Chapter 1: The Traditional Approach to Library Design

"All living species survive by using their senses to collect information about their environment— and to store, process, and translate into actions which are advantageous to their forward existence. Human information processing is unique, however, in the degree to which man has consciously elaborated and transmitted his personal information interactions through sophisticated symbol systems. . . . Human society is essentially dependent on its common symbolic systems." [1]

Along with these symbolic systems, including his language, man has become inundated with a flood of information. Our's has been called an information-rich society because we supposedly know more now than we ever did before. However, we are becoming increasingly specialized as a result, and, in reality, we are losing more information than ever before.

The response to this loss of information is to adopt an information system— a method for translating our 'sophisticated symbolic systems' into terms which can be manipulated to prevent the loss of valuable information. In more concrete terms an information system is any means used to acquire, process, organize, store, retrieve and/or disseminate information.

Faced with an increasing dependence on information, almost every type of business which provides an information-based service is beginning to seek some means of organizing, storing and recovering the various forms of information that it acquires or produces. Thus, the need for an information system. One of the common approaches (and probably the most practical for the small firm) is the company library. But the creation of many small libraries has been totally inadequate, and the result has been a library which is unused, misused, abused, and in many cases, avoided by company personnel.

Private, company libraries tend to suffer from many different problems, but most of these ultimately boil down to one basic problem— the wrong approach to library design. The first aspect of this traditional approach (which, admittedly does work quite well in many situations) lies in the connotation of the term library. For instance, one common definition reads "A library is a collection of books and other printed or graphic materials for the use of a specific clientele, which is arranged and administered in such a way as to meet the needs of that clientele." [2] When people hear the word library, they automatically think 'books'.

Thinking only in terms of books has made the effective design of many libraries impossible. The term information system is a more adequate term (although library should be a perfectly good word and will be used throughout this manual) because a library should contain information in many different forms, not just books. Thus, any firm considering a library should consider organizing all forms of information, not just its books.

A second problem inherent in the traditional approach to library design is also contained in the above definition. This definition states that a library's collection is "for the use of a specific clientele." Every library designer must answer the question "Who is the user of the information system or library?" Traditionally, the users of a library are considered to be the patrons or those

who extract information from the library for their own use. It might seem obvious then that the users of a company library are the members of the company. But then one major user of the company library is traditionally ignored— the librarian or information manager. If the librarian can't efficiently 'use' the library— in the sense of easily putting information into the library as well as getting it out— then the library will unable to meets the needs of all of its users.

To create some sense of order in its collection most libraries use some kind of classification system. "A classification system is simply defined as a subject outline, with each place in the outline having a numerical code." [3] Although there is nothing inherently wrong with using a classification system, most small libraries make the mistake of trying to adopt an already existing system. The two most common classification schemes found in public and academic libraries are the Dewey Decimal Classification and the Library of Congress Classification. Both try to classify all areas of knowledge, obviously making them much too broad in scope for a specialized collection, and the individual sections of these classification schemes which do deal with the subject areas of the small library are usually not detailed enough.

Classification systems also have one other major disadvantage: They are difficult and time-consuming to use. When a librarian assigns a classification number to an item (and this usually requires a fully-trained professional to accomplish), he must first narrow the subject scope of the item down to a single subject or topic. Second, he must decide where that subject fits into the classification scheme. Third, he must devise the classification number because items with the same subject have to be distinguished in some way. And fourth— and this is a real problem in small libraries with limited space— the item must be fitted onto a shelf, into a drawer, or whatever.

The classification problem is one which often inundates a librarian with nothing but technical details. This is often a waste of valuable professional training; most professional librarians have skills that could be better used. A valuable librarian should not only control the information contained in the library collection, he should also be able to provide additional services to the parent agency or firm. Thus, simplicity should be the key to any library. If the techniques used to control information are simple, then they are not time-consuming and the library can become truly user-oriented because it frees the librarian for more useful activity.

In summary then, we want to achieve the goal of a truly user-oriented library when we design special libraries. To do this three major objectives have to be met: First, the library must be information-oriented rather than book-oriented. Second, it should be user-oriented in the sense that both library patrons and the librarian are considered to be users. (Thus, the system used must be simple and not time-consuming to maintain or use.) And third, in order to achieve these first two objectives the design of the library must be unique.

Every collection of informational materials is different and will be used for a different purpose, so each library must be designed for those unique materials and purposes. Since the foundation of good library service is a well-designed library, the following chapter outlines a proposal for designing a user-oriented library.