

Special Libraries Working Together: The Sheridan Park Association Library and Information Science Committee

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Abstract

The Sheridan Park Association (SPA), centred in the Sheridan Science and Technology Park in Mississauga, Ontario, represents a diverse group of industrial, government and academic organisations. For some 30 years, the libraries of Sheridan Park, through the Library and Information Science Committee (LISC), have been joining forces to support growth and creativity for their parent organisations. LISC provides a forum for building professional expertise through formal education and informal networking and for sharing non-proprietary knowledge and resources. The Committee also acts as a consortium and a lobby group to advance the interests of the SPA and its members with vendors, governments and others.

Introduction

A dictionary definition of “consortium” is “an association, esp. several large companies in a joint venture” (1). This meaning is applicable in the library world where consortia are typically associations of large institutions, aimed at pooling resources to obtain financial benefit. However, the Sheridan Park Library and Information Science Committee (LISC) differs both in membership and mandate.

There are dozens of examples of formal partnerships set up by groups of libraries to advance their mutual interests (2) but most involve public or academic institutions. As a consortium of special libraries—all relatively small and most in the private sector—LISC is something of an anomaly. As with other library consortia, resource sharing is an important feature but it is not the Committee’s sole purpose. Like its parent, the Sheridan Park Association, LISC is also part club, part technical society, part trade association (3). Resource sharing can even, at times, be viewed with ambivalence by for-profit companies protective of their proprietary information and wary of shared arrangements. That LISC thrives nonetheless has much to do with the unique context in which it operates.

Background

Sheridan Science and Technology Park

The Sheridan Science and Technology Park is a 340-acre campus located in Mississauga, Ontario, west of Toronto. It houses the research facilities of ten corporations with whose interests cross the whole spectrum of Canadian industry (Exhibit I). Also resident are two Ontario Government agencies.

The Park (the Sheridan Park Research Community, as it was then called) was developed in the 1960s by a group of companies that recognised the importance of research to industrial development and believed that jointly they could generate an atmosphere in which creativity would flourish. They chose an attractive setting—green and spacious and yet close to urban amenities, convenient to transportation, near several universities and colleges—and set about achieving that objective. In addition to the individual research facilities of the member companies, a shared Conference Centre was built and much effort was directed toward establishing an organisational climate that would attract talented people and foster synergies among them.

As early as 1966, the Association set up a committee to consider the information needs of member organisations and the sharing of resources and costs. The idea of a central library to serve the whole Park was discussed but ultimately discarded in favour of a library standing committee. Even as the SPA was assessing options in this area, in the member company libraries, people with common interests were already joining forces. By the time the library standing committee was officially mandated by the SPA in 1975, there was a well-established library group already undertaking co-operative projects. Its Union List of Serials had first been published in 1969 and was to remain a major project of LISC’s into the 1990s.

Sheridan Park Association

The Sheridan Park Association today is a voluntary, non-profit body comprised of the companies owning land in the Park along with a number associate and affiliate members, organisations sharing with the Park’s residents a focus on science and technology. Its stated mission is “to maintain the Sheridan Science and Technology Park as a world class technical community in an attractive campus setting, fostering relationships to return economic and social benefits to its members.” The Association’s organisational structure is three-part:

- An Executive and Board of Directors, drawn from the member companies;
- A full-time Manager responsible for Conference Centre operations and day-to-day administration; and

- Several standing committees, also drawn from member companies. These include Purchasing and Science and Technology, as well as the library group.

Library and Information Science Committee

The Library and Information Science Committee has evolved along with the Park, from a few people meeting casually without a formal agenda to a sub-committee of another group to a formal committee with defined purposes (Exhibit II), roles (Exhibit III) and programmes.

In LISC's first years, facilitating direct exchanges between the member libraries was a priority. This emphasis shows clearly in the early development of a Union List of Serials and in the custom of the time that meetings be hosted on a rotating basis at member libraries in order to allow participants to become familiar with the different collections. However, the Committee was never insular. Contacts with other information provider organisations, particularly the National Research Council, date back to the 1960s. LISC was an early adopter of online searching, one of the beta sites for CISTI's CAN/OLE service.

Special librarianship has changed greatly over the last thirty years. In-house collections have shrunk, literally and figuratively, while the importance of external resources and new formats has grown enormously. LISC has simply adjusted and carried on, with basically the same structure but with interests and projects always focussed on members' current needs.

LISC Activities and Programmes

The three themes of professional development, resource sharing, and spokespersonship on behalf of its members engage LISC today, as they always have. However, the Committee's early emphasis of resource sharing—resource in the sense of library collection—has diminished somewhat and professional development has come more to the fore.

Professional Development

The regular meetings and occasional other events organised by LISC provide a valued opportunity to learn and to interact with peers. Meetings are monthly, except in July and August, normally on the fourth Thursday, and include a business meeting, with reports from the LISC Executive, followed by a programme. Most are held at the Sheridan Park Conference Centre or elsewhere within the Park.

Programmes may take various forms, including demonstrations of products or services, presentations by subject experts, and roundtables in which Committee share their own views and expertise with the group. By tradition, the June programme is a tour of a member company or some other institution in the area. Subjects are also varied. Suggestions for programme topics are invited from the entire group, and the Programme Committee, a part of the LISC Executive, is then responsible for identifying appropriate speakers and making all necessary arrangements. Themes in the past year have ranged from general interest to practical and technology-based:

- E-mail management
- Adobe E-papers
- Workplace ergonomics
- Copyright issues in the digital era
- Conflict resolution
- Marketing your library
- Current awareness services on the Internet

From time to time, seminars or presentations are held in addition to the regular meeting schedule, sometimes co-sponsored with other SPA committees or library groups and open to the broader group.

Resource Sharing

As already noted, direct interchanges such as interlibrary loan were originally a primary concern to LISC. Over the years there have also been many examples of group purchasing or shared services. That early CAN/OLE beta test employed a dedicated hard-wired terminal housed in a member library and made available to the whole group. Before electronic document delivery became common, LISC had a shared bulk delivery arrangement for materials from CISTI. Currently, a bulk purchase agreement that would generate volume discounts is being explored with CISTI.

Perhaps even more important than the sharing of goods and services is the sharing of professional knowledge and experience. Informal exchanges take place at meetings and through the group's listserv, and expert advice can be found on specific projects. For example, when Ontario Hydro Technologies was preparing to convert its catalogue to Sydney Plus, the librarian was able to spend time at AECL, which had recently gone through the same exercise, and what she learned represented a real saving in money and time for Hydro.

Spokesmanship

Putting forward its own image or viewpoint and that the Sheridan Park Association is also an objective of LISC. The group has lobbied suppliers regarding their services and government on such issues as copyright. In the academic-industrial relations area, the library of the University of Toronto at Mississauga is an active member of LISC and the Committee maintains other academic contacts. Until recently, two student prizes were awarded annually, one to a graduate of the University of Toronto Faculty of Information Studies and one to a Sheridan College Library and Information Technology graduate. With the cancellation of the Sheridan College programme, that award has been replaced with a subsidy for a workshop at the Ontario Association of Library Technicians Annual Conference.

What Makes LISC Work

The success factors that make LISC thrive are can be grouped under the broad headings of structure and location, function and attitude.

Structure and Location

LISC enhances participants work lives by providing them with support and an easy way to work professional development activities into a busy schedule. The simple strategy of having regular meetings of moderate length at a local and convenient site makes professional interaction and education accessible and inexpensive. While LISC has always welcomed participants from outside Sheridan Park's boundaries, geography *does* count. Opportunities for personal interaction—especially important for those in one-person libraries—are effectively limited to the local area where meeting attendance is practical.

Committee membership is deemed to include every person in a library-related role in an SPA member company, without regard to job title or academic background. This practice of encouraging broad participation helps LISC to achieve a critical population mass with a range of professional experience to draw on and enough people to take on regular tasks. It also brings new viewpoints and interests into the group.

Lastly, clearly defined Committee roles (Exhibit III) and record keeping contribute consistency and stability.

Function

LISC is many things to its members, among them a network, a support group and a school.

As a network in the sense of a technical society, LISC provides a pool of expertise to draw on, in librarianship and in a variety of other disciplines which reflect the diverse interests of the SPA's corporate members. Committee members can thus support each other in the improvement of practices within their own organisations.

As a network in the employment sense, LISC provides participants seeking, or seeking to fill, a position with résumés from a common file, references, and professional, academic and association contacts. The student award system provides a window on new talent.

Especially important in a special library context is the role of support group. Employees in special libraries, which are typically small, must often look outside their parent organisations for professional colleagues who can act as sounding boards for ideas and problems. In LISC they find a peer group.

Participation in LISC is, in itself, an opportunity to learn practical skills. A member who has had little occasion to chair meetings or make presentations can practice before a sympathetic audience. Organising a programme provides a quick lesson in project management and a chance to make outside contacts.

Attitude

Like the library profession in general, LISC is oriented toward co-operation. Libraries have long known that they could never have everything their users would need and thus could not succeed in isolation. Interlibrary loan is commonplace in the library world but, in fact, is an example of a rare phenomenon, a formal, global system of interchange that touches an entire discipline across corporate and national boundaries.

LISC is a community of like-minded people who help and support each other. In doing so, they generate practical benefits which draw the support of their employers and the Association. At the same time, the group is accepting of diversity. LISC's members simply share an interest in the role of information provider and the group welcomes and values equally all those in such roles—librarians and library technicians, systems specialists, records managers and others.

Finally, LISC is outward-looking and actively seeks new participants inside and outside Sheridan Park. It is, in fact, one of the official duties of the Past-Chairman to identify and approach prospective new members. The Committee has been instrumental in drawing non-resident corporate members into the Association.

Future Directions

LISC, like its parent the Sheridan Park Association, has seen its membership rise and fall with the changing times and changing economy. However, it remains the SPA's most active and successful standing committee. It provides business value to companies involved and, at the same time, is personally rewarding to the people involved. The challenge to LISC is to keep doing that in a changing world.

To conclude, as we began, with a definition, one dictionary meaning for "community" is "fellowship of interests etc.; similarity" (4). In management literature, a "community of practice" means a recognised network of people who have common interests and who come together to improve processes and practices (5). Both are apt in the case of LISC. Perhaps the most important factor in LISC's continued success as a library consortium is the recognition that it is *not* one in the general sense of a business

association. LISC is a community, with a history and a structure and set of shared values. To flourish, it must continue to foster the complex web of social and professional interactions that community implies.

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References

1. **The Oxford Canadian Dictionary**, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.302.
2. **Library Consortia Documents Online** (<http://www.lis.uiuc.edu/~b-sloan/consort.htm>), Bernie Sloan, 1999 05 06.
3. **SPA 20/20: An Agenda for the SPA**, St. John H. Blakeley, Oakville ON: SHB Advisory Services, 2000 05 31, p.2.
4. **The Oxford Canadian Dictionary**, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.288.
5. **Communities of Practice** (<http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/index.shtml>), Community Intelligence Labs, c1999.

Exhibit I – SPA Member Organisations

Residents	Industry Sector
• Atomic Energy of Canada Limited	Energy
• Cancom Satellite Network Services	Communications
• Cominco Ltd.	Mining and Metals
• Hatch	Engineering
• Imax Corporation	Entertainment
• Inco Technical Services Limited	Mining and Metals
• Materials and Manufacturing Ontario	Government
• Ontario Development Corporation	Government
• Pfizer Global Research	Pharmaceuticals
• PCI Chemicals Canada Inc.	Chemicals
• Petro-Canada, Lubricants Research and Development	Energy
• Process Research ORTECH	Research Services
• Xerox Research Centre of Canada	Office Systems
Associates	
• NPS Allelix Corp.	Pharmaceuticals
Affiliates	
• AT Plastics Inc.	Plastics
• Dofasco Inc.	Mining and Metals
• GlaxoSmithKline	Pharmaceuticals
• Stelco Inc.	Mining and Metals
• University of Toronto at Mississauga	Education

Exhibit II – LISC Mission and Strategic Objectives

Mission

- To support the growth and creativity of our members and the Sheridan Science and Technology Park community by providing and facilitating access to information resources.

Strategic Objectives

- To develop our professional knowledge and skills through our programmes;
- To share our non-proprietary knowledge, experiences and resources in order to continue improving our services to our clients and organisations; and
- To join forces as a consortium in order to maximize our influence on vendors, government and other relevant organisations.

Exhibit III — LISC Executive Responsibilities

Note

Elections take place in February with an Executive “year” of March to February. A changeover meeting should be held prior to the March Membership meeting.

- Copies of all correspondence sent on SPA letterhead must be copied to the SPA office.
- Current Executive members will maintain their files and one term of their predecessor’s files. All other files will be passed to the Secretary for filing in the LISC archives.

Chairman (1 year term)

- Chairs Membership and Executive meetings;
- Sets meeting agendas with Secretary;
- Prepares upcoming year’s budget with Treasurer and submits to LISC Executive for approval and discussion with membership at January meeting;
- Acts as liaison between LISC and SPA;
- Writes policy statements as required and submits to LISC for approval;
- Presents awards on behalf of LISC;
- Becomes Past-Chairman.

Past Chairman (1 year term)

- Writes the LISC Annual Report for the SPA Annual Meeting;
 - Attends and presents Report at the Annual Meeting (May);
- Chairs Executive nomination committee;
- Assists Chairman as required; acts as a “sounding board” for Chairman;
- Responsible for LISC public relations;
 - Contacts potential LISC members.

Vice-Chairman (1 year term)

- Maintains a résumé file for LISC’s use. Use by others is at the discretion of LISC;
 - Keeps résumés on file for 6 months categorised as “librarian,” “library technician” or “other;”
 - Acknowledges receipt of résumés on LISC’s behalf using SPA letterhead, includes a current LISC membership list;
 - Announces new résumés received at membership meetings;
- Chairs meetings in the absence of Chairman;
- Chairs two (2) meetings per year as arranged with Chairman;
- Writes letters on behalf of LISC;
- Becomes Chairman.

Exhibit III — LISC Executive Responsibilities (Continued)

Programme Committee (3 members—1 year term with one member carrying over for a second term in a liaison capacity)

- Solicits programme ideas from LISC members;
- Arranges programmes (for September to June of the following Executive year);
- Maintains a list of upcoming programmes (tentative and confirmed) and ensures this is communicated to membership;
- Books meeting rooms with Conference Centre or makes alternate arrangements (one year in advance for the 4th Thursday of every month – no meetings in July and August);
 - Informs Conference Centre 2 weeks in advance of meeting needs (e.g. equipment required, facilities not needed, etc.);
- Confirms with speaker meeting date, time, etc.;
 - Provides speaker with map, membership list, brochure, etc. (can refer them to SPA web site);
- Arranges to have speaker taken to lunch (maximum of 4 lunches to be paid for by LISC);
- Sends thank-you letters to speakers;
- Forwards to Treasurer receipts/bills incurred (large expenses should be discussed with Chairman or Vice-Chairman in advance).

Secretary (1 year term)

- Prepares agendas with Chairman;
- Takes attendance/minutes at Membership and Executive meetings;
- Maintains membership list;
- Maintains LISC pages on SPA web site;
- Maintains listserv (currently with Yahoo! Groups <http://groups.yahoo.com/>);
- Maintains archives and list of its contents (currently housed by Xerox).

Treasurer (2 year term)

- Maintains a record of LISC accounts;
- Reports monthly expenditures and balances at Membership meetings;
- Provides a summary of accounts to Secretary for inclusion in minutes and archives;
- Approves invoices and assigns to appropriate budget category;
- Prepares upcoming year's budget with Chairman and submits to LISC Executive for approval and discussion with membership at January meeting.

Exhibit III — LISC Executive Responsibilities (Continued)

Vendor Relations Co-ordinator (2 year term)

- Seeks out opportunities for consortium discounts;
- Co-ordinates and negotiates with vendors on behalf of LISC.

Other

- University of Toronto, FIS liaison;
 - Acts as liaison between LISC and educational institution;
 - Updates LISC on items of interest regarding library and information science programming at institution;
 - Contacts LISC award winner and issues invitation to attend June LISC Membership meeting and programme (or an alternate meeting of the winner's choosing).