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Putting Knowledge To Work

TO WORK in a firm or institution that has a well-stocked special library, organized and directed by a wise and alert librarian, is a rich and fruitful experience.

The organization that wants facts and information instead of guesses and opinions finds the well-organized library the most efficient research tool and the greatest economy in time and effort. It contributes to the three processes basic to civilization: the discovery of knowledge, the conservation of knowledge, and the transmission of knowledge.

In today's world, with its wealth of new information, its heightened speed, and its widened horizons, the professional librarian's role is truly one of great importance. It has been estimated that some five hundred additional libraries will be needed annually in Canada over the next few years to meet the increased demand for school, university, business, technical, and many other sorts of special libraries. It is the librarian who makes all these of value because special knowledge is needed to find what is wanted amid the bewildering output of printed matter.

Library service in Canada may be traced back to Marc Lescarbot's lending of books at the Port Royal Habitation in 1606, to the opening of La Bibliothèque du Collège des Jésuites de Québec in 1635, and to the donations of John Graves Simcoe to the Legislature of Upper Canada in 1791. Special libraries made their debut early, designed to meet the needs of schools, colleges, the government, and the professions.

In 1966 there were an estimated 900 public libraries in Canada; 75 college and university library systems in degree-granting institutions; 325 business, professional and technical libraries; 265 government libraries, and more than 2,000 centralized school libraries.

Miss Beryl L. Anderson of the Graduate School of Library Science at McGill University prepared a Directory of Special Libraries in Canada for the Canadian Library Association which was published in June 1968 and listed 640 libraries. Further studies by Miss Anderson show that there were 669 special libraries in October 1968 and that there are probably

another 250 libraries which could have qualified for inclusion but were not listed.

Special Libraries Association

The topic of this *Monthly Letter* is suggested by the Annual Conference of the Special Libraries Association in Montreal in June. This is an international organization of more than 7,000 professional librarians and information experts. It was organized in 1909 for the promotion of high professional standards for libraries and library personnel, and now has 36 local chapters, of which two are in Canada.

Miss Mildred I. Turnbull, Librarian of The Royal Bank of Canada Library until her retirement in 1953, was a prime mover in starting the Montreal Chapter in 1932, and she was president when the Special Libraries Association met in Montreal for the first time, in 1936. The Toronto Chapter was organized in 1940.

"Putting knowledge to work" — the incisive slogan of the Association — sums up the aim of special librarians in all fields. They are not content to build stocks of books, but are dedicated to developing the usefulness and efficiency of their libraries.

What special libraries are

Special libraries are built up to supply detailed information respecting some limited subject field. They include libraries devoted to advertising, biological sciences, business, finance, geography, hospitals, insurance, metals, military, museums, publishing, science-technology, religion, social science, transportation, education and other subjects.

These libraries are not static depositories of books and periodicals. They are alive and growing and changing with the times to meet new and enlarged needs.

To quote from the Special Libraries Association pamphlet: "A special library is a world not only of traditional reference books, but of other printed materials — monographs, textbooks, and journals. It is also a world of near-print — documents, technical

reports, trade catalogs, and reprints. More and more it is a world of non-print — photographs, drawings, music scores, recordings, microforms — yes, even IBM cards, punched tapes, magnetized discs and drums.”

A special library does not need to be big in order to be useful, nor need the business be big in order to use a library of its own. There is hardly a business too small for its executive to require a library, even if only of a few basic books, several periodicals, a few filing cases of up-to-date material and a qualified librarian.

The library is the centre of recorded news and information about the business in which its organization is engaged. It reaches out for information about other organizations in the same line, and about conditions in the country, the continent and the world which impinge upon that business.

Because the special library is a service organized to make available all experience and knowledge that will further the activities of its organization, there is a key distinction between it and a public or university library. The unit of material which forms the basis of a public library is usually a book, pamphlet, periodical, or some other physical item; in the special library the unit is a particular piece of information no matter in what form it may be found. The special library shelves or files information rather than material, and it therefore demands special techniques of its staff.

The extent of the willingness of the executive and department heads and staff to make use of this expert help, and to look upon their library as a living clearing house of information, determines the effectiveness with which it can demonstrate its ability to help them in their business and individual problems.

One of the saddest fates that can befall a special library is to have it sink into being merely a collection of books. Miss Turnbull said in a lecture at the McGill University Library School: “I sometimes think that the very use of the word ‘library’ obscures the true duties of a company librarian. The word has an unfortunate ‘dry-as-dust’ connotation in the minds of many people, and creates an impression that our duty is the preservation of printed material only, rather than the utilization of all sources of information, printed, typewritten, photographed, or available in the minds of specialists.”

A practical working department

The special library that is earning its salt is not one set up as a catacomb of books to impress Very Important Visitors or as a gracious gesture to scholarship and culture. It is a practical department to serve all other departments with basic and current information quickly. It keeps at the service of everybody what everybody cannot keep in his own office for his own service.

The more independent the special library is of other departments, and the closer it is to top management,

the more efficiently will it function in making knowledge and information available wherever it is needed.

A volume of the textbooks published by the Alexander Hamilton Institute under the title *Modern Business* puts this matter succinctly: “However extensive a business library may become, its essential purpose and reason for existence should never be lost sight of. That purpose is to serve the business as an information department.”

The librarian’s work starts with the receipt of an inquiry. The ability to visualize what the inquirer really wants is one of the most important parts of information work. An imaginative grasp is needed of the kind of reply which will best help the inquirer.

Sources of information

Miss Turnbull believed that a capable librarian with a telephone, a *Canada Year Book*, a *Canadian Almanac*, the *Oxford Dictionary* and a daily newspaper would be of more benefit to the company than a book collection of thousands of volumes with no one to direct their use. Her list of titles would have to be extended today, but the class of books she singled out as most helpful, the reference books, are still prime aids: trade directories, yearbooks, technical dictionaries, gazetteers, encyclopedias, manuals, handbooks and the like.

The librarian must also refer daily to indexes such as the *Public Affairs Information Service*, published weekly and cumulated annually, and a host of other “where to find it” books. By means of these the librarian can put a finger on the printed data most likely to be of service.

In many organizations material that is filed may be more important than books that are shelved. Letters, clippings, pamphlets, trade and technical periodicals, and reports such as those of the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, are up to date and show not only the present situation but trends. Happy indeed is the executive who has a librarian to follow the periodicals closely and draw to his attention quickly the latest analysis and information on matters in which he is interested.

To scan what is received by a special library, to select what is useful now or may become useful, to give information about it to those who may be interested, and to shelve or file what is worth keeping so that it is readily accessible: that is the art of the librarian.

One of the most important services of a company library is the circulation of periodicals. Every periodical will have its own list of regular readers, but that is only half the story. The librarian goes through periodicals as they are received, and, knowing the needs and interests of staff members, lists the contents in a library bulletin for general distribution. Items which bear particularly upon some topic known to be under special study by some member of the firm are sent speedily to the person involved. When this selective dissemination service becomes too extensive to be handled by the library personnel available, the

special librarian may enlist the aid of the firm's computer centre to establish a computerized system to aid in the process.

No business library in Canada can operate without the material issued by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, and pamphlets and reports are also issued by provincial governments, societies and firms. This *Monthly Letter*, for example, is a pamphlet which tells in the course of a year many interesting facts about various aspects of Canadian cultural and economic life.

Societies issue pamphlets at regular or irregular intervals to publicize their work, such as fighting disease, promoting conservation of natural resources, or reporting on their year's work. This free literature, properly selected with the needs of the library's clientele in mind, provides a fund of information. Financial papers and newspapers report current events, business changes, and much miscellaneous information about stocks, issues, yields and trends.

The librarian is assisted in finding desired information through such publications as the *Business Periodicals Index*, issued monthly and cumulated annually. It indexes more than 150 periodicals covering the fields of economics, business, management and finance. The *New York Times Index* is issued semi-monthly and annually. Each entry provides a reference to date, page number, and column number for a story or report, with a summary if the event is of importance.

The Royal Bank Library

How does The Royal Bank of Canada Library measure up to all these needs and in all these services? This library, whose librarian, Miss Miriam H. Tees, is Conference Chairman of the 1969 Special Libraries Association Conference, has 50,000 volumes and receives 800 periodicals. It specializes in literature dealing with money and banking, international finance, and economic conditions in Canada, the Caribbean and Latin America.

The library declared its purpose in a circular to staff on September 17, 1913: "A library has been established at Head Office with the object of encouraging the staff, particularly junior officers, to read standard books on banking, finance, exchange and kindred subjects." The accompanying catalogue listed 398 books; the budget was \$2,000; a bookcase to hold 1,200 books cost \$265.

The library has expanded its horizon with accelerating speed. Instead of *Co-operative Credit Associations*, published in 1892 and listed in the catalogue fifty-five years ago, it now deals in such books as *How to Live with Your Computer*. The library itself is looking forward to being computerized in some degree in order to meet the demand for fast service.

In addition to broadening the scope of its content so as to include automation, marketing, personnel

policies, management development and techniques, the library has grown physically. "We have greatly expanded our service," says the Librarian. "Our district offices and our branches across Canada and abroad are now using our library. Nearly three-quarters of our Canadian branches call upon us for information.

"All staff members are encouraged to get information or material from the library. We are very happy, too, to help any business executive or serious student outside the bank who needs information in our special subject field and cannot easily obtain it elsewhere."

The librarian

It would be futile to turn loose in a well-stocked library a man who has never seen more than a few score books gathered together. He would be too overwhelmed by the riches at his command to make the best use of them: another case of an ocean of water and not a drop to drink.

The person best qualified to help a business man to find information he wants, either in an ancient book or in a newspaper printed yesterday, is the trained librarian. He is the liaison officer between the inquirer and the source of information.

The special library does not demand so much a staff trained to stiff nicety in library detail as one that will sense the imminent demand for certain information and have it ready and accessible. The librarian is a well-informed, educated person who is professionally trained to select and maintain a library collection fit for its purpose, and to assist individuals and groups to locate and obtain these materials. He must know his company, its objectives, and its staff.

Few people realize the diversity of the librarian's activities. He will have an intensive knowledge of his own collection. He will know how to trace material, however exotic, and how to go about getting it from publishers, government departments, trade associations, other libraries, newspapers and individuals.

His alert mind, his interest in the world, and his instinct for team-work all combine to make the special librarian a successful research worker. His patience, intuition, imagination and orderly manner of thought help him to report thoroughly and quickly and correctly on the matter referred to him, or to present information on his own initiative.

The special librarian must pay particular attention to developments which may affect his company. As Miss Tees puts it: the librarian is not a recluse in an ivory tower, but a person interested in people and events, with a sense of responsibility as an integral part of a functioning organization. He needs to have a mind that delights in solving puzzles, intellectual curiosity about the world, and a temperament eager for discovery. He must respond enthusiastically to challenge and have the ability to leap mentally from subject to subject.

The special librarian, like an archaeologist, must have more patience than most people, and the zeal to dig through succeeding layers of data to find the few pieces of information which are relevant to today's wants. It helps if, in addition to doggedness, the librarian has a flair for looking in the right places.

Stocking a library

Mrs. Whitehead, wife of the great philosopher and mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead, was asked: "Do you buy books from catalogues or by seeing them?" She replied: "One goes into a bookshop and comes out with a book." The special librarian shudders at the thought of being so casual about one of his most important functions. He does not become celebrated because of the number of books he has built up, but for his skill in selection, his judgment and his insight.

One task of the librarian is that of bringing all potential users into touch with this wealth. The proof of the special library pudding is in the eating, and the bigger the appetite the better pleased the librarian is. Yet special libraries are seldom used by all those entitled to use them to the best advantage.

Publications of one sort and another — mimeographed lists of new books with summaries of their contents, and lists of periodicals with mention of their special articles — are compiled by the librarian to spread the library's resources in view of his possible clients. Sometimes he sends along a pertinent book to a person he knows to be interested in the book's subject. Increasingly, he is turning to methods of salesmanship, publicity and personal staff contacts, to publicize what information is available.

The user of a library has some obligations. It will speed up information service if he asks himself: "What exactly am I looking for?" and formulates a particular instead of a foggy request. It will help him and the librarian if he telephones or calls personally instead of having his request filtered through a third party, with consequent loss of clarity.

It is important for the librarian to know just how much the inquirer wants to know about a subject. Arthur Conan Doyle tells about a millionaire who gave his book dealer an order for a copy of all books treating any aspect of Napoleon's career. He thought they would fill a case in his library. The first instalment was of 40,000 volumes.

Why use the library?

If the special library is everlastingly taking stock of itself, as every successful library is, to ascertain if it is performing its full function, it is only reciprocal good business for the executive to examine whether he is doing what he should to get the greatest possible benefit from the library. In everyday affairs he may be trying to pull out of thin air answers to problems which would be available quickly if he gave his librarian a chance to search. Thomas A. Edison explained his wide reading

by saying that he wanted to start work where others had left off instead of duplicating their trials and errors.

There is much said and written about the need for a business man or a technical worker to promote his health: it is equally necessary for him to cultivate his mind.

Few men are content to think of themselves as merely tool-using animals, making holes in things where the blue-print indicates and removing material from where it is not wanted. But to get beyond that the intellect needs special food. Reading feeds the informational reservoir from which spring knowledgeable men.

One hour a day given to planned, purposeful, reading often makes the difference between an expert and a tyro, between success and failure in the acquisition of the knowledge and understanding essential to life. He is a poor manager of his leisure who cannot make time for this exercise of his intellect.

There are some technical treatises one reads because of the "practical" profit there may be in them: one of the great joys in life is to find that they are also interesting. There are some books one reads primarily because of the beauty of their language: it is a matter for rejoicing to find that they are also profitable. There are some, like Shakespeare and the Bible, one reads over and over just for love of them: they are the steady-tail of the technological kite now being carried up far out of sight.

Seeking self-expansion

There are other reasons why the business man, and particularly the executive, should use the library. These have nothing to do with facts about dollars and cents, stresses of materials and mixtures of chemicals. They have to do with self-expansion.

Some men may be able to play all the keys on a computer and be tone-deaf culturally. Other men see computers in their relationship to life and the large questions of human development. As Friedrich Nietzsche put it, culture "distinguisheth them from the goatherds."

A broad scope of intellectual activity stimulates and freshens and adds to every other human quality, and helps to build a powerful personal philosophy.

Background books need not be confined to the history of your product. They may deal allegorically with what you need as a view of the universe. The *Iliad* is great because all life is a battle; the *Odyssey* because all life is a journey; the Book of Job because all life is a riddle.

These mitigate the urgencies of the day, and make us part of centuries and millenia. They extend our experience and help us to see the relationships between things. They give new views to life, breaking down the stone walls of narrow specialism and opening a thousand worlds to us.