

# **The Open Access Association?**

## **EAHIL's new model for sustainability**

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### **Introduction**

These are difficult times for professional associations which serve the many strands of the library and information services (LIS) profession. National, subject and sectorally-based associations in the developed world are struggling to thrive in an environment where their credibility and their income streams are threatened by a number of factors which are essentially outside their control. Many LIS associations are (or have recently been) in some degree of financial difficulty, and even those that have remained healthy are having to re-examine their priorities and activities – and the financial structure on which these depend – at a fundamental level. The purpose of this paper is to examine the reasons which this instability and uncertainty should exist, and how a small but reasonably typical and subject based association, the European Association for Health Information and Libraries (EAHIL) has adopted a radical, technology-based solution. We conclude with an analysis of the special factors that have applied in this particular case, and which may limit the applicability of the model described.

### **Why Are Some LIS Associations Struggling?**

There are some clear and direct reasons why LIS associations are facing serious challenges to their future prosperity. Perhaps paradoxically, the more central information becomes to the economics and sociology of the world we live in, the fewer professionals there are working in what we have traditionally regarded as libraries and information centres. LIS associations are losing their traditional, captive audience. The old strategy

of recruiting library school students who then move into librarian colonies where association membership is nurtured by management and mentor has served us well down the generations but no longer matches the real world. The very structure of the LIS world is, if not quite unravelling, becoming much more diverse and dispersed throughout the user communities. As LIS professionals we are being required to take on a much wider range of tasks and a richer blend of expertise. To reflect this, our professional associations are also needing to redefine their assumptions, attitudes and fundamental business models. None of this is easy in any context, and as we shall seek to show, there can be particular difficulties within the context of a professional membership organisation.

There are also more fundamental changes in society to contend with. In comparison with the world in which we grew up, trained and qualified, society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is much more individualist and consumerist, much less unthinkingly hierarchical. In the contemporary world, collective action of all sorts is less valued than it was, and we are all less inclined to do something, or belong to an organisation, simply because it's the right thing to do. We are making no judgement about whether this is good or bad, but it does put a great deal more of an onus on LIS associations to develop genuine member benefit for the new generation of professionals – and above all to market these benefits more sharply than has perhaps been the case in the past.

Accompanying the higher value placed on the individual and on individual choice, there has been in many Western societies a decline in the respect given to the concept of professionalism. Many older doctors used to a “doctor knows best” world bemoan the tendency of the modern patient to come to a consultation clutching a file of “evidence” (perhaps of dubious quality) and expecting to engage in a dialogue about diagnosis and treatment. The librarian's equivalent of this is the startling readiness of most of our users to rely on their own literature search skills (and Google) despite the sometimes compelling evidence that these skills fall far short of an acceptable standard of thoroughness.

We have already referred to the likely dilution and even disappearance of the large, orderly library hierarchies in which many of us have spent our careers. This leaves many LIS professionals, particularly in the early stages of their career when habits and expectations are being formed, with less support, moral, financial and in time set aside, for becoming active in professional bodies and for the traditional development and social activities.

Financially, too social demographics are leaving a hole in associations' finances. Large numbers of professionals, part of the “baby boom” of the late 1940s and early 1950s are coming up to retirement age together and are not being replaced, as organisations take the easy path to slimming down the size of library staffs, and tasks are either made unnecessary by technology or are simplified to a level where professional staff are not needed to the same extent. The reliance on sponsorship and income from conference exhibitions is similarly under threat as our suppliers merge and otherwise reduce in numbers, and as pressure on price increases eats into their marketing budgets.

Finally, in this rather depressing section, we have to acknowledge that member organisations, of their very nature, tend to be hard to manage and even harder to transform into the kind of nimble, radical, open organisations that are needed to cope with a professional and work environment of continuous, rapid and fundamental change. There are many good reasons why membership bodies should be like this, irrespective of the particular professional group which they represent. Representative democracy is fundamental to their structure, and while this has many virtues and advantages, it does tend to bring with it a slowness of reaction while consensus is gradually achieved and perhaps there is also a tendency to under-representation of younger members. It is perhaps superficial to say that this may build in a slight bias towards conservatism, particularly considering the radical solution found for EAHIL by a team of over-50s, but it must surely work against the awareness of new working structures and attitudes into association strategies. At worst, it can lead to a regime of “management by whim” whereby strong-minded individuals or small cliques can subvert proper, evidence-based strategic planning processes and impose their own views on colleagues who are less forceful, less energetic or who simply have less time to devote to professional affairs.

At their best, associations have proved that they can still mobilise their professional communities and can bring through radical approaches to these structural and strategic difficulties. The Special Libraries Association’s vigorous and radical espousal of in-service professional development in its Click University is an example of what can be achieved. Many others have developed workable strategies for continuing to function at a high level while coping with a seemingly inexorable gradual decline in membership. What we cannot do is to rely on the lazy and erroneous assumption that an information society will of itself guarantee a continuing place for librarians and our professional structures.

## **EAHIL**

The European Association for Health Information and Libraries (EAHIL) was founded in 1987 as a conventional, traditional association. Most of its original aims still hold good today, perhaps in modified form, but there were two assumptions, unspoken perhaps but clear, which have foundered on outside realities:

- The original Statutes and Rules of Procedure clearly demonstrate that the founders’ model and assumptions and about the future scale and nature of EAHIL was very much based on the large, highly successful model provided across the Atlantic by the Medical Library Association. In particular, this was evidenced by the setting up of a permanent secretariat in Brussels with a salaried member of staff. In the event, many of the largest communities were already well served by national medical library groups, many linked to national LIS associations, which competed successfully for the professional affiliation of a community that was (and is) by no means well paid. EAHIL failed to make the hoped-for jump from the hundreds into the thousands of members, and the Statutes and infrastructure

- have been steadily adjusted throughout its life in order to match the membership levels achieved.
- EAHIL was founded in the time of the Soviet bloc, primarily to serve the needs of libraries in Western Europe, a relatively homogeneous group, mostly with established norms and standards for LIS professionalism, and by global standards reasonably secure and well resourced. The dismantling of the Iron Curtain had a fundamental influence on EAHIL, mirroring the changes with the World Health Organisation's (WHO) European region. The medical libraries emerging nations of eastern and central Europe were faced with many difficulties and problems, many of them fundamental. Inspired by Elisabeth Husem EAHIL reacted very rapidly and reorientated itself towards ensuring an orderly integration of the medical library community across Europe and in supporting the maintenance and improvements of professionally-supported medical information services during the transition from command to market economies. EAHIL has played an important role in unification, development and sharing of experience.

In these circumstances, EAHIL existed happily for nearly 15 years as a conventional, subscription-based professional membership association. It brought together health librarians and information workers from 25 European countries and provided a healthy and conventional mix of conferences, workshops, continuing professional education and publications. The annual EAHIL meetings in particular have developed into an important date in the medical library calendar, and the associated professional development courses are a key resource for our professional community.

## **Facing the Longer-Term**

However, despite its professional success, an awareness of the uncertain long-term financial prognosis for all LIS associations, already set out above, prompted us to engage in a fundamental strategic reappraisal of EAHIL's future. At this time, around the turn of the century,, it was clear that the original membership aspirations were not going to be realised and that EAHIL would struggle to continue operating as it had done since its foundation. Although the financial reserves were healthy and the activities as lively as ever, there was a long-term, gradual but exponential decline in membership. If nothing changed the financial fundamentals would this would cross into deficit and inevitably lead to a crisis.

Although there was no longer a permanent, salaried secretariat, administration on a contracted-out basis was still absorbing an enormous proportion of EAHIL's annual budget. The essential problem was defined as follows: almost all of the subscription income was being spent administering and collecting subscriptions, leaving little money for new activities. Despite the introduction of the Euro, EAHIL operated (indeed still operates) in a multi-currency environment where currency commissions and bank charges remain a significant element.

## Radical Solution

Something clearly needed to be done while the level of reserves was still comfortable and before the level of membership fell to dangerously low levels outside the twelve most affluent countries in the region. After a good deal of discussion and working through the implications of several alternative financial models the authors reached the conclusion, and more importantly convinced the entire EAHIL Board that, paradoxically, the radical, apparently wildest solution was the one that gave the greatest promise of long-term stability and success.

For reasons that will become clear, it quickly became known as the Open Access solution and the plan that was adopted took the following form:

- EAHIL was to be converted to a virtual organisation, with 100% web-based administration & processes. The small amount of residual administration – legal reporting requirements, non-European membership, etc – would continue to be outsourced but all routine processes would be web-based, except for Board and Council meetings and the annual, statutory General Assembly.
- Membership would be open to all those working with health or medical information in Europe.
- The annual subscription would be completely abolished for members living within EAHIL's core region (essentially that covered by the Council of Europe).
- Applications from new members were to be peer reviewed before acceptance. The applications themselves and the peer review were to be online and the review process was to be managed and largely carried out by Council members, who are all elected from national constituencies and would be responsible for reviewing applications from their own country or region.
- The association's journal (the *Journal of the European Association for Health Information and Libraries*, JEAHIL) would continue to be distributed in printed form on request, but would move to being primarily an e-publication. Its costs would be paid for by advertising and sponsorship.
- A new income stream would be developed from a fixed levy on registration fees for our annual cycle of conferences and workshops.

A balanced budget, including a significant element of contingency funding was produced on the basis of the above proposals and supported the assertion that it was a viable way forward for the Association. With the unanimous support of the board and following considerable publicity about the proposal and the alternatives, the 2003 EAHIL General Assembly overwhelmingly approved the changes to budget and Statutes implement the new-model virtual, web based organisation. All processes were moved to the web site, including elections.

## The Consequences

After the first full year of operation, the results of the change have been extremely successful.

- Membership has almost trebled to over 1,100, finally making the leap forward in member numbers referred to above. Substantial numbers of new members have been recruited in the richer European countries. But there has also been a very marked growth in the parts of Europe where an annual subscription of €50 would have represented a very large, often insuperable barrier to membership; and since the change EAHIL has expanded into a number of countries where there had previously been no members at all.
- Despite some unbudgeted expenditure, the budget has remained in balance and promised to continue to do so for the years ahead.
- The supporting technical operations, entirely provided by volunteer labour have been delivered on time and have worked effectively and securely.
- Advertising in JEAHIL has increased significantly as a direct consequence of the very much wider circulation list, and sales of mailing labels have also increased
- Member participation has increased substantially, as it had to do if the new model was going to be made to work. This element is discussed further in the Implications section below. Although the level of member participation was one of the most significant risk factors identified in connection with the proposals, it has not proved to be a problem and there are currently no signs that it will become on in the future.
- Additional revenue sources are being developed. The very heavy reliance on conference levies is also identified as a vulnerability. EAHIL conferences and workshops are organised by volunteers from within the membership, often with little experience of events on this scale. Although there is a considerable body of expertise and experience available from those involved in previous conferences, there is an element of risk. Also, in common with most professional associations, EAHIL does not select its conference venues solely on the basis of commercial promise. There is a democratic imperative to ensure that the event moves around all parts of the continent, and that enthusiastic groups of members have a chance to organise “their” conferences.

A factor that was very important was that this programme of radical change was undertaken before it was absolutely necessary to do so. The long-term projections were beginning to look perilous, but the current financial situation was sound and the level of financial reserves healthy. We could, in short, afford to fail completely in this venture. If we turned out to have been completely wrong we (or more likely our elected successors) would have had the time and resources to assure EAHIL’s future by other means. This both gave the Board the courage to be radical, and provided a degree of comfort and support during those times when, inevitably, we looked at each other and asked “what are we doing here?”

## **Implications & Conclusions**

The changes to EAHIL have been a success. EAHIL is a larger, more vibrant and more successful organisation because of the change, and the measures that have achieved that result may have important lessons for the very many other LIS professional associations that are facing similar dilemmas and uncertainties over their future. This final section of the paper discusses some of the particular characteristics of EAHIL that may have been important in seeing this through without serious mishap. It also looks at some ways in which these special factors may limit the applicability of Open Access associations in contexts in which they do not apply, or are not so strongly present.

The first element to bring out is that health and medical libraries and their professional community are different. There are a lot of us compared with other subject groups and perhaps the fundamental, dramatic context of our work draws us together more than others. Certainly there is a strong sense of community and professional cohesion amongst the EAHIL membership and this has been a crucial element in recruiting the large amount of volunteer support on which these changes have depended – and on which they continue to depend.

EAHIL has also been lucky in that the volunteers that have come forward have been able to offer a wide range of supporting skills in a number of areas including marketing, web hosting, database development, journal editing and management. Equally crucial has been the extent to which EAHIL volunteers have been able to call upon practical support from their employing organisation – in terms of the time committed to EAHIL certainly, but also in systems support, space on web servers and so on.

Because of their scale and purchasing power, health libraries have always been able to enjoy disproportionate support from scholarly publishers and other vendors. This continuing secure financial position of *JEAHIL* reflects this, and the willingness of library suppliers to invest their time and money in organisations and journals which can reach whole communities of librarians who make and inform key decisions on purchasing.

Finally there is the question of scalability. Is the solution we have described here a viable option for a much larger organisation than EAHIL? If so, how large would an association have to be or become before the strains began to show, the bonds of community began to dilute and the dis-economies of scale evident in so many membership organisations begin to apply? This implementation of an Open Access association does no more than show that it can be made to work in a reasonably small scale, and that the direct and indirect benefits are significant enough for it to be worth considering, worth working through, in other contexts. Whether it really would work is probably unanswerable except by experiment. EAHIL has made a successful leap into the unknown and found security for the immediate future. It is for others to determine whether this was freakish luck or a way forward for pressured associations.