

CIIG asking the questions

Will the continuing move toward the acceptance of end user focused products mean a radically different role for information workers? Will the continuing trend of vendor consolidation bring any potential dangers or advantages for users? These and other questions were debated at the first of the City Information Group's millennium debate series. Feona J Hamilton reports

The City Information Group launched its millennium debate series by asking these questions at a well attended meeting. Representatives from different sectors of the information industry were asked to discuss them. Anyone expecting to hear



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the same old tired clichés and platitudes trotted out by the panel was in for a very pleasant surprise. But then, the usual suspects had definitely not been rounded up – although those involved were certainly well known figures from the profession.

Jane Langley, Head of Business Information at Saudi International Bank chaired the meeting



and showed a refreshingly different attitude by asking the vendor on the panel to answer first. Manny Cohen, Managing Director, RM Information, definitely sees a positive advantage for information professionals in the growth of products marketed to the end user. Any newly purchased kit will now have Internet access, with all that implies. Intranets are also becoming commonplace and are increasingly installed, regardless of business size. These days everyone working in organisations is encouraged to learn how to use both hardware and software and is introduced to the Internet. If a new employee is lucky, proper training might be offered, otherwise it's a question of picking it up as he or she goes along. According to Mr Cohen, learning how to access information has also become easier. Getting information via portals is especially easy, he went on to say, as these make a wide range of products available without the need for interpretation. But look more closely, he urged. It's not high-level information that is available by this means: it's just the basic company and business information which comes from a simple search.

This means that all the standard business information services – Companies House documents, the latest business news, equities information – are all accessed via the desktop. RM Information's own range of products, which concentrate on company information and are delivered both off-line and on-line, are typical of this type of material. "Information professionals," said Manny, "now get just the high-level stuff to do – which is more fun, more interesting and more creative."

Indeed it is, agreed Professor Charles Oppenheim from the Department of Information Science at Loughborough University – but there's much more to it than that. There are now several new roles for the information professional. These include more demanding research and advising and guiding the end user. These new roles



From left to right: Manny Cohen, Jane Langley, Charles Oppenheim and Martin White

enhance the position of information professionals because they require them to use their expertise to ensure end users are using the right sort of product in the right sort of way to find the information they need. The doomsday scenario – widely discussed not so long ago – of the LIS profession ceasing to exist, he said, had not come about and would not. Instead, information professionals had actively promoted themselves as the best people to give the kind of guidance that was needed to get the best out of the Internet. Gone were the days when a news organisation could inadvertently find itself paying for its own newsfeed from a different source.

The information professional has, in fact, become an expert whose strength lies in more than simply getting hold of information and passing it on. Everyone in the company is now an information worker, said Martin White, Principal Consultant of TFPL and the third member of the panel. It's a trend that has been happening for several years. What the information professional – and no-one else – can do is manage the information. It's no longer up to them to interpret it. It is up to them to spot the options available to anyone with training in information skills. He cited the information professional now in charge of Microsoft's latest Web product.

Having decided that the LIS profession, far from being threatened, is actually entering a new and exciting phase, the panel moved on to the next question. The point was made that the actual number of companies involved in information provision was shrinking because of the tendency toward consolidation. At the same time, however, the market for those services continued to grow. Companies with extremely well known names in other fields are now moving into the provision of information. Martin White cited Hoover's European launch (see *IWR*, 147) where a company with a strong information brand already in existence is seeking new markets. Yet