Epilogue

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The strengths of MCB lie in its ability to adapt and reorganize according to market needs. It is a learning organization and follows an action learning approach; rather than pull in experts from outside, the employees solve any problems with a realization that, whilst they may not know the answers, they have had to understand the process and delivery to be prepared for what may happen in the future. The company has followed an opportunistic strategy (Mintzberg and Quinn, 1992) which presumes flexibility, and allows the company to "think small" and move quickly without too many infrastructural constraints and also to embrace new initiatives.

In the past the partner/owners would take calculated risks on the basis of instinct but in the realization that they could fund such ventures internally. Profits were used to pioneer the business and to improve things, both for the employee and the organization, to do things and do them even better and more abundantly. It is the general belief that MCB is a community which has built the organization: one supports the other; the organization is eternal (Handy, 1991).

The organization cannot afford to be complacent about the role it may play in publishing. Its task has been one of anticipatory learning – it had no way of knowing the future but it needed to be prepared in the best way it could. Innovation fits well within MCB's strategy, and the resources, skills, technology and organizational commitments are structured accordingly (Mintzberg and Quinn, 1992). MCB, along with most other publishers, has had to adopt a top-to-bottom challenge of "who we are and what we do" – identifying core competences, leveraging resources and finding out about the non-articulated needs of the customer. This architecture has identified the broad competences that need to be built – the potential highways to the future. This allies with the "anticipatory learning" discussed by Wills (1995). The company knows its destination but has little idea of the paths that will take it there. Discovering how to get to the future is the area where an organization must hedge its bets and explore alternative channels, delivery mechanisms, technologies, etc. This strategic architecture can be deemed "work in progress" and only as an organization moves forward and acquires an insight into the most attractive technologies, delivery options, etc. can investment priorities become clearer. Specific routes should emerge as one moves forward – and, in practice, they have!

It would be fair to say that for the past four to five years MCB and other publishers have worked hard at building their technological, content and customer infrastructures for electronic delivery, with little indication of how successful it would all be. Their traditional publishing models have supported their endeavours to keep abreast of the electronic revolution.

This book has focused on five authors' anticipatory learning. Their learning has been implemented: they have delivered the infrastructures for electronic publishing, strategic alliances, organizational structures, and electronic communication with and promotion to suppliers and customers.

New lands have been discovered! There are new economic models that will sustain both content provider, supplier and customer. New methods of working include greater collaboration with publishers, suppliers and customers, new competences, ways to "work smarter", more efficiently and effectively.

MCB has channelled its energies into working with third parties to deliver its content – with subscription agents who have provided a "one-stop" shop aggregation service; with content aggregators and resellers such as EbscoHost; with facilitators within the higher education community (CHEST); with corporate business to business (B2B) to deliver articles and global licensing in the corporate community. These have produced the following results:

- 15 major consortia signed up worldwide (USA, Mexico, Sweden, Finland, Holland, South Africa and Israel);
- 50 per cent of the UK higher education community on favourable multi-year agreements;
- new hub model with academic and public library consortia;
- agreements signed with all the major subscription agents and with three smaller agencies;
- co-operative arrangement with the Russian Scientific Research Institute.

MCB has developed academic licensing models that have resulted in successful negotiations with library consortia worldwide. These multi-year deals have provided the company with an attractive holding base for both content provider and customer, with zero attrition and realistic pricing models. These economic models have extended to customer communities such as public libraries, further education institutions, etc. that were historically unable to afford MCB's material. Hub models have been developed whereby the academic, public sector and corporate bodies are able to participate to the benefit of all parties.

MCB's strategic alliance model has more recently extended to working with non-competitive publishers, allowing core competences to be pooled, again to the benefit of both companies.

In addition, a communication infrastructure has been built to deliver a peer review network, to expedite the flow of copy from author to editor to publisher. Successfully implemented on 15 journals, it will now be rolled out to a further 20.

Whilst the organization has in the past successfully communicated with its customers through traditional methods such as promotional letters, telephone and direct mail, it has now recognized the need to build an e-mail database.

Segmentation and customer orientation using this preferred communication tool have speeded up communication considerably. The e-mail database currently fulfils two main functions:

(1) sales activities through free trial campaigns and newsletter services (currently over 80,000 records); and

(2) usage improvement through table of content alerting services.

The most significant planned development lies in the collection of end users' details through "saved searches". End users will soon have the facility to save their search terms and they will be alerted via e-mail every time an article that matches their criteria is added to the database. Details will be collected through the Emerald full-text database and loaded onto the e-mail database, providing MCB with direct contact with its users.

In addition, MCB is constantly looking at ways to improve its campaigns in terms of both marketing effectiveness and logistics. Planned improvements that will increase the efficiency of database operations include:

- Automation of message despatch. This would mean that MCB could more easily overcome the resource issues of sending different messages to the various market sectors.

- Creating a self-managing database. Customers will be able to add their names to, remove their names from and view the lists to which they currently subscribe, with no manual intervention from MCB.

- Giving people the option of receiving text or HTML messages (HTML messages are likely to have greater impact from the marketing perspective).

MCB has had to go through the process of learning about and understanding the nuances of electronic publishing. Now there is a firm belief that there are third parties in the publishing industry that can provide the necessary level of expertise and competences more cost effectively. There are also initiatives being developed where content is leveraged and treated as the core asset owned by publishers, but pooled in such a way that all parties benefit from a collaborative effort for future electronic ingenuity. MCB intends to explore this avenue and use the expertise available through these routes.

A learning company is an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself (Pedler *et al.*, 1991). The publishing industry has undergone turbulent times and the more discontinuous the environment, the more an organization must accept that it cannot do everything in-house; rather it should focus on those activities which reflect its own distinctive competences and collaborate with those organizations that can add value to its products or services. In true learning style, MCB has had the experience, reflected upon it, concluded and taken the next steps in its planning cycle!

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References

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