

ICLG visits to the British Library (8th September 1999 and the City Business Library (22nd September 1999)

First impressions

Ros Cotton of the Business Information Service (BIS) helped to make our visit to the British Library less daunting, after some of our group of 20 who arrived at 6 o'clock, found themselves locked out because of the need for tight security. After an initial question and answer session, we were given a guided tour of the third floor where the Science and Business materials are kept. It was interesting at last to see people actually in the British Library using their own computers, doing their own research and asking for help at the enquiry desk.

In contrast, it was rather unusual to be toured around an empty City Business Library, apart from 30 ICLG members and 6 library staff. We were divided into three groups and were able to ask questions and examine materials and amenities in some detail. Unlike the British Library, there are no cloakrooms or cafeteria although we were lucky enough to be provided with refreshments.

Access / Membership

Both the British Library and the City Business Library are reference libraries. Both need ID before allowing access to materials. The British Library requires membership by applying for a reader's pass. This is made easier if you are a member of the Library Association.

Whereas the British Library is an academic library and "a library of last resort", the City Business Library is the most obvious choice for business information, especially for those of us in the City. It is one of the Corporation of London's libraries. In its brief guide it states its objective is "to satisfy the day to day information needs of the City's business community". It does much more than this. It is not only one of the leading libraries in its field in Britain (at least as far as hard copybook and journals sources goes) but it is a focal point for all those who live, work and study in the area. As Garry Humphries, the Chief Librarian, pointed out, it is in essence a public library, free to users who do their own research. It is companies who pay, particularly if they phone and ask the staff to do their research for them, and, of course, those who need to take photocopies! Both libraries are heavily used and encourage people to apply first to their local public reference libraries where they may be surprised to find the answer they need.

Opening hours and facilities

Although the British Library is open late (until 8.00pm Mondays to Thursdays) and is also open 9-5 on Fridays and Saturdays, the British Library Lloyds TSB Business Line (020 7412 7454 or 020 7412 7977) is available only between 9.00 - 5.00 weekdays. This service is free and is for quick reference enquiries up to 10 minutes. It is intended as a first point of contact and can authorise reader's passes. In-depth research can be undertaken by the experienced team responsible for the Business Information Research Service (020 7412 7457 or fax 020 7412 7453) and are

chargeable at a commercial rate- currently £82 per hour plus direct costs e.g. online charges, photocopying, faxes that have to be passed on.

The City Business Library is open weekdays 9.30 - 5.00 Mondays to Fridays. Despite its popularity, these hours are unlikely to be extended due to financial cuts. Before sending an enquirer along to the library, you are advised to check the availability of publications by phoning between 9.30-11.30am (020 7332 1812 - option 4 enquiry desk.) There is also a tailored, fee-based research service called Business Information Focus (020 7600 1461) which currently charges £80 per hour which may include online costs depending on the service requested. Full quotations are always given before work is undertaken.

The Collections

The Business Information collections in the British Library are found in Science 3 and include company, market and product information. Although much of the British Library holds academic and research material, the business collection has a more practical than theoretical nature. It covers manufacturing, wholesale trading, retailing and distribution aspects of major industrial and service sectors. There are both printed and electronic sources, including online e.g. FT-Discovery and EIU Viewswire via the internet and CD-Roms such as Keynote, Mintel, Investext, Amadeus, Disclosure Worldscope to name but a few. Colourful and useful leaflets explaining these services are available e.g. a 2-page leaflet listing all the electronic media sources. Current information is on open access, available for browsing. It is useful for company news, finance, competitor information and market research, especially trends and statistics. Ros Cotton, our guide, also organises business information training courses for users, librarians and other members of BL staff.

The City Business Library is well organised, classified and signposted. Material is mainly under five years old. There is an excellent collection of directories, pamphlets and other material, including statistics of the EC, US, and an impressive overseas section. A large collection of 750 periodicals and 50 newspapers is also kept here. Some CD-Roms are available to users e.g. FT-McCarthy for company news, Sequencer for financial data, Business and Industry for journal articles. The library staff also has access to DIALOG/ Datastar, Kompass Online for mailing lists, Profound for market research, and CD-Roms e.g. Experian, Bookwise, OJ C and L series, and FT Prices for share prices. However, it is a pity there are no fax and Internet facilities available yet. Well-designed handouts, e.g. on how to research UK quoted and unquoted companies, are produced with the end user in mind as the emphasis is on self-help due to staff shortage. Although there are 16 staff in total, including security guards, some work part-time or job-share.

Final Verdict

Both libraries are well worth a visit. We all found something useful and went home, armed with leaflets, determined to make better use of both the information services in future. We wish to extend our thanks to Ros Cotton and her colleagues from the BL and Gorette Considine, the Deputy Librarian and her colleagues at the City Business Library who made us feel so welcome.

Pauline Dwiar (Pinsent Curtis Information Unit, London Office)