

# Pay tribute to Conan the Librarian

**F**OR more than half a decade, e-business has been the sexy end of town. Fast money, new global brands, billions made overnight and lost just as quickly. It has been heady stuff. But the new economy version of the humble librarian is making all that seem like child's play.

Jeff Bezos, the man responsible for Amazon, was named man of the year (I understand he was just pipped by Einstein for man of the century). The imagination of the media-consuming public was captured by stories of AOL taking over Time Warner, of Dell and Cisco's exponential growth, of being able to get anything online "at the last minute". But alongside all this, a relatively quiet industry has been changing the corporate world from the inside out — information retrieval.

Now this may not make you want to scream about it to passers-by, but the leaders of those organisations that have learnt how to harness the information revolution are desperately holding themselves back from doing exactly that. For it is not only saving them vast amounts of money, it is giving them incredible competitive advantage.

You see, the problem is that we have too much information. Pick any subject you like and you will find more information on it than you care to cope with — from an over-abundance of newspapers, magazines, books, journals, subscription-only publications, free-to-air TV, pay TV, interactive TV, subscription TV...and, of course, the Web.

We were swamped with information before the Internet but now we are drowning in the stuff. A simple query for, say, "beekeeping" on any of the major search engines will result in about 40,000 possible websites. Most people give up after the first 10 or 20, leaving 39,980 useless information sources.

And the scary thing is that current search engines access only about 5 per cent of the Web. So there may be a further 800,000 Web pages on the subject that our poor beekeeper isn't aware of.

While this may be slightly annoying for individual Web users, the same problem can be devastating for corporations. Not only do they need to wade through the vast swamp of Web-based information but major organisations produce

gallons of extra data every day. Most have no idea how to control this glut, let alone use it for their own advantage.

If only there was a solution, a technology to help us sort all this information, make sense of it and help us find exactly what we are looking for. Well, there is. We used to call it "knowledge management", some are now calling it corporate portal management (just to confuse the customers, I think) — but call it what you will, information retrieval is one of the superheroes of the information age.

Take the BBC. Its TV, radio and news services are arguably the best in the world but back in the mid-Nineties they were under siege. Not by competitors so much as by the dead weight of their own information. Three vast news archives, unconnected and all managed manually, were not only costing the Corporation a bomb but it took an age for

researchers to find anything. And obtaining information from outside the BBC was even more hit and miss.

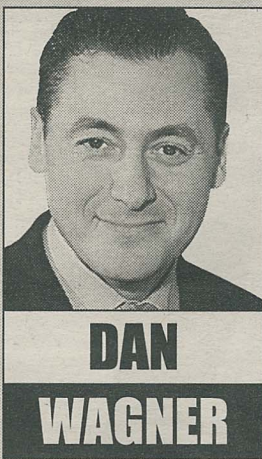
Enter our "virtual librarian". Now the Beeb has become an information retrieval convert, its researchers can get information they need in seconds from their electronic news archive and have instant access to the world from

their PCs. This lets them to get an accurate story on the air before the likes of CNN, which is worth millions to the BBC.

In a strange reversal of fortune, Britain is leading the way with this sort of technology as a result of work done by my old company, MAID, and ground-breaking research in search technology done at Cambridge University over the past two decades. Mike Lynch's Autonomy, Microsoft's soon-to-be-released search solutions and our own Smartlogik information retrieval company were all born out of the same Cambridge stables.

While it may not at first appear to be the sexiest of new-economy stories, the ability to enable decision-makers to find that special piece of information that will turn data into real knowledge is fuelling a global information retrieval industry that is on its way to being worth £5 billion in the next two years.

Who would have thought the humble librarian could be reincarnated in such a remarkable fashion?



**DAN**

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