

Saving Special Libraries in a Recession: Business Strategies for Survival and Success¹

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Abstract

In difficult economic times it is common for organizations to cut back on spending. Unfortunately, one of the first places that many organizations look to make cutbacks is their own libraries. So *what should special librarians do* to help their libraries survive cutbacks or even elimination? Prior literature on library management offers many personal accounts and suggestions for how to manage special libraries effectively in general and how to prevent cutbacks specifically. Much of this evidence is, however, anecdotal and specific to the industries of the host organizations that the special libraries serve. In order to determine the applicability of the techniques suggested in the literature we surveyed 113 special librarians currently working in a wide variety of special libraries (e.g., in law firms, government agencies, corporations, hospitals, etc.) in the greater Washington D.C. metropolitan area in spring 2008. Among the respondents of our survey, 61% have worked at a library that had faced serious cutbacks or elimination. The respondents commented on whether strategies mentioned in prior literature could stop slated cutbacks or prevent cutbacks from taking place in their own organizations. Additionally, we have conducted four case studies: two on libraries that successfully prevented cutbacks and two on libraries that failed to prevent cutbacks (one of which was later able to regain congressional funding). Based on our literature review, survey, and case studies, we have found that while cutting costs and hand delivering materials may be helpful in some organizations but not others, it is universally essential for special librarians to know the particular needs of other members of their organization, align library services with the organizational goals, and to aggressively market services to their organizations (especially the management). Our findings reinforce the idea that, in order for special libraries to weather today's economic recession and thrive in the long run, they must be proactive.

Introduction

In difficult economic times it is common for organizations to cut back on spending. Unfortunately one of the first places that many organizations look to make cutbacks is their own libraries. So *what should special librarians do* to help their libraries survive cutbacks or even elimination? Both the scholarly and professional literature on special library management has suggested various ideas to special librarians, ranging from hand-delivering requested library materials to serving on key committees within the larger organization. There is little evidence, however, that any of these suggestions work beyond the specific situations in which they have been tried. We look across various types of special libraries in order to find common strategies that will be useful to multiple, if not all, types of special libraries. We begin with a survey, in which we ask a variety of special librarians what strategies have worked in their libraries. Next we examine the cases of a government library, a corporate library, a law library, and an engineering library to see what common lessons can be learned from their successes and failures. We conclude the paper with a set of generalized *business* strategies for the survival and success of special libraries.

Literature Review

Prior literature on library management offers many personal accounts and suggestions for how to manage special libraries effectively in general and how to prevent cutbacks specifically. Much of this literature, however, is anecdotal and specific to the industries of the host organizations that the special libraries serve. Matarazzo's and Prusak's 1995 survey of 103 corporate senior managers found that from a management point of view special libraries typically contribute to corporate strategy through research, assisting senior managers with strategic planning, and staying abreast of new technologies.² Managers believe that in addition to the primary library service tasks of acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information, special libraries help their corporations by synthesizing research, providing training, and keeping the organizations up-to-date with developments in the field, but that they are not essential. Matarazzo and Prusak recommended that librarians learn the information needs of senior managers, market to those who need information, and become a part of the business.³ Marshall surveyed 390 managers from 5 major Canadian financial institutions during 1991-1992, and found that library information had an impact on decision-making.⁴ Portugal found that corporations outsourced library services in order to save money.⁵ Although most corporations have not outsourced their entire libraries, many corporate libraries need to find new services in order to compete with new vendors that provide traditional library services. Other studies have explored how to demonstrate the effectiveness of a particular type of special library. For example, Sen's study showed that the users of a medical library wanted librarians to be knowledgeable about the topics they were researching and be proactive in serving them.⁶

Besides research studies, various authors have offered anecdotal evidence for different techniques that have worked to keep specific special libraries functioning. Each recent issue of *Information Outlook*, the monthly magazine of the Special Libraries Association (SLA), runs a regular column on information management, which features tips and guidance in special library management. For example, Claggett and Guevara wrote about management techniques that work from their own experiences as a manager and as an employee.⁷ They both argued that teamwork is an important part of a library's success. Likewise Guevara argued for the benefits of proactively marketing a library to its corporate clients by hosting information fairs and being a part of new employees' orientation.⁸ Similarly, Schachter suggested that the ability to communicate effectively with managerial boards is an important skill for librarians, especially those working in the non-profit sector.⁹ Clearly the literature offers counsel to any special library anticipating reductions. However, it is prescient to note that most of these techniques derived from a single library's testimonial.

Surveying Special Librarians: Strategies That Save Their Libraries

In order to determine the applicability of the strategies suggested in the literature we surveyed special librarians based in the greater Washington, D.C. area. Our survey consisted of 10 questions. We wanted to know how many special libraries have faced a cutback or an elimination, and the extent of the role (on a three-point scale – major, some, or none) that the special librarians think the following strategies play in preventing or stopping cutbacks: (1) reduce costs, (2) form partnerships with other libraries, (3) make librarians visible in the

organization, (4) advertise library services to other members of the organization, and (5) advertise library services to the organization's management. These strategies have been recommended in special library literature as effective techniques.^{10,11,12,13,14} We asked the survey respondents to estimate the percentage of special libraries that have strategies in place to prevent cutbacks and whether special librarians thought it would ever be impossible to prevent cutbacks. We also asked about demographics the special librarians and their job satisfaction. Some respondents included stories or quotations to elaborate on their responses to the survey.

We conducted the survey by e-mailing a link to the web page of our survey to the D.C. chapter of the Special Library Association (DC/SLA) and the Law Librarians' Society of D.C. (LLSDC) between March 12 and 24, 2008.

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

We received 113 useable responses. As Figure 1 shows, our sample was diverse and the respondents were special librarians with different levels of experiences, working in several types of special libraries of various sizes. Most of them were very satisfied or satisfied with their jobs.

Figure 1. Demographics of Survey Respondents

Question	Response	Percentage
In what types of special libraries have you worked?	Corporate	37.17%
	Government	50.44%
	Law	38.05%
	Medical	13.27%
	Museum	2.65%
	News	7.96%
	Other	27.43%
Approximately how many cataloged volumes does the library at which you currently work have?	0 or Did Not Respond	26.55%
	1-9999	28.32%
	10000-19999	14.16%
	20000 or More	30.97%
How long have you been a librarian?	0-5 years	23.90%
	6-10 years	11.50%
	11-15 years	20.35%
	16-20 years	10.62%
	20+ years	33.63%
How satisfied are you with your job as a librarian?	Very satisfied	67.26%
	Somewhat satisfied	29.20%
	Not at all satisfied	2.65%
	Don't know	0.89%

Among the respondents of our survey, 61% have worked at a library that had faced serious cutbacks or elimination. Regarding the strategies for preventing cutbacks, many

respondents thought that advertising the library's services to other organizational members (45%) and to the management (52%) would play a major role. Those special librarians, who have not experienced a cutback or elimination of their libraries, attached significantly more importance to these marketing strategies in cutback prevention than did those who have experienced a cutback or elimination. Additionally, the strategy of advertising library services to the management is also significantly related to job satisfaction. Respondents very satisfied with their jobs considered advertising to the management significantly more important in preventing cutbacks than did those not satisfied. While there is agreement on the effectiveness of advertising library services to other employees and the management of an organization, respondents disagreed about whether they thought other strategies could prevent cutbacks or elimination. Respondents, who are current and former law librarians considered cost reduction significantly more important in preventing cutbacks than other respondents.

When cutbacks have already been announced, we found even less agreement on what, if anything, can be done to save the library. Most respondents only thought advertising library services to the management (48%) would play a major role in saving a library from undergoing announced cutbacks. Law librarians, however, thought this strategy significantly less important than did other respondents. Those who have worked in the libraries of nonprofit organizations found it significantly more important to form partnerships with other libraries to share resources in preventing cutbacks than did respondents who have not worked in nonprofit libraries. Corporate librarians reported that it is significantly less important to cut costs or to make librarians visible in stopping cutbacks than did respondents who have not worked in corporate libraries.

Librarians, especially government librarians, believe there is a limit to what can be done to save a library. We asked our respondents "how likely is it that a library will still undergo serious cutbacks or elimination despite the librarians' best efforts to prevent them?" On a scale of 1 to 100, with one being extremely unlikely, 50 being equally unlikely as likely, and 100 being extremely likely, the mean of the responses was 73. The mean of the responses from government librarians was nearly 77, as opposed to 62 from medical librarians.

The survey has shed light on the applicability of the five strategies recommended by prior literature to different types of special libraries. To understand *why* some strategies work while others do not under certain circumstances, we further conducted four in-depth case studies.

Case Studies of Cutbacks and Eliminations: Successes and Failures

In order to understand how cutbacks and eliminations occur in different special library environments and discover what solutions could be learned and applied by special libraries facing similar situations, we studied special libraries in four organizations: KPMG LLP, Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates (WJE), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Apple Corporation. The criteria for selecting these cases rested on two principal factors: (1) the level of information available to us and (2) the inclusion of diverse types of special libraries in order to make recommendations that would be applicable to a broad number of types of special libraries.

For brevity, in this paper, we focus on KPMG's National Tax Library and discuss the lessons learned from the other three cases.

KPMG NATIONAL TAX LIBRARY

In 1998, KPMG LLP was in the process of establishing a small, centralized headquarters for tax consulting, staffed by tax attorneys as opposed to auditors and accountants (who made up the largest employee population of the firm). The idea was to not only provide newer services to clients but also take advantage of the increasingly complicated scope of tax law. Washington, D.C. was the natural choice, given its proximity to the Internal Revenue Service and the legislature as well as its reputation for housing many prestigious law firms.

At the time, KPMG's 'library' consisted of bookshelves scattered throughout the firm, usually maintained by a practice group, and whatever else individuals ordered on their own. Often there were too many copies of some books and not enough of others. Looseleaf filing of updates was sporadic and mediocre at best, not to mention time-consuming. There was no central apparatus that could aid the professionals in finding materials and doing research projects.

The firm was also in the process of downgrading all libraries nationally. This was a common trend in law firms, which often increasingly relied entirely on access to online database services such as Lexis or Westlaw for research needs. Frequently this trend meant more office space and considerably less funds for maintaining a library and staff. Despite the closures, the D.C. tax office not only managed to keep the current library as it stood, but also hired a new librarian, designed a dedicated library within the building, and secured funding to staff the library. Today the library remains a strong and integral part of the firm.

What Helped Them Succeed?

Marketing was the initial key to making the library a reality. The new tax department called itself the Washington National Tax Office, which differentiated the department as a separate entity that offered specialized services. In keeping with the theme of identifying via name, they presented the library to the managing partners as the National Tax Library (NTL). These marketing efforts served two purposes. First, the library's name created an image of providing a specialized service for the entire firm (which mirrors the services that Washington National Tax provides). This purpose led to the decision to move the materials from the libraries that had been closed into the central library. Professionals throughout the firm began to associate the National Tax Library as the best place to get research help, hard-to-find materials, and general reference services. The second purpose of a centralized library was to strengthen the reputation of both KPMG and its budding Washington National Tax since the firm could now boast a National Tax Library among its clientele and its rivals.

An additional benefit of the library's success was that the librarian began maintaining open channels with all levels of the management, viewing them not only as users but also as 'investors' in the 'business' of the library. In order to further improve its images and services, the

new library employed a diverse set of tactics, such as contacting the managing partner in order to explain the current library system problems as well as establishing a NTL Committee, which included the library staff, the managing partner of Washington National Tax, and other types of professionals. By studying the firm's library practices the NTL Committee learned that the users often purchased whatever library items they wanted, were reimbursed, and then maintained the subscriptions themselves. As a result, the committee decided that having all materials in a central location would be cheaper and easier to maintain and save time for the departmental administrative staff, who had often been charged with ordering and maintaining the subscriptions. A centralized subscriptions policy also saved the firm space. Additionally, the NTL Committee recommended that group leaders could make decisions on what resources their groups would need, but the library would be responsible for all of the ordering.

Also, in an effort to understand user needs, the new librarian asked patrons to fill out a questionnaire rating their use of resources and the value of the resources, and describing their research styles. The survey revealed which resources were lacking (legislative history materials, various online databases, periodicals that were not available through the firm's current Lexis subscription). It also revealed that the users were unhappy with the current way of doing things (individual subscriptions/resource maintenance) and that they welcomed a central library that would be the main source of information. A corporate library would increase ease of use and eliminate clutter in personal and general office spaces. The NTL Committee also realized that junior staff (associates and senior associates) relied heavily on library services in research projects. They needed a wide range of materials to help them conduct research as well as a centralized place to locate information. Ultimately the survey helped to address user needs and illustrate that the librarian made efforts to understand the firm's requirements as it grew.

The library also conducted an Information Audit that involved constant contact with the heads of functional groups as well as the heads of the entire department (which made everyone a part of the process) as a means of gathering information about what materials were already used, what materials were needed, and what were the pressing concerns and information needs of the firm's management and employees. One tactic the library employed was to set up multiple communication points. The plan was communicated in various ways, first in a memo that addressed the needs of the organization and how the library would be helping to address those needs, thus justifying the library's existence. Then the NTL Committee listed the goals and deliverables for the library. As a result, all users could not only see what the library could do for them, but also track and understand the changes that were being made to their ability to access information. The users and management were extremely well-informed about the library's actions and the ways that these actions could add value to their own work and save them time. In addition, the library employed business principles, immediately defined its goals, and created a detailed plan that it would follow in order to achieve tangible results. The plan addressed specific issues at a time, starting with an audit to figure out what materials already exist throughout the office that can be consolidated into the library, reduce multiple copies, and decide what else was needed for the collection. Record keeping, goal statements, and an overarching project plan were particularly successful elements of the plan. Regarding record keeping, the library made sure that all records of meetings included a defined focus, a specific timeline, and outlined goals. Another business practice introduced by the library was writing goal statements, such as "A Business Case for Change," which clearly outlined what the current system for research and resource organization involved and what the new library intended to do. This was used to justify the

purchase of materials and resources, the allotment of dedicated space within the building for the library, and the hiring of additional personnel (in this case, a library clerk).

Finally, the library advocated for creating an overarching project plan that listed goals, needs, and deliverables. The plan sought to address the following questions: Can you define your library? What is the plan for the future? Do you have a risk management structure? The goals were used to establish a model for the desired library and the needs addressed various resources that could not be provided for by the committee itself. Lastly, the deliverables were addressed first as a general list of tangible things that could be done to fulfill the model goal, and then this list outlined each action while spelling out the steps necessary to undertake the action. The strategies that the KPMG National Tax Library employed helped to make it possible to create a stronger community within a fairly new, but growing, organization which was looking to prove its worth to a larger overarching firm that previously had had other areas of tax specialty.

THE LIBRARY AT WJE

Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc. (WJE) is a 53-year-old firm composed of engineers, architects, and material scientists providing solutions to problems in all types of buildings. Headquartered in Northbrook, Illinois, WJE has 18 branches throughout the country. In 2001, WJE's management was considering outsourcing its library services when they hired a new librarian, Penny Sympson, who vowed to make the library indispensable. This librarian alone served the entire firm of over 300 employees. While each location had some materials available on site, the only library proper, with about 7,000 items in inventory, was located at the headquarters. The library was underused, had an online catalog that was only accessible to the librarian, and housed a poorly organized collection. As a result, Sympson had a lot of downtime in her early days at WJE.

What Helped Them Succeed?

Sympson began familiarizing herself with the collection, the firm's mission, and the day-to-day needs of the engineers as she settled in. She identified and licensed several databases that were useful to the firm, but her most important realization was that the engineers did not have enough time to browse through the collection for useful sources. Hence she began hand delivering materials to those who made requests in the firm headquarters, introducing herself while also marketing the current library resources and services as well as noting areas of research interest for future reference. She continued marketing the underused services through presentations in offices, at lunches, and virtually for those in other locations. In these sessions she was able to garner input from users, walk them through new technologies and services, and promote the items in the collection while introducing herself to many within the firm. Sympson tried to make it clear that she was available to do research, but that there were also many good resources to help users find information on their own. As library services became better known, the collection both in the main library as well as in the other branches grew and was accessed by users more often and more efficiently. Ultimately, not only was the WJE library not outsourced, but also the firm hired a part-time clerk to aid Sympson in the library.¹⁵

EPA LIBRARIES

The Bush Administration, in early 2006, announced a \$1.5 million budget cut from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regional libraries for fiscal year 2007 (beginning in Oct. 2006) and a \$500,000 cut from its headquarters library - a 50-percent reduction of the budget. EPA administrators justified the closures by saying that the collection either was already online or would be made available online, but then it was announced that “the digitization of many unique EPA print materials would take up to two years.”^{16,17} Due to a letter-writing effort to Congress by some 10,000 EPA scientists, engineers, and other specialists arguing that the cutbacks “would put thousands of scientific studies out of reach and hinder emergency preparedness, anti-pollution enforcement, and long-term research.”¹⁸ Finally, in spring 2008, Congress restored the budget for the EPA libraries.

What Went Wrong?

EPA administrators clearly did not realize the value of the EPA Libraries and how long it would take to digitize the collection. Librarians, for their part, could have kept metrics that would have enlightened administrators on the full range of library services. EPA administrators were unaware, for example, of the extent to which users accessed library services online or via e-mail, and not just by visiting the library premises. In fact, the GAO (Government Accountability Office) reported that the EPA “did not adequately consult agency staff, outside experts or stakeholders before undertaking the reorganization, and failed to take into account the needs of the public to have access to the materials.”¹⁹

THE APPLE LIBRARY

The Apple Library reported to the Advanced Technology Group, a strong supporter and user of the library’s research services.²⁰ However, when Apple’s financial picture took a downturn in 1997, Apple’s management decided to cut the library staff from 14 to 7 and decided to outsource the library services and require each department to pay for its research needs from its budget. The management believed that there would be less demand and therefore a “reduction in expenditures for information.”²¹

What Went Wrong?

The Apple Library did not cultivate its stakeholders. Customers may value library services, but they do not control corporate budgets. This library would have been in a better position had it cultivated more than one group within Apple and kept better return-on-investment metrics of its services. When budget cuts were threatened, even though the library was a success at serving internal users and promoting Apple products and services to outside educational and library groups, it did not survive elimination, because it had not been prepared to demonstrate to

the management that having an in-house library was more efficient and cost effective than outsourcing the library services.

Strategies for Survival and Success

The lessons we learned from the survey and the case studies have allowed us to recommend four strategies to special librarians to help them work to save their libraries from budget cuts.

MARKET YOURSELF AGGRESSIVELY

Special librarians must aggressively market the library's services and resources to the management and other members of their host organizations. They need to inform executives about how library services are actually used, the extent of such use, and the impacts of library services on organizational objectives. As trained information professionals, special librarians usually can find the right information more efficiently than other employees in an organization. Therefore, special librarians need to convince the users that work productivity will increase when non-librarians spend their time on core tasks instead of library related duties. Additionally, the management may think outsourcing saves money, because the use of electronic databases, for example, is not always included in corporate overhead but instead individual departments pay the costs. As a result, special libraries need to offer more value-added and customized services in order to differentiate their services from the generic services provided by outside vendors. Therefore, in-house special libraries should streamline their operation in order to become more marketable in the information marketplace.²²

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Special librarians need to know who their target audience is and how to meet the audience's particular needs. Libraries must continue focusing on being user friendly, further facilitating the research process, and helping to obtain the information that organizations and their employees need to succeed. Consequently, the library should offer training, either in groups or one-on-one. With a good understanding of user needs, special librarians should be proactive and keep an eye out for applicable information that meets user needs and delivers it even before the information is specifically requested. In addition, special libraries should build good connections with the management and other departments in order to nurture champions that can support the library in both good and hard economic times.

BE A PART OF THE ORGANIZATION

Special librarians need to ensure that the libraries are integrated into the organization's daily workflow and make an impact on its goals.²³ As a result, the library will be viewed by the organization as an active and valued member of the "team."²⁴ Special libraries should try to

establish the library manager position as being equivalent to department heads in other areas of the organization with comparable title and similar hierarchy of supervision. Special librarians need to be proactive in adopting new technologies in line with the strategies of the host organization, read trade publications, and keep current with the innovations applied within the host organization's industry.

PREPARE METRICS AND JUSTIFICATIONS

Special libraries need to gather usage and performance information throughout the year, whether a return-on-investment report on services, or survey results from users converted into monetary terms, or usage statistics from vendors on electronic resources.²⁵ Librarians should look for ways to reduce costs or to justify current or projected costs through the use of usage and performance metrics.

Conclusion

Based on our literature review, survey, and case studies, we have found that while cutting costs and hand delivering materials may be helpful in some organizations but not others, it is universally essential for special librarians to know the particular needs of other members of their organization, align library services with the organization's vision and mission, and aggressively market library services and resources to the management and other employees within the host organization. Our findings reinforce the value of being proactive, in order for special libraries to weather today's economic recession and thrive long-term. Based on the strategies we have recommended above, we further articulate the underlying philosophy: Special libraries facing cutbacks or elimination need to employ and assimilate effective *business* strategies in order to increase their chances of survival and success.

Endnotes

¹ This paper represents the views of the authors only, and does not necessarily represent the views or professional advice of KPMG LLP, whose National Tax Library is studied here.

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