

Learning how to change our ways – a case study in the establishment of the State Library of Victoria's Learning Services Division

Andrew Hiskens
Manager, Learning Services
State Library of Victoria, Australia
ahiskens@slv.vic.gov.au

Abstract:

Over the past two years, the State Library of Victoria (SLV) has developed a package of strategic initiatives referred to as slv21, in order to both transform its service model to one based around digital information and access appropriate to the 21st century, and to achieve a sustainable funding base for the future.

Aligned with this, in February 2006 the SLV undertook a broad organizational restructure which, among other things, created a new Learning Services Division to provide strategic focus for its learning 'offer' and better coordinate its programs for a diverse audience.

Learning Services supports slv21 in its aim to place the SLV 'at the hub of an integrated knowledge network reaching into the Victorian community, connecting to the world at large and positioning Melbourne as a major creative centre'. It plans to do this in many ways, including learning programs to help all Victorians access and use the Library, online curriculum-based support for schoolchildren everywhere in Victoria, and by opening the way for future collaborations within government in information technology, education and social policy.

But the real challenge, as Tom Peters and Robert Waterman put it in 'In Search of Excellence', is not to simply fiddle with strategy or change structure, but to change our ways.

This paper explores this shift in thinking and the way in which it is being implemented; not only creating value for users now, but continually looking to the future and maintaining the flexibility to create new value in an ever-changing world.

Introduction

This paper is effectively a case study – partially completed, since the process of change is still underway – of how a visionary organisational strategy can drive the re-conceptualisation of the business, using the Learning Service Division at the State Library of Victoria as the example. And because this process is still underway, it is also a call for input, an invitation to further discussion about suggestions, experiences and how things may be done better.

It is decidedly *not* about definitive answers; but about nimbleness, adaptability and the preparedness to keep changing the plan – while maintaining the general agreed direction.

Background

The State Library of Victoria is the oldest public library in Australia. Founded in 1854 by Sir Redmond Barry, it has been operating on its current site since 1856, providing Victorians with access to a continually expanding world of knowledge.

In the past 15 years the Library has enjoyed a comprehensive physical refurbishment. Its reading rooms and galleries have been brilliantly restored in an award-winning architectural project, and four inviting exhibition spaces provide an opportunity to explore themes in Victoria's history and the history of books and ideas.

In 2004-05 more than 900,000 people visited the Library's Swanston Street buildings, to use its various collections, to see the redevelopment for themselves, or to visit the exhibitions. In the same year, an astonishing 22 million people visited websites supported by the Library. These numbers reflect the fact that the period spanning the Library's redevelopment has seen an extraordinary shift in the external environment within which it operates. The increasing penetration of the Internet (coincidentally 15 years old this year) and rapidly developing communications technology has completely changed the behaviour and expectations of people seeking information in the 21st century. It has also fundamentally changed, in many ways, the nature of library collections, and has generated a whole set of new challenges for collecting and storing material and making it accessible to users.

slv21

Towards the end of 2005, the State Library of Victoria commissioned a report from Ernst & Young designed to look at the sustainability of its funding base. Over several years, the organisation had gone from year end to year end, generally maintaining a position in the black. However, at current funding levels, there was no certainty that this could be maintained.

Ernst & Young's report was put up to the Victorian state government through the annual ERC process (that is, the Estimates Review Committee – the cabinet committee which determines the annual state budget). This process gained the Library temporary relief – the argument was heard and the Government's response was to provide enough to be getting on with, but with the stipulation that the Library come back to the next ERC round with a more complete proposal for the next triennium and beyond.

So began the process of producing a strategic positioning document, *slv21*, designed to look not only at issues of sustainability, but how to position the institution to best deliver services to the people of Victoria into the 21st century.

The following is a summary of some of the key points articulated in *slv21*:

slv21 will transform the Library's service model to one based around digital information and access appropriate to the 21st century, while achieving a sustainable funding base for the future.

Its aims are:

- To place the Library at the hub of an integrated knowledge network reaching into the Victorian community and connecting to the world at large, positioning Melbourne as a major creative centre.*
- To build a legacy for future generations of Victorians by strengthening the state's unique collection of social and historical documentary material about Victoria.*
- To ensure the long-term viability of the Library's heritage site, as a destination for library users and cultural tourists.*
- To open the way for commercial partnerships, based on the technology foundations laid down through this initiative, which will generate sustainable revenue streams for the Library into the future.*

slv21 is an innovative package that will be delivered through ten interconnected strategic initiatives. Together these initiatives will create a new service model for the Library's operations focused on the digital world.

These initiatives are:

- 1. slv online*
- 2. Engaging our customers*
- 3. The information gateway*
- 4. Digital Victoria*
- 5. Communities online*
- 6. Created content*
- 7. Finalising the redevelopment*
- 8. slv@swanston*
- 9. Organisational capability*
- 10. Partnerships for the future*

In developing its proposals for the slv21 package, the Library has articulated a set of planning principles against which to measure the elements of the package:

- 1. **The Library will serve its users as and when they seek information** by giving them the means to access collections, services and resources digitally and to select from a range of digital delivery options.*
- 2. **The Library will provide access to digital information resources** in preference to collecting other forms containing like information.*
- 3. **The Library will foster collaboration with other organisations** as shared responsibility will be essential to providing new and existing services, maintaining enduring access and preserving digital resources.*
- 4. **The Library will develop the skills of its staff** so that the transition to, and performance in, the digital environment is supported.¹*

And obviously, the complete document detailed a range of fully-costed options.

The underlying purpose of *slv21*, beyond the vision of ‘transforming the service model to one based around digital information and access appropriate to the 21st century’, can be characterised in three ways. It was designed to:

1. provide a framework for new thinking and conceptualisation
2. free the State Library of Victoria from the past, and
3. be visionary in a saleable sense, particularly to government.

Of course, strategy alone was never going to be enough. Alongside *slv21*, the Library’s Executive and Board devised a program to market the concept to government, working with politicians and colleagues in the Department of Premier and Cabinet, the Department of Treasury and Finance, and Arts Victoria. This process was also helped by the fact that the strategy provided major community dividends, and that strengthening community is a key value of the Victorian Government.

It was also fundamental that you don’t succeed at this type of thing by simply getting several key government stakeholders to support the proposal; it is also essential to ensure that no one vetoes it. And that is where the Executive and Board were arguably most successful – because the strategy was visionary, delivered well-articulated benefits to the community, was financially robust, and able to withstand significant scrutiny.

The net result was that, when the Victorian budget was announced at the end of May this year, the Library was successful in gaining a boost of A\$25.1m over the next four years.²

Organisational restructure

So, if the Library had been successful in selling its vision into government, how was it then to go about delivering on its promises?

Securing the funding was only getting off the starting line and, while the Library had qualified in the heats, the race was yet to be run.

In fact, what the Executive chose to do was assume that the Library *would* get off the starting line in some form or other, and therefore it commenced the race early enough that it was already in motion when the metaphoric starting pistol went off.

The first step, in February this year, was an organisational restructure.

Here I have to step aside and tell you something about myself, about the role I was in prior to the restructure, how I felt about it at the time, how I rationalised it, and how I feel about it now. Because none of us like change, and when it affects our roles, it both challenges our sense of our own identity and, by extension, our sense of self-worth. People generally don’t like this very much.

I guess I should start with a confession. I’m not a librarian; my background is in museums. My primary experience was in exhibitions management, from a period of eight years in London in the 80s, six of which I spent at the Victoria & Albert Museum. I was brought into the State Library in 1997, as part of an earlier restructure, in order to establish a Public Programs Division.

Over the years, this covered an enormous variety of things – the re-establishment of an exhibitions program and development of permanent exhibition galleries, publishing, creating a marketing and communications area, events, the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, the establishment of the Centre for Youth Literature, re-shaping the schools program and creating a digital programming space called Experimedia (which my colleague, Indra Kurzeme presented on at this conference last year). As these things grew, so some of the responsibilities were shed and new divisions were created, such as a separate Marketing & Communications Division, formed in 2003.

I liked looking after this broad portfolio. My analogy for it was that, compared to colleagues in the museum sector, I might not have had as big a train set to play with, but at least my train set had all of the requisite parts – a station, sidings, a tunnel and so on. And it was all mine to manage; in turn complex, absorbing, challenging, creative and rewarding. The problem was that it had grown significantly and become too complex to continue as a single division.

So, with the *slv21* restructure, I was given two options. My responsibilities were to be split in two, and I had to choose between managing an Events & Exhibitions Division, or developing a new Learning Services Division, largely built around the existing Centre for Youth Literature, Schools Program and Experimedia, but with some of the information literacy programs previously run out of the reference services area.

As I have indicated, at the time I was not particularly happy about this. It felt less than consultative. It was not comfortable.

But weighing things up in the balance, I realised a few things. Firstly, that the restructure, while personally uncomfortable, was designed to ensure that key responsibilities and accountabilities necessary to deliver on *slv21* were given to individuals and not left to the vagaries of committee structures. Secondly that, with the delivery of a couple of major permanent exhibition galleries in 2004/5, I had actually reached the furthest point I had imagined for the former Public Programs Division, and was now out the other side without having really considered where to go next. And, finally, that I worked best when I was building something rather than maintaining it – so I was temperamentally much better suited to creating a new Learning Services Division than to maintaining (or, rather, re-creating) an Events & Exhibitions Division.

So, I chose Learning Services.

Transforming the service model

In February 2006, as part of the campaign in support of *slv21*, the Library invited a range of key Australian and international decision-makers, commentators and industry leaders – from within and outside the library sector – to speak at a symposium on the theme of the Library of the 21st Century. The aim of the February 2006 Symposium was to generate discussion and provide a range of perspectives on the changing information landscape. The Symposium was arranged around four topics: community, learning, collaboration and the creative economy.

One of the speakers was Charles Leadbeater, a leading international corporate thinker, strategist and consultant who has spoken and published widely, recently concentrating

primarily on innovation theory. In 2003, he released an important report on public libraries in the UK, called *Overdue: how to create a modern public library service*. In his paper, Leadbeater looked at two different types of creative economies – the open and the closed organisation. He considered the assumptions and the applications of the two models and the breaking down of the closed approach. Libraries are precursors to open innovation and the public platforms for cumulative innovation. The media, traditional research organisations and knowledge-based professions such as doctors and teachers are in the middle of the innovation spectrum.

In summary, what Charles had to say about the new model for library services was that it should:

- Enact very basic library principles about democratic rights to information, knowledge, sharing and common resources for private uses
- See the people who use library services not as users or consumers but as co-producers and co-designers. Understanding that it's not a service libraries are delivering to them, libraries are giving them tools and a platform in which they can create things themselves. So providing distributed tools is important, as is allowing people to follow choice rather than forcing them into the boxes containing pre-packaged services.
- Be highly collaborative and peer-to-peer. In fact, the strength of these new collaborative models is that they are highly peer-to-peer. They mobilise peer knowledge, which tends to be cheaper and more accessible and often more trusted than professional knowledge.³
- Mean new roles for professionals, new definitions of their roles, new relationships with users, new kinds of training.
- Be about personalised services, implying not just a menu of choice but quite a conversational approach. If most creative activity comes from conversation, and from people sharing ideas...[so]...maybe libraries should be places of conversation. That might be their important role in the knowledge economy; that they're places where people can share and debate ideas.
- [Be] modular and evolutionary.⁴

He then went on to compare Google with libraries and came to the conclusion that libraries are not up against the technology, they are up against a *culture*. And that culture is incredibly flat, egalitarian, nimble, informal and entrepreneurial. He then challenged us to:

imagine...that public libraries could be as entrepreneurial, creative, open, dynamic and exciting. And they could be because all of the evidence of Wikipedia, Linux, and even of MySpace, is that actually people like collaboration, participation, sharing knowledge, common platforms, ease of access: all the values that libraries stand for they like. And they like getting more of it through...technology and our task is to try and create a public culture which is as dynamic and open as these private cultures are being and exploiting it and applying it and using it with people to create new value.⁵

Changing our ways

Learning Services supports *s/v21* in its aim to place the State Library of Victoria 'at the hub of an integrated knowledge network reaching into the Victorian community, connecting to the world at large and positioning Melbourne as a major creative centre'. It plans to do this in many ways, including learning programs to help all Victorian access and use the Library, online curriculum-based support for schoolchildren everywhere in Victoria, and by opening the way for future collaborations within government in information technology, education and social policy.

And, taking on board Charles Leadbeater's exhortations to redefine the role of libraries around high-level principles of democratic rights to information, could Learning Services be a catalyst for change within the organisation?

How to go about this was the issue. Tom Peters and Robert Waterman characterised the problem in *In Search of Excellence*, when they talk about not simply to fiddling with strategy and changing structures, but *changing our ways*.⁶

The Library's restructure had loosened the fabric of the whole organisation, allowing it to fit the new *s/v21* purpose more snugly. And a new Learning Services division made it possible for us to think about things in new ways. For all of the staff coming into Learning Services, the sense of a brave new world created the energy to look to new opportunities in a creative and optimistic way.

In terms of the divisional structure this meant not simply transferring the *status quo* out of the old Public Programs Division but, through a series of conversations, creating a quite different divisional management structure which met the following criteria:

- It was conceptually robust so that, no matter what program, initiatives or projects might be considered, it was clear where responsibility within the divisional structure would sit.
- It was scaleable and allowed room for growth.
- That clear areas of responsibility were built around a logical framework defined by audience type.
- And, finally, that the structure's capacity to look into the future, to innovate, to manage projects, to consider new things and stay nimble, was hard-wired.

In order to meet the criteria of defining responsibility by audience type, our solution was to create two main programming areas – Education Services and Reader Development & Library Learning.

- *Education Services* covers curriculum-based learning – primary, secondary and tertiary – where the audience needs are defined by a framework (ie the curriculum) external to the individuals who are 'doing' the learning.
- *Reader Development & Library Learning* focuses on the needs of the individual, and working across the two traditional areas of library services – the getting of information and engagement with books and reading.

And in order to address the need to maintain flexibility, we established a unit responsible for Learning Initiatives and Coordination which

- surveys developments in technology and information management for opportunities for new program development
- programs in technology and ideas (in conjunction with other areas)

- manages coordination of cross-divisional programs and services, and
- manages the development of specific projects.

Alongside this, we looked at our existing programs, and what we knew about them in terms of take up, information from customer surveys and feedback generally.

We decided that, in order to build from our current audience knowledge and the challenges of *slv21*, we wanted:

- to offer more flexible learning program delivery onsite, offsite and online
- to provide learning programs that can be adapted to individual learning needs (ie which enable people to achieve their goals), and
- to make it easier for our audience/s to navigate our learning offer

We also established a series of principles which would serve as our 'road map', should circumstances change, or we simply lost our way. These are:

The Library's Learning strategy is underpinned by slv21's planning principles and strategic initiatives which extend the Library's services for customers, enhancing the information it offers and developing the Library's infrastructure and skills by :

- *servicing its users as and when they seek information*
- *providing access to digital information resources*
- *fostering collaboration with other organisations*
- *developing the skills of Library staff.*

Learning Programs also contribute to ensuring the long-term viability of the Library's heritage site, as a destination for library users and cultural tourists.

Learning Programs will be informed by the learner's information needs to assist them to be as autonomous and independent as possible.

Learning Programs will engage and encourage participation and meet one or more of the following criteria. They are

- *repeatable*
- *structured around a perceived community need, or around the collection*
- *informed by current learning theory*
- *designed in a format similar to an individual learning opportunity, group, class or classroom*
- *delivered onsite, off site, online or using mobile technologies.*

The Learning Services Division is responsible for the co-ordination of the Library's integrated learning offer.

Learning Services will

- *Build programs around informed market understanding*
- *Maintain flexibility in order to respond to the Library's many audiences*
- *Harness the organisational capabilities, creativity and knowledge of the organisation*
- *Develop an online 'learning gateway' which is so compelling that people will both want to use it and will tell others*
- *Give greater physical prominence to and better articulate the learning spaces at 328 Swanston Street.*

- *Extend the Library's capacity to deliver schools and formal education programs across all sectors (primary, secondary and tertiary)*
- *Extend the Library's capacity to engage independent learners in developing information literacy*
- *Foster recreational use of the library through learning programs which engage specific audiences and link them to the broader library offer*
- *Continually survey developments in technology and information management for opportunities for new programs*
- *Consider the needs of disadvantaged groups and communities in the Library's offer*
- *Integrate with other State Library of Victoria promotional strategies*
- *Seek opportunities to develop partnerships that will enhance and grow the learning offer*
- *Consider and support public libraries in the development of, and integration with, SLV's Learning Services offer.*

Next steps

The next step was to consider what we do now – both what is working and those programs which need some attention.

By way of background, the SLV's current learning offer includes:

- Education Programs – the schools suite (mostly designed for a secondary audience at present), teacher Professional Development, School Holiday Programs (collection-based workshops) and the schools component of *Travelling Treasures* which tours collection material across Victoria as a kind of Library show and tell
- Reader Development and Library Learning – the Centre for Youth Literature program (student/youth programs such as Bookgigs, teacher/librarian Professional Development such as Booktalkers and the biennial *Reading Matters* conference and insideadog.com.au, Australia's first website for teenagers to share their enjoyment of books and reading) and Library Learning ('How to use the Library' program, tours and the adult component of *Travelling Treasures*)
- Technology and Ideas programs, such as forums/talks on new technologies, use of technology or ideas which will impact on the future of libraries, digital 'exhibitions' in the Experimedia space and the technology-based School Holiday Program which covers things like animation workshops.

So, having established a clearer structure, the gaps in the Library's learning offer became more apparent – and we were better able to determine both things that we weren't doing, but should be, and things that we were doing, but not so well.

Based on this understanding, below are a few examples of the projects we are currently working on:

Research

As part of the package of funding received for slv21, money has been put aside to undertake research which will inform the development of programs, services and

marketing and promotional activities in the future. Part of this project is dedicated to look at the audiences for the Library's learning programs.

Expanded curriculum-based programs

The State Library has been delivering schools programs for many years, primarily focussing on secondary students. With the completion of different stages of the Library's building redevelopment, new spaces have opened up – training rooms, an education studio, the Experimedia new media space, permanent and temporary exhibitions – allowing the schools program to expand. Prior to that, space was the major restriction on the number of students who could attend the Library's schools programs; now the main constraint is the staffing to support the program.

By creating a programming unit responsible for curriculum-based learning, the Library intends to expand the scope of the existing program to include primary and tertiary students – covering the full range of formal education.

Taking the tertiary sector as an example, this means that we are likely to do things such as:

- Developing an orientation program for first year students (or those new to the Library), both promoting and running it regularly through first term each year
- Establishing a 'buddy' system where second and third year students who have undergone training are employed on a casual basis to support first years and deliver the orientation program
- Specifically targeting students from different language backgrounds, so that programs for international students can be delivered in their own languages (Melbourne has the second largest cohort of international students in any city in the world, behind London), and
- Working with colleagues in university libraries to fine tune the offer, and draw on their specific professional expertise in this area.

Adult reader development

Librarians and libraries are now being called to renew their focus and expertise as readers' advisors and providers of reader development programs. After a 10-15 year period where service delivery, staff expertise and professional development has been dominated by the ICT environment, there is a renaissance being witnessed internationally – particularly in the UK and the US – in reader development.

The concept of reader development is not new to the State Library – the highly successful Centre for Youth Literature program is built on the principles of developing creative reading and a framework of reader development and resourcing readers' advisors. But the Library does not have a similar program to serve the broader community.

There are three components of the proposed program:

- *Reading Victoria* with a focus on supporting and developing Victorian readers and writers (either as a summer reading project or a longer year long program depending on partner funding).
- Professional development for public librarians in partnership with booksellers and publishers to support readers' advisory activities more broadly across Victoria, and

- Online reading projects that engage and support readers on a technological platform which provides an opportunity for participation in sharing information and views about books on a state-wide, national or international basis.

And finally

The 'Learning Gateway'

The Learning Gateway concept sees the Library creating an online environment which will enable us to deliver learning programs to 'help all Victorians to access and use the Library. All up, it will take at least three years to develop and be built around the kinds of principles articulated by Charles Leadbeater.

The vision for the project is that Learning Gateway will be an innovative, personalized virtual space in which individuals can learn by creating, organizing, locating, linking, debating, conversing, capturing, taking, reviewing, informing, saving, packaging, exploring, designing, sharing and asking. In doing this, it offers a parallel to the physical library, which allows for:

- Resources (books, electronic)
- Working by myself
- Working with others, and
- Asking for help.

Stage one of the project is currently being scoped and, in order to ground its rather ambitious vision, will focus in the first instance on developing a tool to both teach and assist in research, following an agreed framework and aimed at upper secondary students. We are currently in discussion with potential partners in the education sector.

This project is also funded through *s/v21* and we are planning to test the first stage before the end of June 2007.

So, these are just a few examples of how visionary organisational strategy can have a fundamental impact on how we create value for our users.

The secret indeed lies in 'changing our ways'. But, while we have probably taken the first step, cultural change is a very long process – if, in fact, it is even finite.

Antoni Gaudi, when challenged by sceptics who doubted that the Cathedral of the Poor in Barcelona would ever be finished, famously remarked 'My client is in no hurry'.

Something similar is true of large public institutions like the State Library, which first opened its doors 150 years ago this year. The shifting of culture, the changing of ways, has been happening since the beginning, if rather slowly. Our task, as the current custodians of the Library, is to ensure that it continues to change at a pace appropriate to the times.

For, unlike Gaudi, most of *our* clients are in a hurry.

Endnotes

- 1 Extracts from internal State Library of Victoria planning document on slv21.
- 2 A\$5.8m in 2006/7, A\$6.6m in 2007/8, A\$6.9m in 2008/9 and A\$5.9m in 2009/10
- 3 For example <http://www.insideadog.com.au>, the State Library's youth literature website.
- 4 This is an edited version of a section of Leadbeater (2006)
- 5 Leadbeater (2006).
- 6 Peters & Waterman (2004) p3.

Bibliography

Insideadog, n.d., viewed 14 August 2006, <http://www.insideadog.com.au>

Leadbeater, C. 2006, *Libraries & the Creative Economy*, viewed 14 August 2006, <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/programs/events/2006/symposium/economy/leadbeater.html>

Peters, T. & Waterman, R. H. Jr. 2004, *In Search of Excellence: lessons from America's best-run companies*, Profile Books, London, U.K.