

Working in partnership and building relationships as a specialist information service

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Abstract

Deena Maggs, Head of Information and Knowledge Services at The King's Fund, discusses the development, challenges and advantages of creating income generation activities and demonstrating impact. Key to success has been developing and maintain partnerships and reaching new audiences.

Key words: entrepreneurship; library services.

Introduction

The King's Fund was formed in 1897 as an initiative of the then Prince of Wales, who went on to become King Edward VII. Its initial purpose was to raise money for London's voluntary hospitals, which at that time offered the only health services available to the disadvantaged. It was during the 1970s, that The King's Fund's was more clearly defined as a health care think tank. It is this role, commenting on national health and care policy that people are most familiar with today.

The King's Fund Information and Knowledge Service has a history of working in partnerships, both to expand professional networks, networks and inform in service delivery. In my role as Head of Information and Knowledge Services, I have consciously sought to "join up the dots" between specialist libraries and other health libraries to build our professional profile and this has benefited in us working on national projects and initiatives. However, our income generating activity is less well known and is considered unusual for libraries, especially in the charitable sector, but plays a major part in the way we have developed partnerships over the last 30 years.

The King's Fund Information and Knowledge Services

A library has existed within the Fund since 1948 (in those days it was called an "Information Bureau") and along with the NHS we celebrated our 70th anniversary this year. The role of the library has adapted to meet the changing role of The King's Fund and this is reflected in what we curate in our unique collection of health and care policy material. We offer a popular enquiry service to anyone with an interest in health and care policy where we respond to queries within one working day. The positive responses and feedback we've received in relation to our enquiries has helped build our confidence and understand the value that others place on our expertise and knowledge. This has given us the confidence to work with other information professionals and organisations to develop aspects of our services. In this article, we highlight examples of some collaborations we inherited and those we wish to grow further to widen our reach, all in the context of our organisational objectives.

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Co-operation to consortium

One of the most established partnerships we have is with the Department of Health and Social Care's library to produce a unique health policy bibliographic database: the Health Management Information Consortium (HMIC). In the early 1990s, our service recognised that we needed to meet the rising user demands for information services from The King's Fund: "this is due to a number of environmental factors including the major NHS reforms, changes in nursing education, and expanded interest in European Community health policy" (1).

Originally, the intention was to encourage greater collaboration between major information providers such as ourselves, the Nuffield Institute for Health Service Studies and Department of Health library, co-operating at a national level. As we embarked on the initial steps towards a consortium, it was mooted that recovering costs for services provided across these organisations would be required and this marked the beginning of our income generating activities. The first products of HMIC included an exchange of bibliographic records with the Department of Health which eventually led to combined bibliographic records on CD-ROM which would then go on to appear as an online database alongside other health and medical databases. A core customer of this service was the NHS and this still remains the case today. Over the years, the topic coverage and sources included reflected the themes of The Fund's work and expanded to include more international comparative material. Today the current content of HMIC is a combination of The King's Fund's database and the Department of Health's and Social Care (DHSC) library database, all managed via the publishers Wolters Kluwer.

Although this partnership was already established when I joined The Fund, I continue to work closely with the Department of Health library to ensure we maintain to provide a high-quality product. Although relationship has changed over the years, and different librarians have been involved, we have continued to preserve the essence of the original aim of collaborating with others to support information provision in health service management.

Re-using and refinement from experience

We have sustained an income generating model since the 1990s by offering similar information service to those we offer internally (such as literature searches) to external organisations on an ad hoc basis. This worked well for a number of years but predicting the level of income we would get from this type of work on an annual basis was difficult. We wanted to find a way of either gaining repeat business or on-going contracts. IKS has extensive experience of emailed current awareness alerts as part of our contract with NHS Evidence (known then as the National Library for Health) to provide information for the health management, commissioning and patient and public involvement specialist collections. Over time we brought these alerting services in-house and expanded the range offered from the twice weekly Health Management and Policy alert to a monthly Integrated Care Bulletin, and the fortnightly Digital Health Digest and the Health and Wellbeing Bulletin.

Given our experience and refinement of internal processes we felt we could utilise our expertise in this area for other organisations. In 2015, we were approached by the Centre for Ageing Better to explore the idea of a bespoke email alerting service. The Centre for Ageing Better is a charity foundation focused on the issues of ageing well; from health to housing, dealing with major life changes and managing finances. This was an initial challenge as the content was beyond our expertise in health and care. It took nearly two years of meetings to agree the remit of the topics to be included, the sources we would need to use, how the content would be delivered and the responsibilities of both parties in the contracted relationship. This experience also helped build our confidence in working outside our area of specialist knowledge. The project has been a useful reminder in how transferrable our information skills are and in our strengths as a service.

Reaching new audiences

One of our on-going objectives is ensuring users continue to visit and use the Information Centre. Like many library services we have seen our physical library space reduced significantly over the years. The most significant reduction in space was in 2009 where

the period of closure had an impact on the number of users who came in to use the Information Centre. There were also other factors which impacted on a decrease in footfall such as the loss of the management trainee contract. These trainees would previously have seen us as the “go-to” place for their assignments after we provided them with an induction to our services.

We have adapted our space, as others have, to meet current work practices such as increasing the amount of flexible workspace so users can use their own devices and to use the space more creatively; for our regular book group, a meeting space, a training suite and traditional study space. In September 2017 a tutor from Morley College brought several of her students to use our collection. I happened to be passing through the library when I overheard them talking and so I introduced myself. That initial ‘corridor conversation’ led to us meeting the other health and care tutors at Morley College to talk about the research skills needs of their students and find out a bit more about the courses offered.

This resulted in us re-working a standard presentation on the use of grey literature into a session on research skills in health and care policy aimed at further education students. Over the course of the 2017/18 academic year, we rolled out this model of training to two other FE colleges in London, tailoring the sessions to their specific course curriculum and the needs of the tutors and their students.

As we approach the new academic year, we have all three colleges continuing to engage with us to support new cohorts of students with sessions pre-booked up to January 2019. We have taken a more strategic approach by contacting health and care tutors at other FE colleges to expand this offer across London. It is not always easy to meet during the academic year, tutors are busy delivering so there is little time to plan and generally we have found curriculums are quite restrictive, so we do spend time distilling the resources we showcase during these sessions. But we have managed to identify a genuine need and by tapping into this we hope it will continue to result in increased users for the Information Centre.

An additional benefit is greater confidence in approaching new audiences and trying new ideas to demonstrate our impact and maintain user visits to the Information Centre. It has also given us insights

into new audiences that The Fund would like to connect with, especially for our Events team who are looking to engage with students for some of their events. Some of these students will be health and care leaders of the future and it is paramount we engage with these professional beyond their studies and into their careers.

Learning

Lessons from building partnerships is building relationships it is key and it can take time. Like with our Centre for Ageing Better partnership, it can take a while to agree the remit of the work. There can also be challenges around working styles and different organisational cultures. The relationship can change when there is a change in personnel but sometimes this can lead to new ideas and new thinking which enhances the products we are delivering, whether it is an alerting service or skills training.

Better understanding can also lead to new and interesting opportunities. All of these examples have presented us with new opportunities such as new income initiatives, connecting with new networks or getting involved in new projects.

However, there can also be barriers such as lack of capacity within the team, so managing expectations is essential. Some ideas need significant time to explore and work through. We have had people approach us about potential projects where we engaged in the initial relationship but it did not result in an outcome. There are a number of reasons why this happens such as funding, people undervalue the costs involved in scoping and developing new information products, poor buy-in from stakeholders and changing strategic priorities.

Conclusion

Working in partnership is essential to secure our future as a specialist health library service and fundamentally our existence. That might sound extreme but talking to peers we all experience continual questions about our services; whether it is reviewing staffing, space, resources or just how we meet organisational strategic aims. Justifying and demonstrating impact is a constant for our profession but I feel strongly that we need to work collaboratively to stay relevant.

If you have an idea for collaborating, like I did about

the corridor conversation with the FE tutor or our vision for national co-operation on health management information, then as a first step I would recommend having a conversation about it. These conversations as a team, as information professionals and as experts in health and care policy information have led to engaging with new users not only for IKS but has also allowed IKS to be seen as a gateway to new audiences for The King's Fund. By engaging with people through the library database, enquiries, alerts and training we have identified people keen to know more about the health and care system they

are working in or gained insights into how people are experiencing this system.

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