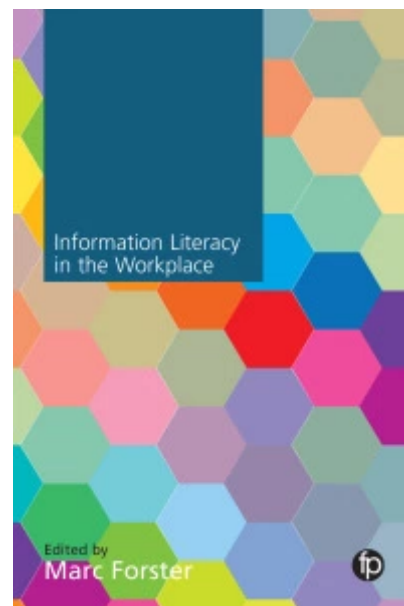


## Information literacy in the workplace: a different phenomenon

In this guest blog, Marc Forster, editor of recent Facet book, [\*Information Literacy in the Workplace\*](http://www.facetpublishing.co.uk/title.php?id=301324) (<http://www.facetpublishing.co.uk/title.php?id=301324>), explores how information is experienced in the workplace and the ethical implications for ensuring that students are equipped with the right skills to ensure they are information literate when they enter the workforce.

### Isn't information literacy in the workplace just 'information literacy'?

Information literacy (IL) has been defined (and redefined) and widely written about; why bother to draw attention to how it's experienced in a 'workplace' setting? The answer comes (as it should) from research which has made it clear that we can't be confident that existing assumptions, definitions of IL and methods of development continue to be relevant and appropriate for the workplace, surely one of the largest and most important contexts in which information is used. IL doesn't appear to be quite the same phenomenon in the workplace as the more familiar version developed in, and for, the academic world. Young professionals, confronted by a way of dealing with information quite different to the academic, find themselves having to think about their relations to information in new ways: in terms of meaning, value, and purpose. How can librarians, LIS academics and researchers address this problem?



### Thinking about information literacy in the workplace

Do we know in what way information experiences in the workplace are significant to professionals themselves, their employers and educators and society at large? Indeed, what is the 'workplace' in an increasingly virtual information world? Thinking about, and understanding workplace IL should be a task for librarians and LIS academics, and it is. Our book [\*Information literacy in the Workplace\*](http://www.facetpublishing.co.uk/title.php?id=301324) (<http://www.facetpublishing.co.uk/title.php?id=301324>) presents some of that thinking, much of it based on research into how individuals, teams and organizations use information to achieve their objectives. Research which has required and developed new approaches in order to investigate the work environment.

We describe, from new perspectives, several aspects of IL's nature and role in the contemporary information driven workplace, and how academics, librarians and researchers can understand and develop it. Our authors engage in a range of contexts, including IL's role in assuring competent practice, its value to employers as a return on investment, its translocational nature; and its function as an ethical safeguard in the duty and responsibilities professionals have to clients, students and employers.

Several of us have made use of the research methodology phenomenography to find just how individuals experience IL in the workplace. How can library professionals know how, when and why information is used in the workplace? Such knowledge, potentially acquirable through this kind of research, shows librarians how they can more profoundly engage with workplace professionals and their needs and ambitions. Using research evidence from a phenomenographic study of information 'experiences', they can more precisely focus their information resource provision; potentially achieving both a superior service and a more cost-efficient one. There is also the possibility of more effective programmes of IL education, tailored as they could be to the information culture of the organisation and the actual range and focus of the information experiences of workers. The continuing call for evidence-based practice in the library and information professions finds an echo in our book.

### **Workplace information literacy is collaborative**

One of the key aspects of workplace IL which comes strongly to the fore is its co-operative and team-based nature; IL in the real world is often a joint venture. Employees often work in teams and always as part of larger organizations and companies. Information use is often, even if on individual initiative, a means of contributing to the knowledge development, and so capacity to act effectively, of a wider group. In several contexts and chapters we give details of this 'social' IL and how it seems to function as the backbone of organizational operations. In fact one of the chapters of our book describes how IL can be made the fundamental basis of a creative and effective organization through its role in 'Informed Learning'.

### **Information literacy or death?**

IL isn't just a tool for learning or empowerment but a means through which one can save lives.

Some professions must be aware of and locate, correctly interpret and apply research evidence, research-based professional guidelines and other more local and personal sources of information, in the varying ways that contribute to that fully informed practice that has the best chance of achieving successful outcomes for the patient or client. To be unable to do this invites failure of competence and care. Not to have the necessary information skills is a professional but also ethical failure as information illiteracy means that the most up to date research evidence or other relevant information may not be identified and applied. Without the correct information or best research evidence, inappropriate or out of date practice may be the result; practice which risks the health, social, legal or financial wellbeing, or even life, of the patient or client.

This new way of looking at IL, discussed in chapter 7 of our book, is one which implies that IL in some professions is absolutely essential to professional, even *personal*, development. Professional education's awareness of this remains patchy, but this new understanding of IL's role promises a means of raising its profile.

### **Developing information literacy in the workplace**

How can IL be developed in this key environment; one which is so important to the financial, medical and personal wellbeing of our fellow citizens? If IL in the workplace isn't identical to its

manifestation in the academic sphere then simply teaching database searching and essay/dissertation based methods of using information might well be found to be irrelevant and wrongheaded. Managing the transition to the workplace must involve a recasting of pedagogical practices to better accommodate the transition to work. There is the additional problem of making the world of work aware of the value of IL. We describe in detail how the development of IL amongst a workforce might be facilitated through applying strategies that bring IL to greater prominence in corporate thinking and through promoting a better understanding of the social/contextual dimensions of information use. We look at how academics can address the needs of students who will soon be using information in the professional workplace; and how new methods for formulating evidence-based IL educational interventions and monitoring educational progress can be developed from research data.

The workplace remains a 'new frontier' for those who research and think about IL. Our book is a contribution to the ongoing process of research, theory-building and professional understanding. In the modern world of expanding information-based professions, information overload and false news, such work is as important in both the narrowly practical, and the broadest human context, as ever.

[Find out more about \*Information Literacy in the Workplace\* on the Facet website \(<http://www.facetpublishing.co.uk/title.php?id=301324>\)](http://www.facetpublishing.co.uk/title.php?id=301324)

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