

**2009 ALIES Conference: Interaction and Innovation
Sunday 5th to Thursday 9th April 2009-03-05**

Information brokerage for law enforcement agencies: past, present and future trends.

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Problems:

1. Support from management – how do you make it last?
2. Collection building – how much, when, where do you stop?
3. Tools for the library – when do you say yes – when do you say no?

How clearly I remember my first encounter with the director of a police management training institute. It was the winter of 1977-1978; I had just walked 3 miles from the railway station to the institute along a road where you weren't allowed to walk. It was raining just a bit and it was muddy so that by the time I arrived my cowboy boots were covered in mud. I had a full beard and my Dutch was still pretty poor as I had only been in the country for 4 years.

I must have asked the right questions and given satisfactory answers as I was given the job of setting up and managing the future library and documentation centre of the Police Study Centre – the management development and organisational consulting institute for the senior police managers of the Netherlands police.

What I discovered some months into this new job however was that I happened to have come into the sphere of perhaps the two most respected and valuable persons within the Dutch police training environment. The director was a born listener and gave his staff the room to innovate, to grow, to be flexible and guided us towards our objectives with a gentle but firm hand. And then, the deputy director, now there was a man who believed firmly in change, in new adventures, in experimenting with new ideas. He was a revolutionary within the established police world and a mentor for many young up and coming police managers. Terms such as "Bending Granite", "Broken Windows", and "Promotion on the work floor" were favourites of his.

Both these men laid the foundation in me of how I would approach the tasks before me. They were instrumental in how I would look at police managers, and how I would deal with the steady flow of challenges that began and has not ceased to this day.

So now to my first problem which undoubtedly many of you have also experienced.

You start with a library which has the support and backing of your senior management and encouragement from the rest of the staff. OK – everything goes along nicely for years – till suddenly a number of your key supporters move on, retire, get transferred etc and they are replaced by persons who are not supportive, or who don't care one way or the other. You start to feel the financial pinch. Your library is no longer included in the welcome tour for new students and then for new staff. The staff members who were in the first place supportive start to change allegiance.

You think I'm describing a situation from the 1970's, not really – it's occurred to me several times – 1982, 1993, 2002 and the last time in 2005.

What can we do to minimize the effects of the lack of support?

Well – in the first place I set up a library advisory committee in which had representatives from every department and asked them to assist in formulating policy and direction – and get this approved by management. Get it on paper into your agency priority paper. Once you've got that down on paper with the support of your library advisory committee there is however absolutely no guarantee that you'll be safe. There are enough valid reasons for management to close you down, allocate funding towards something else which in their view is more important, and you're out of a job and you have no library.

OK – there must be other ways to make sure that management doesn't pull the plug.

Creating a strong client base is one which requires a lot of work, dedication and perseverance, but eventually if you do this correctly you'll have a lot of supporters out there in the field who will come to rely on your expertise and who occasionally return to make use of your library's services.

Again – there is no guarantee that your management will be susceptible to wishes of the client base that you have so carefully created. By now – after years of getting to know what your clients want, what your management wants, how best you serve their information needs, you built a collection and provide a service that cannot be neglected or ignored.

Wrong again – there is no guarantee whatsoever that what you and your staff have so carefully worked at over the years will survive when the final decision has to be made. Trust me – I've been there.

Let's move on to my second problem – that of collection building.

I can say that I've been extremely lucky in this respect as I was fortunate to have ample funds when I established two of the libraries for the police. The first being the library of the Police Study Centre and the second for Europol – the official European Union police agency.

Starting in 1978 with virtually no real library I spent lots of money building an international collection in all relevant areas of police management, training, crime, etc. Having toured the United States looking at police libraries and with regular visits to the Police Staff College Library at Bramshill soon proved to be paying off – scholars were coming to the Police Study Centre just for the library. Police managers soon caught on to my philosophy – “If a police manager asks for a book – he or she by the sheer fact of requesting a particular publication warrants the purchase of said request”.

Of course I soon realized that the castle in which the Police Study Centre was housed was going to be too small if I kept buying more and more books. One way to remedy that problem was to change the lending policy. A book on the shelf is not doing its work (unless of course it's a reference work) - it's got to be out there somewhere being a benefit for a police manager. So I stopped reminding people to bring back their books after the 3-4 week lending period and I only sent out a request if someone else required that particular book.

But I think that this is only a temporary solution. What's more effective in the short term and in the long run is networking. In 1978 there were close to 20 police libraries in the Netherlands who did not really communicate with each other. With the establishment of the Police Library Network and the yearly police libraries seminar the basis was laid for cooperation between all the police libraries and has eventually paved the way to amalgamations so that today all these 20 libraries with the exception of 2 have merged into one organisation. The knowledge gained from colleagues in the police library network also made it easier for me to part with segments of the library collection of the Police Study Centre in 1992-1993. Traffic material went to the Traffic School; criminal investigation material went to the Detective School, and so forth. And in 1995-1996 the whole of the remaining collection was swallowed up by the Police Academy library – which to this day has remained the largest police library in the Netherlands. A major rebuilding is currently taken place with an expected completion date of 2011.

What is important to realize is that the trust that builds up between colleagues, the knowledge of each other's collections, the periodic meetings you have as a group all form your collecting behaviour. Knowing that your neighbour has the book you need and will willingly lend it to you strengthens your own collection and the service to your clients.

Of course everything depends on how you interact with your colleagues. You can't always be nice to everyone. In one particular case I was involved in a merger of 4 police libraries and being the senior librarian tasked with heading up the merger. After many months of disagreements and fruitless discussions the feelings towards my colleagues was such that I decided not to head up the team and I went looking for another job. Within two months I had the position which proved to be the most challenging job of all, namely that of creating and managing the Open Source and Documentation Unit for the then newly formed European Union police agency – Europol – that was February 1994.

Europol – the most challenging in many ways, also the dream job, the opportunity to spread my wings even further – internationally.

The beginning of the electronic boom – the internet – the browser, search engines, electronic data bases, you name it – all the new tools coincided with the start of Europol. There was so much money in the first few years that I could not spend it all. When I was hired the boss has said "...you'll get no staff for the first few years, but money is no problem, just make sure we get everything we ask for..." So there I was subscribing to Reuters, Dow Jones, Jane's, Lexis-Nexis, WorldBase. And then I wanted internet – I wanted to go searching myself. So I contacted an internet provider and had them install the necessary lines. Only to be disconnected the next day when the boss heard that the firm was run by a well known hacker. By the way – this firm is now the biggest and best protected service provider in the Netherlands and most government departments are serviced by them.

All of a sudden there were internet browsers – Microsoft Explorer and Netscape. We didn't have official email – our unit used CompuServe – you all remember CompuServe don't you? Then we couldn't have an internet machine on the internal network, so the unit got a stand-alone internet machine. Of course the system kept crashing so I requested a direct internet connection bypassing the network. There I was with 3 computer screens on my desk and this was 1995.

I was sent to every open source conference, to every information warfare conference. Was finally able to hire staff and grew to a five person unit. Feeding the information hungry officers 24 hours a day – 7 days a week, my work week was usually between 60 to 80 hours. We scoured the internet for new tools, for new developments, for new forms of crime, for new methods of combating crime. We'd test software, test data bases, test new ideas, and then pass everything on to the new units – the cyber crime unit, the child pornography unit, the environmental crime unit, the drug laboratory unit. With our stand-alone outside the network internet machines we were able to find anything and everything. We were even teaching our ICT department a few things.

For a number of years management praised us as the best unit in the organisation. We were a team, and we enjoyed our work, we wanted to be challenged and we wanted to serve the staff to the best of our abilities – supported by all the modern technology we could lay our hands on.

To all good things must come an end – and indeed it did. In 2005 the tables turned.

Despite a written policy plan – mandated by the user committee and by the whole management. Despite the support of the majority of the 550 staff members. Our unit began to crumble – to be slowly dismantled.

All of us at Europol worked on a contract basis – one member of the unit was not replaced at the end of 2004 when her contract ended. Management, which had always been playing political games – you must realize that there were 5 nationalities in the management and 18 in the organisation – with each nationality wanting to manoeuvre to the best possible power position – but now the power struggle was out in the open for everyone to see and feel. Strong supporters of the open source unit had been replaced by non-supporters. The turf war was in full swing. At the end of 2005 two more contracts in the unit ended and were not replaced. My own contract ended in June 2006. The whole open source unit including the library was moved into the Media and Press Relations Unit. Internet and data base searching support was moved to the individual units – drugs, crime, money laundering, human trafficking, analysis, counter terrorism, cyber crime, child pornography, nuclear materials trafficking, etc. The last unit member was tasked with shredding publications no longer deemed useful, and with gradually phasing out all open source and library services. She has not stayed to finish the job – she immigrated to Australia in February of this year and lives with her husband in Brisbane.

Many of you will no doubt remember a news item a few years ago in California where the legislative assembly was contemplating to stop funding to the state library and to close it completely. The argument for closure was seeing that all the material that the library provided was no longer needed as all could be found on internet. You probably also remember who put all the material on internet – yes – the state library.

Let me close in saying that despite all the measures we took to ensure our continuity – even considering that we knew full well the political games that were being played by management there was really nothing we could do to stop the process of our dismemberment.

My only hope is that with the new management coming in this year that maybe things will be put right and once again an open source unit can fulfil its rightful task within the organisation.