact details to be notified quickly, pending the issue of the next quarterly update to the directory - which is provided free to members, and is available to others for a fee, with the option of an annual subscription for the updates.⁸

The potential benefits of pooling resources to mount joint publicity and promotion campaigns were seen as central to the Network's *raison d'être*. The need to raise awareness among the business community of the availability of business information products and services - and indeed of the value of information to support business decisions - was shared by all public sector business information services, and it made sense to collaborate in efforts to get a common message across. A logo and house style were developed, and incorporated into a leaflet explaining (with examples) what members offered, with a space for local contact details to be added. The house style has been carried through to letterheads, posters, presentation folders, etc, acknowledging the importance of conveying a businesslike image. BIN has also been promoted through articles in the professional and trade press, presentations - by the Network Manager and individual members - and press releases (which have been rewarded with several favourable mentions in the *Financial Times*). At the same time, work began to develop draft quality guidelines for service to members and users, intended to encourage good practice and provide a framework within which members set their own standards and targets, in accordance with their institutions' mission and objectives.

As BIN's membership and status have grown, it has been able to put pressure on suppliers to members' benefit and to influence policy discussion at national level. The Network Manager has negotiated discounts and

special deals with publishers on behalf of members (which are publicised in the newsletter). BIN has also challenged database producers/hosts over attempts to impose contractual obligations regarded as unfair and unethical, and has thus succeeded in protecting both intermediaries and end-users from unscrupulous behaviour threatening to undermine the confidentiality of the professional-client relationship. Earlier this year, it was invited to give evidence to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission investigation of the supply of historical online databases for archival business and financial information (with particular reference to the position of FT Profile). In 1992, BIN became the official Business Information Panel of the Library and Information Co-operation Council (LINC) and thus acquired a formal role as expert adviser on library and information co-operation in relation to business information across all sectors throughout the British Isles. LINC was established in 1989, with the objective "to promote co-operation and partnership as a means of improving the effectiveness of the library and information sector in the UK and the Republic of Ireland".⁹

BIN's remit in this role reflects the general aims of LINC, but with a specific responsibility for business information, and thus includes reviewing, encouraging and facilitating all types of business-related library/information co-operation; acting as a forum for the exchange of views on such co-operation; and collecting and disseminating information thereon. Its first major initiative in this capacity will be the conduct of a survey of the range and breadth of co-operative developments in business information in the UK, which is being funded jointly by LINC and the British Library Research and Development Department. This research has been prompted by BIN's concern at the burgeoning of co-operative developments in the field, which frequently overlap in terms of market, customer base and services, while the communication and pragmatic links between them are at best accidental and unplanned. This is not, however, BIN's first research venture, as in 1992 it commissioned a study (conducted by the City University Department of Information Science) on the effects of the economic recession on business information services, which concluded that despite difficulties in marketing fee-based services, demand for business information had remained buoyant and there was scope for expansion.¹⁰ In keeping with its desire to facilitate the sharing of information among the business information community, BIN has with this study initiated a publishing programme to ensure that the results of its efforts reach the widest possible audience.

In addition to the above research, BIN has also recently published the proceedings of its second successful seminar held at the annual International Library Technology Fair in Hatfield, Hertfordshire, offering members and others the chance to purchase either individual papers or the complete set.¹¹ The previous event, on the theme of "Current issues in business information technology", underlines BIN's concern to help members exploit new technologies to improve standards of service provision. Innovation through information technology characterises another exciting project which involves BIN as a major player in a partnership with library communities in Belgium and Portugal formed to develop a pilot enquiry and referral service, based on the X.500 directory standard, with funding from the European Commission under Action Line 2 of its Libraries Programme. The Library and Information Referral Networks (LIRN) project is being co-ordinated by LASER - the London and South Eastern Library Region - and BIN members will participate in the definition, implementation and evaluation phases. LIRN aims to provide a rapid response to enquiries and makes information available to libraries on a European-wide basis, by developing a thesaurus and distributed database of information sources, using business as the subject focus for the study.¹²

Within the UK, BIN is launching a timely new service directed initially at the university library community, but extending beyond BIN members to involve everyone interested in business information provision and use in an electronic forum to identify and address issues of current concern. LIS-BIN will operate as an unmoderated e-mail discussion list, open to business specialists in the higher education community who have access to JANET (the UK Joint Academic Network). This initiative is an example of BIN's determination to assume a wider role in national co-ordination as part of its responsibilities as the Business Information Panel of LINC. Although BIN's public and government library members are not at present connected to JANET, the initiative is well timed as it will run in parallel with a project investigating the potential benefits of networking for public libraries, with the expectation that within the foreseeable future all BIN members will be able to communicate with each other electronically. (In the meantime, members can use BIN's electronic bulletin board hosted by DataStar.)

European Role

Development of a European dimension to BIN was envisaged from the outset as a natural progression. The BIN directory enables members to identify colleagues likely to be able to assist with requests for European company, market and product information; entries cover countries regularly researched, foreign language skills, significant holdings of overseas directories, etc. as well as giving details of specific links with information providers in other parts of Europe. The Network has already generated considerable interest in other countries and informal links have been established with corresponding members in Spain, France, Finland and the Czech Republic. In November 1992, the BIN Management Committee was delighted to learn of the successful launch of the Erhvervs Informations Netvaerket (Danish Network for Business Information) and the publication of its directory, deliberately taking BIN as its model. BIN members are also looking forward to working with Portuguese and Belgian colleagues in the forthcoming LIRN project; development of effective electronic links across national boundaries may raise the question of admitting colleagues from other countries into full or affiliate membership.

A Global BIN?

BIN has established itself as an impressive model for resource sharing within the UK. In three years the Network has made steady progress towards its objectives and goals, it has undergone substantial restructuring and development, and is now acknowledged as a major player in the national arena and in Europe. Key features include the emphasis on staff expertise as the shared asset of the Network, the successful establishment of a corporate identity, and evolution into an effective lobbying force in the commercial world. New technologies already underpin the delivery of members' services to their customers, but are beginning to have more impact on roles and relationships and the Network's future direction. The prospect of a global BIN by the end of the decade is both feasible and desirable.

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