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INFORMATION POWER AT OREGON'S OLDEST CORPORATE LIBRARY

By Bette Stewart

During the 90's the word "change" inundated our professional life and workplace. Special Libraries Association used it for the theme of several annual conferences. At work, we attended MOC (Managing Organizational Change) classes. While technology accelerated our perception of the speed of change, it certainly is nothing new. Our Business Information Services (BIS) department at Portland General Electric is no exception to lifetime of changes. BIS, formerly known as the Corporate Library, began circa 1914, and is unofficially the oldest corporate library in Oregon.

Portland General Electric (PGE) originated as the Willamette Falls Electric Company in 1889. This early company was the first to transmit electricity from a generating facility (the hydroelectric plant in Oregon City) fourteen miles to Portland. Here the electricity was used to power the "horse car" lines [becoming electric trolleys] and to provide street lighting. Imagine the "change" engendered by turning night into day!

The company adopted the name "Portland General Electric Company" in 1892. Mergers during the first half of the 1900's saw several more corporate name changes. Around Portland today, you can still see manhole covers with the names of these successors to the original PGE name, such as Portland Electric Power Company (PEPCO). Years ago at a former job for a consulting engineering firm, I was weeding out old material from a file and came upon a catalog for a firm that manufactured manhole covers. Since the catalog was thirty years old, I was preparing to discard it when I was told, "Oh, no. That catalog is still good!" So while most catalogs over six months old are apt to be ancient history, manhole covers are evidently a different matter!

In 1948, the company name reverted to Portland General Electric. It is the major electric utility for the Salem-Portland Oregon area, serving almost 704,000 customers by the end of 1998 and owning its own generating plants (hydro and thermal plants using coal or natural gas fuels). Merger once again entered PGE's history this century. In July of 1996 it was announced that the company was merging with Enron Corporation of Houston, TX. On July 1, 1997, having secured all the state and shareholder approvals, the merger was official. Like most Enron companies, PGE remains fairly autonomous in its operations. So the merger did not drastically impact the daily operations of our BIS.

Desktop delivery in the 90's

BIS staff members throughout its history proved to be early adapters of library technology and to place a strong emphasis on customer service. During the 1990's the focus was to provide information to the client's desktop-top to enable information users to obtain their answers immediately during these fast-paced times. A networked CD-ROM system, using Meridian software and towers, delivers research resources (e.g. Compendex, DOE Energy, EBSCO's Business Plus, and Computer Select) to employees' PCs. While these are all wonderful, the CD-ROM delivery brought its own difficulties. When one is emphasizing customer service, then the system must be reliable because clients depend upon it. With company network upgrades, individual user PC
configurations and individual CD-ROM product changes, this can be a nightmare. We are thus happily migrating to Internet delivery wherever possible and affordable.

BIS also introduced electronic news resources. Daily news feeds were sent via E-mail to seven separate mailing lists covering topics such as Electric Industry News, Gas Industry News, Environmental News, and Electric Vehicle News. Maintaining an accurate mailing list was tedious, so as soon as possible these news items migrated to Intranet delivery. Now clients can access these news items and other Internet linked news or resources via our Intranet. We do debate the "push/pull" concept of reaching clients, but for these intensive news services, the "pull" concept was preferred.

Internet/Intranet Era

The Internet/Intranet era brought a new excitement to BIS. From the earliest days of gopher access we used the resources and fought to have it adopted. Our IT department had many other issues on their plates, so they weren't always appreciative of our requests. At a vendor fair hosted by PGE, one of our IT colleagues jokingly introduced two of us from the library staff as "the folks that are kicking our butts" to get an Internet connection." I loved that image! How counter to the "typical librarian" images that we usually hear!

Before our Intranet was available to employees, we developed our BIS pages and distributed them on a 3.5-inch diskette. We called this our "Intranet on a disk." It enabled staff to open the files in their browser and link to the resources we had identified. This proved a useful tool in our Internet training classes, too. We also tailored disks for specific departments or projects. It was a valuable part of introducing clients to the resources available on the www.

Well, we now have connection to our T-1 Internet link on almost every PC and an Intranet/ Web Team led by Barb Buckley, formerly our library cataloger. BIS and the Intranet/Web team are functionally together since there is a synergy of information, and much of the Intranet content began and continues with BIS pages. The library staff consists of librarians Bob Weber and myself. We also have a library technician who manages the periodical subscriptions of over 800 titles. Bob manages the CDNET and coordinates records of the research and development areas including our Electric Power Research Institute (EPRI) targets. I am focused on converting our online catalog using the Sydney product into our Inmagic DB/Textworks with accessibility via our Intranet using Inmagic's WebPublisher. We both field reference questions and the other element of providing information technology, which is training the clients to use it.

We have a training area across from our cubicles. It's our "Client Access Area." It hosts four PCs for use by clients and is where we conduct most of our individual training sessions. Initially people used this area prior to having Internet access at their desks. Now we use it to show clients how to use the products we have and to introduce new ones. Much of our current training is to show people the resources available on the corporate Intranet.

New Opportunities

Following the merger with Enron, PGE continues to operate as a regulated utility. So our BIS service remains with the core PGE departments we have always served: generation and distribution engineering, marketing, human resources, health and safety, legal, plant operations, customer service, and management. We also continue to support the unregulated new product areas of PGE. In addition, we have Enron staff assigned to Portland and frequently assist with their information needs. Also, many of our staff work on temporary assignment to specific Enron projects. They have entirely new areas of information needs. To provide services to these non-core groups, we negotiated "Service Level Agreements," and determined a charge back system. They are billed at a loaded labor rate and for all direct costs.

Recently, PGE considered selling some of its generation assets (generating plants). This is a trend in the electric industry as it moves toward deregulation. In preparation for this potential, I assisted in the organizing and cataloging of the documents which would be necessary in the event of
such a sale. Original plans were to use a word processing program. I suggested that our Innmagic DB/Textworks database would give us much more flexibility, including online access, since it was not known what formats might be needed. BIS is constantly looking for ways to add value to core business activities in this way.

PGE is in the process of decommissioning its Trojan nuclear plant. In addition to providing engineering reference resources for this team, I recently assisted as they wrote a copyright policy as part of their regulatory requirements. I had been securing copyright permissions for their submissions, so this was an extension of that service. While we have a Copyright Clearance Center (CC) contract for internal copying, this policy was to cover items needed for reports submitted to external agencies. Again, this showcases our expertise in an area not familiar to most staff.

Enron is coordinating its contracts for electronic information services favoring enterprise-wide agreements for economy and availability of usage. In January I attended a meeting in Houston, Texas, with representatives of the other major components of the Enron group. This was an opportunity for me to participate in discussions of much broader licensing agreements with many new partners. We will probably see more of this type of activity. I also met with Enron's librarian, Mary Sue Rose. We look forward to continuing and expanding our contacts to benefit the staff via resource sharing.

Information Overload

While most of the 1990's involved identifying and getting information resources to our clients, we are now faced with our clients' perception of information overload. Internet access gives them the illusion of having access to "everything." In truth, they still need training and assistance to find the "right" items in many cases. We provide filtered news/update searches for several departments and topics, getting them the core information needed.

Our BIS Intranet "pathfinder" pages provide links to pertinent and authoritative sites on various topics, helping clients get to the heart of information quickly. It can include Internet sites, company data, or other resources. We provide a form for ordering of books and periodicals and include links to online bookstores for quick searches. We update our Industry News pages at least once a day and can quickly add links or citations to news items. It's a communication tool as well as a training one. We work with other departments as they develop web pages and encourage them to use Intranet or document management products to simplify their communications and record keeping tasks. We participate in the Pagemaster meetings to maintain even more contact with the needs of all the departments.

The future

So change continues at PGE and our BIS. As the deregulation of the electric industry progresses, we will see more changes. But this is nothing new to a company that began in the last century as the first "long distance" transmitter of electric power, and moves eagerly into the next century. Reminders of past change are with us - be they books or manhole covers. Portland has even brought back the electric trolleys!

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