

## Neil Infield at The British Library's Business & IP Centre: Recognizing—and Responding to—the Potential

by Guy St. Clair



Isn't there an old adage somewhat along the lines of "May you live in interesting times?"

Well, no matter how you define "interesting," these are without doubt interesting times for the British Library. And for entrepreneurs in the UK.

In terms of opportunities available to entrepreneurs, innovators, and other people we think of as "pushing the envelope," there are definitely interesting prospects for them at the British Library these days. Even with the current uproar in the financial sector, the British Library's two-year-old Business & IP Centre ([www.bl.uk/bipc](http://www.bl.uk/bipc)) is now established as the essential "go-to" place for people seeking information, knowledge, and strategic learning related to their business and intellectual property needs.

And why not? When Neil Infield—who has management responsibility for the Business Centre (as it's called)—began to hear about what was being considered for the UK's business community at the British Library, he could not help but get excited.

"There was just so much potential," he says, "and the great thing about being a manager is seeing the potential. At the British Library, the potential for providing service delivery to people who need information for managing their businesses was so great it was almost irresistible. And the challenge for pulling it all together was daunting, to say the least. But what success we would have when it all came together!"

And while Infield is not exactly the type of person to overstate his enthusiasms, he can hardly contain himself when he speaks about the possibilities that began to emerge at the British Library as leadership there began to think about what could be offered.

"When Lynne Brindley came to the British Library," he says, "her challenge was to build a library for the 21st century. Responding to that challenge was an openly stated goal, and she had to think about how society and the library would deal with such issues as digitization, customer focus, moving information delivery up the value chain, those kinds of issues."

Brought to the British Library in 2000 as that venerable institution's first Chief Executive, Brindley clearly recognized that one of her early goals would be to match library services to the government's commitment to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). If the UK government was encouraging

entrepreneurship and innovation as essential to the country's future economic success—as it was—then service delivery from the British Library would have to match that commitment. As with any major research library, there already was some movement in that direction but much more was needed. As Brindley commented in an interview in *Harvard Business Review*, while the library was being used by researchers from large companies, SMEs were not taking advantage of the opportunities available to them. To even things out—as Sarah Cliffe put it in that November, 2007 *HBR* article—required “a major shift” in the mission and culture of the library. And it was all connected with Brindley's responsibility to oversee the development of the “new” British Library, moving toward a research institution that would be “more forward-looking and customer focused and much less exclusive.”

Quite a change for one of the world's most scholarly research libraries. And, yes, perhaps a little threatening or disheartening to those who think of a “library” as a repository of collected printed materials or as a peaceful retreat from the busy-ness of the outside world.

But there really wasn't a choice at the British Library, just as there isn't any choice for other research organizations in today's information-, knowledge-, and strategic learning-focused society. In our fast-moving, goal-oriented workplace, the delivery of knowledge services—the term we use to refer to the convergence of information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning that drives almost every conceivable venture—the move toward a forward-looking knowledge services facility built around customer needs is now simply a fact of life. Particularly in those segments of society wherein one must build information, knowledge, and strategic learning into the accomplishment of strategic ends, they must be provided. Whether those strategic ends are business related (as in starting up a new company), concerned with societal change (as with the many non-profits and charitable organizations employing such a huge part of the workforce), or connected with some other goal or purpose, they require access to and excellence in the management of a vast number of knowledge assets. Surely it is the purpose of society to provide that access and excellence in its primary research institutions, and in redefining and refocusing the mission and culture of the British Library, Lynne Brindley and her management leaders decided to openly tackle those management and service delivery challenges for the citizens of the United Kingdom.

By October of last year, Brindley was describing the development of the British Library's Business & IP Centre as “a story of success.” In her introduction to the report of the Centre's first year,\* Brindley writes that the development of the Business Centre is a story “about a unique contribution to enterprise in the UK and a story of an entrepreneurial public institution—the British Library—backed by strategic investment by the London Development Agency (LDA).” That strategic investment was also a vote of confidence from the leaders of the LDA, confidence that the development, management, and delivery of knowledge services for business people would be at a level of excellence to specifically meet the present (and, particularly, the future) needs of the UK's citizens. The Business Centre was designed for that very purpose. Its design, creation, and development recognize that as people determine they can control and influence their own success—whether by going into business for themselves or simply learning about business and businesslike practices that affect their personal lives—the availability and accessibility of tools and resources is critical, and the Business Centre would provide those tools and resources. The LDA, in providing that £1 million capital injection, was confidently willing to help transform a successful pilot project into a highly valued service. It paid off.

There was value add, too. The library's idealistic mission (indeed, we might refer to it as the library's *practical and determinedly actionable* idealistic mission) included doing more than building a state-of-the-art business and IP knowledge services facility for the public. It also represented an effort to establish a

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\* *British Library Business & IP Centre: A Capital Resource for Enterprise and Innovation*. October 2007.

standard, to provide a template or a guide for other governing authorities that would do the same for their citizens. From conception and throughout its development, the Centre was expected to be a model for other libraries (especially national libraries) seeking to serve their own business and IP communities. To develop and sustain the British Library Business Centre at a level of excellence to justify that global ambition would be a challenge of the highest order. It would require a manager who was comfortable in the business and IP community, someone who knew and understood what entrepreneurs and innovators want when they are looking for information, knowledge, and strategic learning.

In early 2006, Neil Infield joined Brindley's team. With specific responsibility for dealing with knowledge assets and knowledge services delivery to support the business community, Infield had the experience and the background for the job. And what a job it was to be! In her comments in that report, Brindley listed some of the library's brave ambitions (she called them "bold statements about how we would aim to help the launch of new UK businesses"): free access to high-value databases containing the very latest company, business, and industry information required by start-ups and SMEs; free access to the UK's most comprehensive collection of business and intellectual property information; guidance from impartial information experts; and free access to the library's other vast resources, such as its image bank, its sound archive, and scientific and technical research.



British Library Business & IP Centre Reading Room

### Was Infield up to it?

"There were no moments of doubt," he says (and if there were he is politely reticent in speaking about them). Once again it becomes clear that Infield was seduced by the service potential waiting to be tapped, but in this case it was to be service with a difference. As he reported in the February, 2008 issue of *Business Information Review*, "I can speak for my colleagues by acknowledging it has proved to be a very challenging experience. As information professionals we are used to digging beyond an initial information request, using our skill at the reference interview. But this approach takes it to a whole new level. We have to restrain ourselves from just finding the answers to our clients' questions, and instead travel with them on their journey towards business success. Sometimes it is about helping them recognize when to change direction or even stop in order to avoid failure. It is crucial that all decisions belong to the client and not to the advisor."

Changing direction, or being savvy enough to advise changing direction when change is required, is nothing new for people like Neil Infield. As Manager of Business Information Services (BIS) at Hermes Pensions Management Ltd. for ten years, Infield had an impressive track record with the company (the principal fund manager for the British Telecom and Post Office pension plans). It was pretty generally recognized that while at Hermes, Infield had taken business knowledge services management far beyond traditional library services. By the time he came to the British Library, he was well established as one of the nation's top leaders in specialized librarianship and knowledge services management. In December, 2003 Infield had been named *Information World Review's* "information professional of the year," an honor that brought press coverage describing him as "a leading light in SLA Europe." As his career advanced, Infield continued as a strong voice in the business and finance segments of specialized

librarianship, actively participating in the work of the Special Libraries Association, the preeminent international association for information professionals (he was the president of SLA's European Chapter in 2003).

Not surprisingly, Infield's leadership role in the business information community continues to be an important asset with his current responsibilities. As he seeks to take advantage of his many connections with information professionals in the larger knowledge services field, Infield finds much insight in their advice and counsel. For one thing, while the development of the Business Centre was taking place, early market studies indicated that potential users would have a different set of expectations from the library's traditional academic users, but the degree of difference in those expectations surprised everyone. As Infield points out, "entrepreneurs do not consider themselves to be researchers in the mold of the traditional British Library reader." Indeed, they don't think of themselves as library "readers" (a term, incidentally, which Infield discourages, since his experience in the business and financial community leads him to think of the Business Centre's users as "customers" or, in a nod to the Business Centre's specific and highly individualized interactions with its customers, as "clients"). These people want access to the information, knowledge, and strategic learning they require by the "simplest and quickest route," as Infield puts it, and again, it was the potential for what could be offered to the Business Centre's clients that caught Infield's attention.

Realizing that potential, though, meant grappling with another critical stumbling block, one that would require tact and certain amount of delicacy but which would, when successful, provide the Business Centre with the single most valuable asset it could have for providing services for the business community: excellent knowledge services staff who would provide the highest levels of attention to the Centre's clients.

"In the library profession," Infield says, "staff issues continue to be one of our biggest hurdles. No one realizes just how really *good*—he emphasizes the word—these information professionals are. At the same time, though, because they aren't recognized for their strengths and because so many of them are in work that is not particularly rewarding, either intellectually or financially, they become entrenched, insular and reluctant to deal with change. So you find yourself dealing with some issues that are really important to the information staff, things like professional status and standards, and you have to push yourself very hard to work your way through it."

There are ways to do it, of course, and once Infield identified some of them, he began to incorporate them into his own management style. As a first step, he looked at institutions where there has been success in transitioning traditional library services into a more proactive knowledge services approach, places like the Birmingham Central Library with its Business Insights program and SIBL, the Science, Industry, and Business Library of The Research Libraries of the New York Public Library.\* Infield approached leaders at those libraries and they turned out to be remarkably helpful, particularly in this area of staff management. Thanks to the leaders of these and other libraries, and their enthusiastic willingness to share experiences, development plans, and, not to put too fine a point on it, "war stories," the development of the Business Centre was able to proceed to a position of staff strength in a relatively short time.

"This is not to say it was easy," Infield says. "It's hard to make people switch, to ask them to do something different. It makes them very nervous, very uncomfortable. But information professionals know how to find the information, better, quicker than the user, and in the Business Centre it's the

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\* For a description of SIBL's efforts in this direction, see the 2006 two-part SMR International e-Profile of SIBL's Robert and Joyce Menschel Director Kristin McDonough at [http://www.smr-knowledge.com/eProfiles/e-Profile\\_02-01-06\\_McDonough1.pdf](http://www.smr-knowledge.com/eProfiles/e-Profile_02-01-06_McDonough1.pdf) and at [http://www.smr-knowledge.com/eProfiles/e-Profile\\_03-01-06\\_McDonough2.pdf](http://www.smr-knowledge.com/eProfiles/e-Profile_03-01-06_McDonough2.pdf).

role of these people to be the information experts, and we had to help them realize that they are experts.”

And one of Infield’s first steps was to ensure that his librarians knew he was aware of how difficult the situation was, that he understood—as they would have to understand—that change involves taking risks.

“Right at the start I just said to them, ‘Look. That’s what change is all about. We will all make mistakes in the next few weeks and months, but I will not penalize you when you do.’ But it takes a lot of effort to persuade them to change their culture and adapt to taking risks, to making the library easier and simpler to use, to listen to customer feedback, hold workshops, and go forward with that customer-focused framework.”

Another of his approaches was what Infield calls the “information and advice” role, not just for staff but including himself: If he was going to ask his librarians to take on a new entrepreneurial role for librarians, to be business advisors to the customers who come to the Business Centre, he was obviously going to participate himself but that step, for Infield, was not a difficult decision.

“This is something I like to do anyway,” he says. “After all, in my previous jobs I had worked directly with the information customers and I certainly don’t mind doing it now. The only problem is the time issue. As a manager I am not able to work on the enquiry desk regularly, but I make sure I spend several sessions each week on the customer front line.”

With the staff issues under control (if not totally resolved, as if they ever are), Infield realized that he also had to deal with getting customers into the Business Centre, with getting the word out to all those budding entrepreneurs and innovators who would benefit from knowing about the Centre.

“One of our earliest surprises was the lack of awareness about the library,” he says. “People just did not know they could use the library for business, so there again we had great potential. This, as it turned out, was our first win. Since they didn’t know they could use the library, or that the library had the information they needed, we decided that our first major thrust had to be to get the word out.”

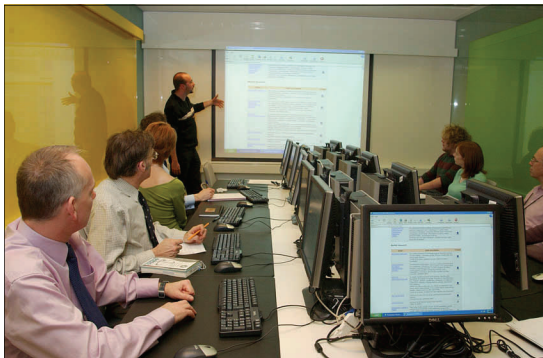
Appropriately enough, the Business Centre’s approach to awareness-raising matched that in the commercial world and produced remarkable results, with new people coming in all the time, and often. With the London Development Agency funding a series of poster advertisements in the much-traveled underground ‘tube’ system (“the first time the library had advertised in such a way,” Infield says), people began to notice and to react to the different type of services being offered by the British Library through the Business Centre. Indeed, in one early survey some 20% of users reported that they had heard about the Centre as a result of the advertising campaign funded by the LDA. As a result, citizens’ expectations began to change and with that change, entrepreneurs and business thinkers—including inventors and innovators who could access the library’s unique collection of some 50 million patent specifications from some 40 countries worldwide as well as the set of free-to-access subscription databases (“unrivaled,” Infield calls it)—began to show up at the Business Centre. They came to find what they needed for their work and what they have available to them are some 7,000 market research reports, 3,000 trade directories, business journals, official gazettes on patents, trademarks, and registered designs, law reports and other material on litigation, company annual reports, house journals, and trade literature.

The Business Centre’s success has been impressive. Opening a month ahead of schedule on March 9, 2006, the Business Centre is a public service that brings together two critical resource requirements

for entrepreneurs and innovators, especially people connected with SMEs. With its comprehensive collection of business information and intellectual property resources all in one place, the Centre plays a very important—and unique—role in the UK’s business community. Additionally, entrepreneurial thinkers and commercial innovators can find advice not only about how to turn their ideas into actionable reality; at the Business Centre they can also identify what the intellectual property situation is with respect to their ideas and learn how to access publicly available information for helping them move forward with their work.

From the beginning, Business Centre staff realized that there was a great need to focus on both providing networking opportunities for clients, and for providing them with training sessions and one-to-one clinics. These latter are bookable one-hour meetings where the client’s business idea and relevant information can be discussed, and the demand for these grew so much that leading entrepreneurs and inventors agreed to participate in “Ask the Expert” one-to-one sessions. By the Business Centre’s second anniversary, over 400 of these types of interactions had been coordinated for the Centre’s clients.

This type of activity obviously led to more types of networking and personal interactions between the Business Centre’s clients and staff and, particularly, among the clients themselves. Activities like brown-bag lunches and seminars all came together to create a real networking “buzz” at the library, with the natural result being more and more clients coming in to see and use the Business Centre (and, not so coincidentally, the exchange of business cards and individual networking, leading to even more ‘win-win’ interactions).



British Library B&IP Centre workshop in session

Certainly this level of networking and interaction would lend itself to expansion, and that is exactly what happened, to such an extent that the Business Centre’s initial team was required to grow, and even that was not enough. There also had to be a new approach to service provision, since the staff were now expected by their public to be information experts and to recognize and accept that they were experts. Soon external training was brought into the mix, and now the offerings from the Business Centre are pretty much divided 50/50, with half the strategic learning programs offered by partners (vendors and entrepreneurs) and

half offered by staff. Management expectations for staff training are high—it begins with staff’s own initial training course in workshop presentations, followed by an advanced course a year later. Presenters are required to reach certain quality standards (a minimum 80% average score).

As it happens (due to careful planning and not a little entrepreneurial thinking among British Library staff and leaders themselves), the training opportunities have turned into something of a windfall for UK entrepreneurs and business innovators. The wide range of workshops available is also something of a windfall for them. These “business interventions” (as they are described by the Business Centre) include both one-to-one advice sessions, of up to 2 hours in duration, and workshops. In the Centre’s first months of operation, 150 of the former were targeted and a total of 956 were actually delivered. So, too, with the workshops. Only one workshop was targeted for the Business Centre’s first months of operation, but the need was there, and 50 workshops were planned, organized, and presented to the Centre’s anxious and welcoming public. The Centre’s first full year of operation, 2006/2007, was even more successful, with 1,080 one-on-one sessions targeted and 2,131 delivered, and with 96 workshops targeted and in the end 222 delivered.

A quick look at any current line-up of programs tells us why these targeted activities exceeded expectations, and if other libraries are looking for a model for providing direct services to entrepreneurs and business innovators, the British Library Business & IP Centre is the place to go. Just in two weeks of one recent month, two or three courses a day are being offered (with many of them already marked “Fully Booked” and alternate dates suggested), along with other lively networking and “get-together” events. More to the point, the topics make it clear that these programs and workshops are in response to customer needs: an “Inventions Advice Clinic,” for example, or “Introducing Patents Searching,” or “A Beginner’s Guide to Intellectual Property” are typical. Other activities match topical or situational needs, such as “Introduction to Social Media for Business,” or “Small Companies, Global Ambitions,” or (my favorite) “Surviving the Credit Crunch: Workforce Solutions.” With programs like these available to the UK’s entrepreneurs and business people, characterizing the Business Centre as a “success story” is absolutely the right way to describe it.

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