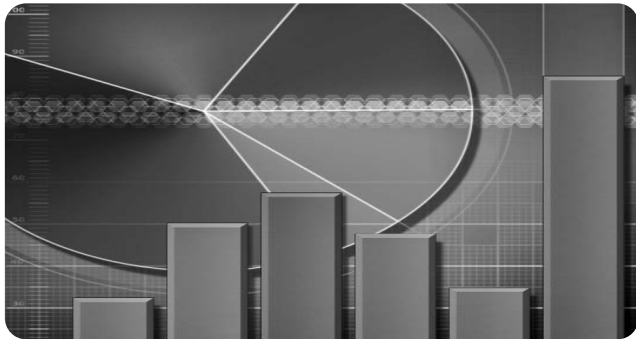


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Recovering from Disruption: The Theme of the 49th Annual NFAIS Meeting

NFAIS, the National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services [<http://www.nfaais.org>], is a membership association for organizations that create, organize, and facilitate access to information. The topic of its 49th annual meeting was *Creating Change: Growth Opportunities in the Wake of Disruption*.

The history of NFAIS is quite interesting. The organization seems to have been born and bred in disruption. In 1957, the Soviet Union launched the world's first spacecraft. The launch of Sputnik led to an international competition in science and technology throughout the Western world. The key to ultimate success in this new environment was believed to be high-quality scientific information. Therefore, in 1958, President Dwight D. Eisenhower directed the National Science Foundation (NSF) to ensure the provision of indexing, abstracting, translation, and other services to provide a more effective dissemination of scientific information. The

nation's eyes — or at least the federal government's wallet — turned to abstracting and indexing.

As the U.S. mobilized to create a new information infrastructure for the promotion of scientific innovation, G. Miles Conrad, director of Biological Abstracts (now BIOSIS), called an urgent meeting of the leading not-for-profit and government scientific abstracting-and-indexing services. Conrad encouraged the assembled group to join forces, cooperate, and interact, so that as a unified force these services could make rapid progress in achieving national priorities while simultaneously promoting the international advancement of science. This group became, initially, NFSAIS — the National Federation of Science Abstracting and Indexing Services. It was formed with 14 information services, and today, all 14 (although under different parent company structures) are still part of the organization.

Over the years, the information community's view continued to

broaden. Science was dropped from the organization's name as it began to incorporate information producers in all venues. Later, the term "indexing" was replaced with the term "information." The membership has come to include international scholarly associations, public and private companies, libraries, major corporations, and government agencies. Today its interests span host systems, technology innovation, data creation, information distribution, secondary publishing, and more.

Throughout its almost 50 years of existence, NFAIS has embraced change to keep pace with the evolution of its member organizations and the information community as a whole. Now, as the marriage of technology, content, and the "born digital" generation have accelerated change, NFAIS is again considering a name change that would more accurately reflect the nature of its diverse member organizations — the *National Federation of Advanced Information Services*. By the time

you read this, the change will have gone to the NFAIS assembly for a vote and, if approved, taken effect.

On Sunday, Feb. 25, 2007, in Philadelphia, some 211 people representing 101 organizations, a combination of both member and non-members, gathered to participate in a meeting where disruption and change were the primary focuses. “The millennials are one with technology,” said then NFAIS president, Linda Beebe, APA, “and their union is a disruptive force that is transforming traditional communication and information-seeking behaviors. Its impact can be seen in the rapid growth of social software and user-generated content, in the perpetual beta releases of innovative products and services, and in the ever-increasing demand for business models that will meet today’s information needs. For most of us, this environment of rapid change is unsettling. But I believe that disruption can be a force for good. It challenges all information providers — publishers and librarians alike — to take risks, to move forward and to grow by leveraging the new opportunities that have been created.”

Step One

I couldn’t help but feel that I was watching all the attendees, somewhat reluctantly, starting an Information Anonymous 12-step program. First step? *We admit that we are powerless over the technology that is disruptive to our stable information space — our lives have become unmanageable.*

Sunday’s keynote speaker, Lawrence Wilkinson from Heminke & Condell, launched the meeting with The Twin Engines of Change. He caught my attention by pointing out that throughout the centuries, change and the acceptance of change have been difficult steps for even the most brilliant. Perhaps most noteworthy: “The phonograph is of no commercial value,” said Thomas Edison in 1880. We

have all been inaccurate in the prediction of the future. As changes occur, competition changes, regulation changes, technology changes, and, therefore, the demand changes, forcing us to recapture our marketplace in new and innovative ways. Technology forces new efficiencies, new automation, and a transformation. When technology changes everything, the environment changes: Are the end users the individuals or the institutions? Is packaging the key? Do all of these changes cross over, forcing us all to play very differently? And, of course, does this give birth to new players?

The new players become everyone: universities, social networkers, and, of course, Google and Amazon. As we watch the unmanageability, we look at value-added portals; access becomes the key play. Product starts to become something of a feature, rather than the key. Quality becomes questionably important, less important than the ever-growing need for access. We review choices that kick the industry into a frenzy of unmanageability: Do we decommercialize altogether, start a revolution, give away what had been billable before, and let search engines rule? Do we build new business models that start with the dreaded “f” — free — word and then wrap value add around it for revenue? The key conclusion seemed to be that you must truly be “everything” to the user: Provide one-stop shopping, quickly, with excellent and easy access to hard-to-find data, with value-added portals becoming standard, and, as we have already seen, while watching publishers consolidate, leaving fewer and fewer competitors on the content side of the world.

Clearly, like all good 12-step programs, this will take many meetings, discussions, and supportive interventions to allow our conservative world to take new form.

Step Two

Moving into step two of our recovery: *We have come to believe that a Technology and Environment greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.* Bette Brunelle of Outsell, Inc., discussed how we measure change and how disruptors affect the information community. “Those who do not learn from the future are destined to make mistakes in it” [Cartoonbank.com].

A few bloggers commented that they remembered Brunelle’s NFAIS talk from a few years ago. Back then, when we had a great future behind us, Brunelle had discussed how disruptive the Internet was. It enabled lots of people with no information skills or training to do the kinds of things that information professionals used to do. She talked then about portability and personalization as potential disruptive technologies. Did Brunelle indeed possess a crystal ball?

Brunelle provided us with many statistics from the Outsell databases, some quite startling. The biggest changes were reflected in the larger number of people who access information from intranets rather than purely from the commercial Internet. Nonetheless, without qualification, some form of Internet/intranet access is the way that everyone gathers their information. Surprising to me, the least likely resource tapped for information was the library, even less used than work colleagues or the “other” category that no one can define. Even more startling, statistically 31 percent of all searches resulted in failure. The average time to analyze and gather information in 2001 was 8 hours, but in 2006, it had risen to 12 hours, with no better results.

Brunelle built a very strong case for analyzing how much had really changed. It seems to take about 20 years for a new technology or approach to really become a success: XML took 10 years to take hold. Her

advice? Talk to tomorrow's customers — not the same old customers. Look to the future. Look to the people (the dreaded youth) who *never* knew a world without the Web — not just the Internet, but the *Web*. Her presentation identified several new players: a social tagging project at the University of Pennsylvania called PennTags; bookmarking at Lucent; Denver Public Library's Teen Space; totally new venues such as the Camden County (N.J.) Library Systems' ShelfLife; and new worlds for information, such as all the potential consumer health information sites and new channels, including Eastern University's Virtual Reference.

Clearly, the toys in the sandbox have changed, too, with wireless hand-held devices utilized for everything from phone calls to ebooks, emails, and beyond. Various media preferences — from blogs to RSS feeds and podcasts — did not go unmentioned. As Yogi Berra put it, "The future ain't what it used to be."

Step Three

The first day of sessions ended by bringing us to the corner-turning third step: *We make a decision to turn our data and our technology over to the care of experts as we come to understand them.*

A team of consultants led by Hal Espo of Contextual Connections brought home a few key points. It is critical to redefine products and determine what is nice to have versus what we must have. Advertisers are more discerning. Publishers must create a new value proposition and need to think about new ways to support their users, including a by-the-drink approach. The day of advance sales and huge subscriptions for little-used products is going away. Adding value to existing products for current clients is key; truly integrating systems for better functionality is key. Espo also pointed out

that refreshing our staff with new thinkers — OK, I will say it, younger thinkers, visionaries who know what we don't know yet — is in our future.

Yours truly surveyed the room of attendees, and while I won't share when I raised my hand, when asked how many in the room were under 50, under 40, under 30? I wasn't sure if the lone three people who raised their hands in the under-30 category were embarrassed or proud. It cer-

tainly did drive home that the hand on the wheel as we drove into the future seemed to have liver spots. Do I see an opportunity at hand?

Thankfully after a difficult day of recovery, we progressed to the welcoming reception, where we could drown — or at least dilute — our fears and prepare the next steps.

Step Four

We started day two with the very difficult step four: *We make a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves.*

CJ Rayhill of O'Reilly Media, Inc., led the day with her talk Leveraging the New Information Environment. CJ reviewed many opportunities. What are we each doing within our organizations to stay in step with today's technology and with our clients, collaborators, and our team of experts? CJ told us in no uncertain terms that we must start treating our users as co-developers. We must harness collective intelligence. She too used the term "co-competition" as applied to clients, Yahoo!, Google, or many unknowns. Make access easy so users come often. Words such as open source, multiple devices, and browser-based filled the air.

Clearly, without doing the in-

ventory of existing wares, you will find yourself roadblocked. Experiment directly with the customer. Live, whether in print, online, or in person, totally immersed with the client — almost the mantra of O'Reilly. Web 2.0 was a recurring theme through many presentations. CJ was adamant. You must know what is happening at home as well as at work. You must partner to grow. It is unacceptable as a pub-

Content must be findable, accessible.
Piracy isn't the issue — obscurity is.

lisher not to change. Youth is reading more than ever, but in a different way. User contributor content is becoming key — tagging, rating, reviews. It is hard to talk about data without raising the issue of search engine optimization. Content must be findable, accessible. Piracy isn't the issue — obscurity is. While Google may be the number-one competitor, it is a key component in terms of search engine optimization. We must stay in the loop to survive. We must reorganize around key audiences. Every piece of content must be in a central repository, so the user can mix and match content, metadata, print on demand, customized books. O'Reilly has listened to its own advice and ended with the best year in 6 years after a 40-percent loss in 2001. "Challenge the world by spreading the knowledge of innovators."

Steps Five Through Nine

The day continued moving us through the remaining steps to recovery — Step 5: *Admit to fellow technologists the nature of our wrongs.* Step 6: *We're entirely ready to have experts remove these product and technology defects;* Step 7: *We humbly ask our client base to help us remove our*

shortcomings; Step 8: We make a list of all clients, authors, partners we have harmed and make amends to them all; Step 9: We make direct amends to those whom we have harmed whenever possible.

Many speakers representing organizations such as IEEE, OECD, CAS, APA, as well as universities such as the California Digital Library and publications such as the *New*

chases rather than subscriptions. We learned of discounts to smaller users; one price, unlimited access; full archives; and distribution through a broader base of aggregators. We heard tales of economic woes from scholarly publishers and the need to provide some type of infrastructure to generate revenue through IT planning, digital stewardship, data preservation, and — here it comes

We must have the three vitamin C's of the future: curiosity, confidence, and courage.

England Journal of Medicine gave us great insights as to what they had done to step up into the Information Age of Disruption. They shared their experiences, their strengths, their failures, and some glimpses into the future. Interestingly, a large number of not-for-profits struggle with the same challenges in trying to remain current. Remember that non-profits must earn money to survive in order to keep serving constituents, so free data becomes a challenge, even for them.

We heard tales of penetration into new markets, for instance, going into the corporate sector. We heard tales of open-ended subscriptions, no time limit, document caps, niche marketing, tutorials, etc. We learned how the dreaded Sarbanes-Oxley even plagued not-for-profits in the ability to take revenue — something one can only do when a product/service is supplied and the transaction is complete, which is somewhat difficult when you work with an open-ended, multiyear, subscription price model. We heard tales of blogs, dynamic taxonomies, unholy alliances and partnerships, revenue sharing with new partners, user-generated data, cross-market products, individual pur-

— interoperability.

Step 10

And then came a turning point in our session: Step 10: *Continue to take technical inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admit it.*

Larry Keeley of Doblin Inc. shook the crowd with his presentation *Sometimes Things Change . . . Finding Information Service Frontiers Amid Daunting Disruptions*. Keeley talked about understanding that innovation happens to you, that ambiguity becomes king when there are simply too many choices, so nothing is done. Complexity becomes our enemy and volatility our staggering point.

We must have the three vitamin C's of the future: curiosity, confidence, and courage. He begged us to please stop developing new products and instead to make the products we have absolutely critical to our clients, so they will pay any price to keep our materials. Keeley talked about the invention of the light bulb to show us how no one gave up on the light bulb or switched to a new product in the face of failure. Success came from constant review and improvement of the light bulb, until it became a product we all *must* have.

Frankly, Keeley's presentation was so inspiring I forgot to take many notes. At the coffee break, the hungry, and now clearly recovering, crowd implored him to continue with his lesson for the day. In the spirit of leaving you hungry, his PowerPoint presentation is available on the site with only enough to make you hungry to call him for more. It was truly inspiring to see the growth in the now much healthier crowd.

The Miles Conrad Lecturer and Award recipient, Donald A. B. Lindberg, M.D., shared many thoughts based on all his experience leading the National Library of Medicine: Optimize content. Define user goals. Get discovered. Be relevant. Engage your audience. Try to discover something totally new. Optimize and prophesize.

Again, we leave for a gala banquet at the Union League of Philadelphia, where we continue to share all the thoughts of the day, forming new mini-support groups. We all agreed, as we headed off to our hotels, that our brains were swollen with all the new thoughts we had gathered.

Step 11

Now, we are on the homestretch — Day Three. We approach Step 11: *Seek through networking and brainstorming to improve our conscience contact with our clients, hoping only for the knowledge of our clients' will for us and the power to carry out that mission.*

Multiple presenters filled the stage, including ProQuest, Mark Logic, ThinkFree, OTTO Digital, CSA, InfoEther, and Unbound Medicine.

We learned again of the ramifications of hosting social interaction information and the legal, ownership, safety, and privacy issues involved. We are assured that privacy will survive, but digital independence will rise. We are assured that a wireless future, using technologies not yet even identified, will

integrate with the Web. We are assured that the born digital generation views the Web as their information resource of choice and wikis, blogs, RSS feeds, folksonomies, and more will become even more second nature than they are now.

The final keynote, Tony Hey of Microsoft, talked about the future of research, how the need to research across all subject disciplines will increasingly require the collaboration of globally dispersed groups

of researchers needing access to distributed computing, data resources, and remote access to expensive, multinational specialized facilities. The world will explode with hundreds of terabytes of data crossing many fields. Research papers will change in nature as Web 2.0 and other technologies allow the creation of live documents linked to RSS feeds and supplemented by blogs and wikis. The future of the research library is

rich and challenging.

Step 12

And so it ends with Step 12: Having had a technological awakening as a result of the NEAIS program, we try to carry this message to publishers, information specialists, technologists, librarians, and all who play in the information sandbox and to practice these new directions in all of our affairs.

See you at the next meeting! ♦