The Flat Track

I n his recent best seller *The World Is Flat*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Thomas L. Friedman explains the irony in comparing his journey to India to understand the offshoring phenomenon occurring there to Christopher Columbus' journey 500 years earlier to find material wealth in the Far East.

Columbus accidentally ran into America but thought he had discovered part of India. I actually found India and thought many of the people I met there were Americans. Some had actually taken American names, and others were doing great imitations of American accents at call centers and American business techniques at software labs.

Columbus reported to his king and queen that the world was round, and he went down in history as the man who first made this discovery. I returned home and shared my discovery only with my wife, and only in a whisper.

"Honey," I confided, "I think the world is flat."

Friedman is referring to the trend by large U.S. corporations to offshore information technology and other knowledge worker jobs to Bangalore, India. *The World Is Flat* speaks not only to software engineers, IT professionals, accountants, radiologists, and call centers, but also to the information industry as a whole. What does a flattening world mean to information professionals as we redefine our profession and our career paths? How does Friedman's "discovery" that the world is flat influence information professionals?

The

COMPETITION FROM TECHNOLOGY

It's not merely offshoring. Some librarians worry about the impact Google's library digitization project

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will have on the profession's perceived value and, therefore, on employment prospects. I see this more as an expansion of the need for information professionals' expertise. To expand the scope and reach of books through other media, making them more conveniently accessible, can only broaden our audience.

The more lethal challenge to the information profession is the leveling of the playing field that is occurring through the emergence of low cost, hosted technologies. The intent is to give the "little guy" the same advantage the "big guy" has. Companies such as Microsoft, Intuit, Google, and Yahoo! are competing to be the providers of technology platforms, search engines, and services that can be delivered to the desktop from anywhere on the planet. This

trend is a double-edged sword. Not only does the flattening and globalization of technological platforms make it easier for *us* to reach a broader audience more efficiently and economically, it also affords the same opportunity to the rest of the world. Our competition can come, quite literally, from anywhere and can be of any size. Exit complacence. Enter innovation.

"If you think that software engineers will be the nemeses of librarians, consider this somewhat shockingly naive remark by Bill Gates on May 19, 2005, at Microsoft's CEO Summit—"Nobody's paid to do search or just find information." [*Editor's note: The speech was reported by* InformationWeek *on its Web site (www.informationweek.com) with the citation, "Gates: Technology Must*

BY MARJORIE JASSIN

Flat Track

to New Career Options for Information Professionals

Make Information Overload More Manageable," by Elizabeth Gillespie. It was no longer available at the Web site when ONLINE *went to press.*] As long as software engineers think that digital services alone will satisfy the world's thirst for knowledge, information professionals are safe in using the engineers' technology platforms to promote value, showcase search prowess, and deliver relevant results.

The one element of any service or inquiry related process that information technologists have consistently undervalued is the validating and satisfying experience derived from human connectivity. I know from our clients how much they appreciate hearing those wonderful words, expressed by a professional they trust: "Here's what you are looking for." Bringing life to the Internet through real-time technology—and a real live person—is a promising platform for librarians to exploit.

EMERGING TRENDS

Application service providers are contributing to the trend toward services that help small businesses grow. Customer-driven innovation can really happen here; it's where librarians can seize the moment. I've seen this trend emerge in many ways—via blog technology, instant messaging, hosted Web sites with functionality, and Web-based databases. The global open source movement is responsible for the low cost of these hosted solutions and the drive for technology to lead innovation.

My company generally uses a database manager hosted by Intuit (QuickBase) as a service platform to accept and fulfill research requests, acquisition requests, and interlibrary loan requests. I'm not a big fan of e-mail as a way to communicate important information, particularly in the legal profession, where confidentiality and privacy are paramount. I prefer more secure environments,

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such as password-protected database managers, to accept and fulfill requests for information. As recently witnessed by the security breach involving LexisNexis' Accurint unit and ChoicePoint, researchers must provide a safe environment in which to transmit confidential information. E-mail doesn't qualify.

The ASPs used to create library systems haven't involved IT issues and work quite well in promoting a positive image of the library and its staff. When we design a solution without having to involve our client's IT department, everyone breaths a collective sigh of relief. It proves the value of ASPs. Using a combination of QuickBase, LivePerson, and Blogger, we can design a library page complete with links to request forms, the online catalog, chat buttons, and blogs. Since the cost of the technology platform is low utilizing these ASPs, we've fostered good will.

TELECOMMUTING LIBRARIAN

This type of technology platform is enhanced by the real-time presence of our virtual reference librarian, working from her home in Duluth, Minn., serving our East Coast and West Coast clients alike. As a telecommuting librarian, she brings life to the Internet via chat. Think of it as, "Forget Google; ask a Librarian, live, online, now."

Since I am in the business of librarianship, I have the opportunity to market our profession every day to a different venue—businesses, law firms, law enforcement are examples. It's clear from these client visits that, aside from information professionals, self-help search engines will go only so far in satisfying research and information management needs.

Librarians do a lot of hand-holding. That won't go away any time soon. Just as consumers face the consequence of nowhere to turn if things go wrong when booking travel through online Web sites, just as customers dislike lengthy voice-message menus directing them to the wrong area of a company with which they are trying to communicate, people are finding self help solutions, without any human connection, to be customer disservice. That hold true in the library profession as well. Let's reclaim the front lines by using technology to promote our value rather than to detract from it.

GLOBAL LESSONS

Complacency, however, is not an option. Look at the U.S. basketball team in the 2004 Summer Olympics. Having dominated the game since it became an official Olympic sport, the players failed to realize that global competition had become stiffer. Their complacency affected their competitiveness. It is easier for imitators to challenge a leader than it is for a leader to maintain a leadership position. As the information world trends toward digitization, it will be increasingly difficult for librarians to secure a leadership role. Still, we must continually strive to be the first and best deliverers of well-organized, authenticated information.

In the U.K., the People's Network launched a new government initiative, Enquire. This is a 24/7 live question and answer service utilizing instant messaging or chat room technology. The service is for free and available to anyone. U.K. librarians are taking a front line position in this innovative new service. There's a great deal of customer service involved in librarianship in

which information technologists are not trained. The reference interview and presentation of research results are unique to librarians rather than IT professionals. It is what distinguishes us in a technologically driven, flat world.

How can information professionals compete with the possible future "Bangalore-ization" of the profession? Start thinking outside the library box. As Thomas Friedman points out, the technology infrastructure has already been laid around the planet. After the tech bubble burst, cheap labor from outside North America has been learning new services to deliver via the Internet.

Librarians can compete with this emerging labor trend by developing our own telecommuting jobs. Telecommuting is used as a labor intensive low cost business model for many service industries. Over the past 2 years, my company incorporated a telecommuting position to beta test this type of job, from the end-user perspective as well as the librarian perspective. A virtual reference staff connected by low-cost technology can integrate very successfully into the infrastructure of any type of venue. Combining and leveraging the efficiency of the Web with the economy of telecommuting can enhance a library staff immeasurably.

If the world is flattening, as Thomas Friedman believes, and low-cost Web applications make working from Bangalore as feasible as working in the U.S., then information professionals need to change and adapt. Combining telecommunicating with a Web-based technology platform is one new career path possibility. Rather than bemoaning increased competition from globalization and digitization, the information profession should leverage its strengths in human connectivity to regain a leadership position and forge new products and services for a flat world.

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