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Guest Editorial: Organizational Structure—Yesterday Informs the Present

Donna Hirst

Organization structure and reorganization are never exciting topics. The world rarely pauses to take a deep breath or offer a round of applause when an organization adds a new committee or decides to split into subgroups. However, organizations frequently inform the patterns and processes of change—as well as no change.

Recently, the Ex Libris Users of North America (ELUNA) group reorganized. Processes and outcomes were similar to those I observed many years before when the Library Information and Technology Association (LITA) restructured, and I labeled the process LITAish. John Webb subsequently asked me to elaborate through an *Information Technologies and Libraries (ITAL)* editorial.

LITA—An organizational recap

In 1981, LITA launched a bold reorganization. Sections and committees were abolished and a new structure, the interest group, was created with the hope of significant benefits to the organization. The final report of the Long-Range Plan Implementation Committee of May 29, 1984, stated:

> The main thrust of the reorganization . . . was the establishment and encouragement of interest groups, which were intended to reflect topics of current interest to members and to have a structure which allows for easy creation and easy elimination as interests and technology change. Interest groups could be formed . . . from as few as ten LITA members and were empowered to plan and present programs, institutes, and preconferences . . .

Linda Knutson, who became executive director of LITA in February 1987, "has . . . been impressed by the increase in the level of participation and by the tremendous energy that the players have; they want to contribute, and they plunge in with both feet." These comments are from conversations with Linda Knutson quoted in "LITA's First Twenty-Five Years: A Brief History," by Stephen R. Salmon in the March 1993 silver anniversary issue of *ITAL*.

Twenty years later, the LITA organization and, specifically, the LITA Interest Groups (IGs) continue to provide forums for discussion, create conference programs, institutes, and preconferences. The IGs hold the content of the organization with minimal administrative overhead, irregular leadership, and virtually no bylaws.

NAAUG—The deconstruction of a classic model

ALEPH, the Ex Libris integrated library solution (ILS) software, is used in numerous countries. The North American ALEPH user's group (NAAUG) existed from 1999 to 2006. The organization had a reasonably classic structure with a steering committee and ad hoc groups to work on annual software enhancements, focus groups, and conference planning. The organization was very centralized with all appointments to subgroups made by the steering committee.

Developments outside the ILS put pressure on NAAUG to reorganize. Ex Libris was offering numerous new products, some of which complemented, some of which were independent of the ILS. As with any organization, there was some pressure to retain all or part of the status quo from those who were hesitant to change or change radically. Leaders, including myself, were cautious, always questioning whether new developments would work and be effective.

ELUNA emerges

The new Ex Libris users' organization, ELUNA, is composed of the steering committee, product groups (PGs), and interest groups (IGs).

I was intrigued with the formation of ELUNA IGs and believe that this structure was an offspring of the LITA IGs. The ELUNA IGs have very little bureaucracy to hinder the creativity and energy that LITA wanted to capture. There is no minimum number of participants in an ELUNA IG, the creation of which can be proposed by any single individual. Each group must write a brief annual report, have a contact person whose name and e-mail is posted on the Web site, and may have an optional electronic discussion list. The groups can meet at the annual conference or anywhere they choose and a virtual IG is not discouraged. The IGs may get involved in product enhancements, but it is fine to leave this work to the PGs.

Currently, IGs are organized around such areas as function, type of library, and particular software. Some examples:

- Data Representation (special scripts)
- Law
- EDI
- Music
- Government Publications
- Shared Systems (consortia)
- ILL
- SQL

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What happens next?

The ELUNA structures of steering committee, PGs, and IGs are off to a good start. Because each of these is empowered to work independently, a communication matrix needs to be put into place so that all interested or affected parties are adequately informed.

In the future, a process will need to be created to identify groups that need to be disbanded. LITA solved this problem with the periodic renewal process. In ELUNA, the contact person may be able to assume this responsibility.

We live in an age where "opening" offers a context for change. Opening implies new possibilities and few restrictions. Open systems . . . Open access . . . Open source. It appears to me that ELUNA is continuing a tradition that LITA began twenty-five years ago with an open organization. Put people into a group, stir lightly, and watch what comes out of the pot. ■