

Consultancy Opportunities: Answering a plea for help from a Public Library

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As today's libraries move more towards digital media, there is a growing demand for IT expertise among library staff as they plan for the future. When the Napier Public Library looked at upgrading their Library Management System (LMS), they found themselves lacking appropriate IT skills to be able to confidently plan the implementation. Looking to fill the knowledge gap and aiming to keep within a tight budget they turned to their local Institute of Technology for help.

This paper outlines the relationship that developed between the library and the Eastern Institute of Technology, Hawke's Bay (EIT) and offers a guide to other Institutes that are looking for ways to develop community partnerships. The paper traces the activities that have led to a partnership, which has obvious benefits for both parties.

As a result of the partnership, EIT has provided guidance in relation to technical matters and has encouraged library staff to ask the difficult questions associated with a significant system upgrade. The institute has incorporated the consultancy role into a third year IT Management paper, which has as its core the development of a strategic information systems plan for the library. The library has gained significant expertise and reduced the risks associated with the LMS upgrade and as a result has gained confidence in moving towards the future.

This paper will be of interest to both, institutes looking for opportunities to develop meaningful relationships outside the institute and to library staff that may be feeling overwhelmed by the rapid advancement of technology and information systems.

Keywords

Computing Practice, Community Collaboration, Strategic Planning and Innovation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years tertiary institutes have explored ways to integrate industry and community organizations into both teaching and research objectives. Early in 2004 the Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) was approached by the Napier Public Library (NPL) to provide a consultancy role for the upgrade of their Library Management System (LMS) and purchasing recommendations for new hardware.

This paper considers the case for providing consultancy for industry and community organizations and outlines the importance that both EIT and the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) have placed on industry relationships and collaboration.

The paper introduces the Napier Public Library and traces the events that led to the establishment of a significant relationship between the Library and EIT. The paper also describes the nature of the evolving relationship and explains the processes followed by EIT and the Library, which enabled the integration of the development of a new IT Strategic Plan for the Library into the assessment for a third year BCS IT Management course. The paper concludes, looking at the benefits gained and the opportunities for tertiary institutes to develop meaningful relationships with major industry and community based organisations.

2. INTRODUCING THE NAPIER PUBLIC LIBRARY

Established in 1874 as part of the Napier Athenaeum and Mechanics Institute, the Napier Public Library is the oldest public library in Hawkes Bay. The Napier Public Library is a community based service organization whose purpose is to provide for the ratepayers of Napier, materials for their education, recreational and informational needs.

In January 2004 the Manager of the NPL approached the Computing section of EIT requesting help with the upgrade of their Library Management System (LMS). The NPL required help with both the software and hardware points of view of this upgrade. Having been the previous Library Man-

ager at EIT, the NPL Manager recognised the valuable input that could be gained from establishing such a relationship. Key staff changes at the Library also had an impact on the decision to seek outside assistance with this project.

The Technology Services Manager (TSM) at the NPL who had the overall responsibility for the LMS and the upgrade had only recently been appointed to the position. Complicating the relatively short time the TSM had been at the Library was the fact that a long serving member of the Library staff who had expertise in the IT area had passed away suddenly, leaving the Library with little expertise in this area.

Before EIT became involved, initial discussions had taken place with the LMS vendor in Australia and quotes and budgets had been prepared for the hardware and associated software upgrades. As a result of these discussions numerous issues and queries arose and given the lack of expertise available within the library itself, a decision was made to approach EIT for expert advice.

3. THE EIT CONNECTION

Following the initial approach, a small consultancy team at EIT was established to investigate the original request. With the call for assistance being on a more formal level than many of our previous “off the cuff” consultancies the project team immediately asked questions such as “how do we do this” and “what will we charge”. The “how to do this” was put to one side, while an attempt was made to address the “what we will charge” prior to the first meeting taking place.

The Dean of the Faculty of Business and Computing was consulted and it was decided by the consultancy team that we would not charge a fee for this project, in the hope that we could forge a lasting relationship with the NPL (which may open up other opportunities). Another thought was that if we did not charge a fee, we could explore with the NPL the possibility of documenting this process as a research paper, which may be of use to other institutes and public libraries.

The first meeting took place between the NPL and the consultancy team, with the library outlining where they were at with the project to date and the EIT team trying to establish what was required in order to move forward. In addition to the NPL carrying out their upgrade, it was also mentioned that

the Hastings Public Library was also going through the same process with the same vendor. The meeting concluded, with the EIT consultancy team having a clearer understanding of what was required and another meeting was scheduled with the TSM to move the project forward into its next phase.

A Technology Plan was tabled at the next meeting by the TSM, which included information relevant to the proposed upgrade. After reviewing this document, it was evident that it was no more than a “story” about what had happened with Information Technology at the NPL to date, and a wish list of what they actually wanted to occur in the future. A decision was made that this needed to be reworked and take the form more of a Strategic Information Systems (IS) Plan. It was proposed that EIT could help in this process by integrating the need for a new plan into an assessment item for third year BCS IT Management students.

After agreeing on the need for a new IS Plan, questions such as why were the NPL going to continue their relationship with the current LMS vendor, had they had the opportunity to look at other LMS vendors and what about integrating with the Hastings Public Library were all asked. The TSM agreed that these were valid and obviously couldn’t answer all of these immediately.

A meeting of Library Management and another between the two Libraries were held and a resolution was made by both Libraries to go ahead with the upgrade using the current vendor based upon the following justifications:

- The current LMS is delivering operationally what the Library require it to do on a day-to-day basis.
- The LMS upgrade will take the Library through the next 3 years, in which time other systems could have been investigated. A full review of the LMS will be undertaken during this time.
- Current issues with the LMS vendor were not significant enough to warrant a full review.
- At the end of the day it is only an upgrade, not a full version change.
- The costs of abandoning the existing system would be significant.

By questioning the reasons and upon reviewing the above rationale, the EIT consultancy team were happy with the outcomes but even more pleased

with the fact that the Library had asked the tough questions. At least we were sure that the NPL and other interested parties had made an informed decision to go ahead with the upgrade.

4. THE INTEGRATION OF THE CONSULTANCY INTO THE BCS

The creation of a new strategic plan for the library, formed the basis of a Case assignment which was used for the IT Management paper 06.725 (3rd year Bachelor of Computing Systems). The concept of undertaking a real-world case was discussed with the class and was met with unanimous agreement by students. The draft IT Strategic Plan was attached with the assignment specifications for the students to familiarise themselves with the NPL case. The TSM of NPL was invited to run a question and answer session with all the IT management students. The students soon realised that this was a genuine request for help from NPL as the TSM was open to technical solutions and ideas from the students. Students sought clarification and information regarding staff hierarchy, current IT systems, vision for the future and where NPL fits into the entire Napier City Council (NCC) organisational structure.

The BCS students stated that they preferred to investigate an actual organisation with real problems rather than an artificially contrived case study. Some students found the Q&A session with the TSM difficult to put into context as this session was run reasonably early in the teaching term and they were not sure of what questions to ask.

Some students reflected that this case assignment was going to mean more work for them, as they were no longer able to “fudge” case issues, which they could have done if it were not a real organisation, particularly as the TSM had committed to at least scanning all the assignments. Students also appreciated hearing an IT professional (the TSM) struggling with issues of budget, lack of firm future direction and some ambiguity of IT solutions. They realised that IT management was about dealing with an imperfect world in somewhat “messy” situations with people who were not 100% sure about what they were doing. As Dark (2002) noted

“Because students do have limited professional experience, at times the instructor

also will need to intervene with redirecting information, clarification, etc., to move the discussion and analysis forward. Because the case studies are dilemma based and fairly personal in nature, students will sometimes form strong opinions and will sometimes disagree with each other. These instances are what I refer to as highly “teachable moments”; there is some tension in the room, all students are paying attention, the students in the disagreement are mentally preparing to defend their positions by scrutinizing the facts and hand, as well as injecting and assimilating other knowledge into the situation to strengthen their positions. This is active learning!”

5. THE ACADEMIC PROCESS

The class consisted of 40 students, with small groups to create 10-12 separate IT plans. The TSM made a commitment to read all reports from the EIT students and to make a brief comment on each one. The lecturer agreed with the TSM to handpick three of the highest quality reports and recommend further use by the TSM and NPL. The lecturer would still mark each report under normal academic rigour and criteria. Two students did request payment if their report was used by NPL! Students also mentioned that they appreciated getting to know real people in the case e.g. the TSM. Groups of students also visited the library to observe borrowers and staff in action on a typical day. A senior library staff member from the EIT library in a similar role to the NPL TSM also came to a class and answered questions from students.

In summary, this live case provided a higher quality assignment with greater motivation and active learning opportunities. The NPL case probably did require more work and time from the group of students. Students accessed a website showcasing a wide variety and number of technology plans for libraries (Dzurinko & Platt, 1999)

6. STUDENT FEEDBACK

When surveyed to find out what they thought of the real world case study, comments made included;

■ “It’s interesting to hear the problem from someone grappling with how to solve it. Real information”

■ “For this case to be fully successful, we would need to see that our report had some real-world effect.”

■ “The case gives an idea of what is expected in the real-world.”

■ “I would like to get “real-world” feedback.”

■ “I rate this assignment highly, even the fact of having a real physical location helps in understanding.”

■ “You feel more obligated to do a better job.”

■ “The real-world case has re-enforced that I do know more than I thought I did!”

■ “Because this assignment is going to be read by someone external it encourages you to try harder to make the report meaningful to recipient, rather than just achieving marking criteria.”

It is interesting to note that several students felt some pressure to produce higher quality work because of the presence of an external industry person who would read their work.

7. CONCLUSIONS

From this project it is evident that IT has a major influence on the way in which libraries conduct their day to business. It is obvious that the NPL lacked the skills and knowledge within their staff to carry out such an upgrade and it is likely that many other libraries are in the same situation. The need to have specialised staff with the appropriate skills was also evident, rather than having Librarians with an enthusiastic interest in IT.

This liaison with NPL allowed EIT to judge the reaction of students to this type of project. The positive response from students gave EIT confidence to take on more consultancies in the future especially where students can become involved. The consultancy achieved organisational and faculty goals in this area for EIT. We can now use this work as evidence for new proposals in the future.

With respect to the work carried out by EIT for the NPL, there is no reason why other institutes could not use this same or similar scenario’s to participate in consultancy projects or integrate Active Learning into their academic programmes. This project may

also be of interest to other Public Libraries who are currently in the same situation that the NPL was in and may provide direction for them to approach their local Tertiary Institution for help.

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