This first issue for 2011 reflects our content plans for the year. We want to bring you content that demonstrates how the boundaries of information service provision are being stretched; showcases good practice and novel ideas; helps you to work smarter; demonstrates where content suppliers are developing products to increase workplace efficiency; and highlights technical trends likely to impact on the provision of business information services. We also want to share relevant research and reflective thinking that may suggest new directions for information management.

The 2011 Business Information Survey, researched and written by Allan Foster, is a tour de force that has explored the views of 21 senior information managers in the finance, legal, consulting and professional fields on how their resources, services, and challenges have developed over the last twelve months. The survey continues the insights that have characterized previous surveys. The findings are, however, subtly changing.

The operational climate in which information managers and their organizations have been working has been turbulent, but the survey contains examples of resilience, adaptability, and of services whose value is clearly recognized. The results highlight several trends that we think will continue beyond 2011. Many managers have needed to respond to a tighter financial environment and, although they may not have experienced budget reductions, are negotiating hard and are likely to continue to press vendors for cost containment. One organization is examining the tax efficiency of its content purchasing with the possibility of considerable cost savings. Data purchasing is constantly monitored and the concept of gatekeepers is emerging in order to reduce user numbers for expensive products. New service development is being directed towards areas that are of evident value to the surveyed organizations. Compliance is a growing activity as organizations expand their business with new partners and customers. This work requires exemplary data sources, research precision and timely delivery. Strategic and competitor intelligence work is another important trend as is the involvement with internal information management, particularly in the legal sector.

Three trends surprise somewhat and our view is that these areas will increase in importance with time: the infancy of social media use; the low demand for mobile information service delivery; and the lack of attention to proving return on investment in information services. All three are probably reflections of the sectors featured in the survey. Social media tools are making the greatest impact in sectors that deliver products and services directly to a significant customer base and in the public sector i.e. where the need to communicate with and listen to customers is critical. In all the sectors included in the survey, the necessity for ‘Chinese walls’ between some company functions will impact on the use of social techniques though the use of LinkedIn for recruitment and for professional and company networking is already evident. Intranets are, of course, commonplace and wikis appear to lead the social media investment with blogs providing yet a further source of information. Information managers report very little demand for tailoring information products for delivery to mobile devices and email distribution is the norm. So predictions that email will dramatically reduce in favour of instant messaging may take much more time to come true.

Proving the return on investment for information services by demonstrating their direct impact on organizational targets is proving a necessity in sectors such as health and academia and is likely to be required for any service that is funded publicly in the future. There are many techniques for making impact and value assessments and though these are challenging to apply, their application in the private sector is not impossible. However, those business information managers surveyed indicated that whilst output statistics were routinely gathered, no rigorous tools for assessing value were in use. Demand trends were seen as an important indicator of value and feedback sought from specific customers. One exception indicated a process that ensured the following up of all pieces of work to provide both qualitative and quantitative performance data. We predict that across all information services the need for impact assessment and demonstrating real value will grow.

The Business Information Survey involves UK managers only. Outsell’s research covers a wider geography. The summary of its report Top 10 predictions for Information Managers in 2011, is available free of charge and confirms our view on value by suggesting that ‘striving to assess the real value of information services to the enterprise’ will be an action area this year (http://www.outsellinc.com/store/products/972-top-10-information-management-predictions-for-2011?refid=home). Outsell’s report also highlights the priority for optimizing content spend and benchmarking performance and confirms our view on social media by reporting that information managers will need to put effort into getting ahead of the social media game as users race ahead in the adoption of social media tools.

Whilst on the trail of insights into the information services scene, we listened with interest to Henri Stiller...
at Online Information 2010 as he reported his 2010 survey into the roles of information professionals in French companies. This survey followed previous research in 2001 and 1995; in all three the top 200 companies have been contacted and willing organizations with information professionals in post have been interviewed. Given the breadth of sectors, it is not surprising that of the 187 companies willing to participate, 35 per cent had no information centre and no information professionals identified as such. Manufacturing and energy production are associated with information professional investment whilst the retail, wholesale, corporate services and entertainment sectors are not. The most important functions were reported as information search and delivery and management and centralization of documentation and literature. As with the UK, the importance of information monitoring (of competitors and of core subject areas for the business) is recognized. However the involvement of the information unit and corporate approaches to monitoring are patchy. Competitor intelligence is handled separately and a discrete knowledge management unit existed in only half the companies surveyed. The future for information professionals appears to lie in mapping the landscape of sources and tools and, given the spread of information related tasks through organizations, to position themselves as guides, mediators, solution providers, facilitators and trainers. For strategic involvement in information and competitor monitoring, information professionals will have to demonstrate a real contribution to added value as their place is squeezed by knowledge experts who have acquired many of their information skills. There are many parallels with information professionals elsewhere as they aim to prove their value to their organizations.

We have included an article in this issue by Tim Buckley Owen, an erstwhile and talented editor of Business Information Review and now a writer skilled in analyzing trends in the information scene. The use of self-help in information provision (i.e. the Google factor) has been one of the drivers stimulating board directors to wonder why their organization is still funding an information service. We therefore asked Tim to review the role of free information from the perspective of a corporate business information unit. Whilst recognizing the threat that the availability of free information poses to information management and also to vendors, Tim argues for a place for free information in the portfolio of resources and demonstrates that making do with free resources is now an important strategy for coping with reduced budgets as evidenced in FreePint surveys. He also notes that the biggest challenge facing information managers is to convince internal stakeholders that a purchase would have measurable benefit.

That information professionals are prepared to trade functionality for cost to some extent is also reinforced in the Business Information Survey. Bad information is, of course, a risk. Nevertheless it would now seem critical to ‘meld vendor with donor portfolio management’ in a content strategy and, for vendors, the message is, ‘as you react to free information by developing software-based workflow solutions direct to end-users, don’t be tempted to sideline information managers and sell yours, that is a medium risk strategy – because, rest assured, if it is free and unique, the professionals will find it’.

An important mission for the business information professional is to stream the right information to the right places in their organization. The sub-texts in this mission are to ensure well-founded decision making and to prevent overload. Personal information management is an area where information professionals should be exemplars for their colleagues. Yet not all of us can claim sufficient efficiency to be role models. For this reason we asked Stephen Dale to provide advice on how Web 2.0 tools can provide survival mechanisms. Ensuring that you tune into what you want to read; bookmarking and social bookmarking to organize what you find interesting and to extend your knowledge cooperatively; creating a personal dashboard that brings together the sources you value; and selecting the right browsers will all help with managing the rapidly changing information environment. The tips will help you keep on top of your fields of interest whilst remaining well organized. There are other challenges, of course – endless meetings and emails prevail in many organizations, and these very real time pressures are the enemy of thinking time. The recently published article ‘Recovering from Information Overload’, (McKinsey Quarterly, 2011) provides an interesting complement to the focus on personal information efficiency by its reminder that our brains are most effective when focused on one task at a time, and that multitasking is unlikely to result in creativity and effectiveness at work (https://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Recovering_from_information_overload_2735).

Katherine Allen has taken the opportunity to comment on aspects of the Business Information Survey from the vendor perspective. Vendors too are grappling with the challenges of reduced budgets and the technological maelstrom. She notes that news providers have fared the worst in terms of reduced revenue, a probable consequence of the print/electronic mix that many are still producing and possibly influenced by the volumes of free news. Overall Katherine’s conclusion is ‘watch out for innovation’. Innovation has long been a critical success factor in vendor market share. Just now the potential for technology driven innovation is vast and could well transform the market and the work of information professionals in dealing with information supply.

As editors we pay careful attention to the downloading statistics that tell us the numbers of those downloading abstracts and full articles from the BIR website. The rise and fall of specific topics provides an informed stimulus to future article selection and commissioning. Since its publication in 2006, Luke Tredinnick’s article, ‘Web 2.0
and business: a pointer to the intranets of the future? has continued to attract significant interest.

As the impact of Web 2.0 has dramatically increased since 2006 we approached Luke for an interview based on his original predictions. In this update, Luke reminds us that Web 2.0 is simply a re-articulation and a realization of the original ideals of the web itself – characterized by technological innovation and also by a shifting understanding of the status of information, knowledge, and the role of the user in respect of information applications. In moving us from publishing to collaboration, we now see social relationships, not information, as at the heart of activity and are beginning to manage the multiplicity of information, communications and knowledge assets by associating them with our existing social networks. The change is further stimulated by the shift to mobile devices which follow us into work and social environments. The potential stimulus to creativity is tremendous as individuals and organizations use Web 2.0 for collaboration. Yet many corporate environments still consider that a culture of trust, participating and collaboration, needed in order for collaborative tools to be successfully exploited, is a step too far. Those espousing this direction are nevertheless seeing considerable success. Another big shift slowly taking place is the realization by organizations that there may sometimes be more benefits from opening up those data sources over which they have control for external use, rather than limiting use of that data and poorly exploiting it themselves.

Luke warns us that with information saturation, the value of knowing anything declines somewhat. This emphasizes the importance of understanding the processes by which particular forms of knowledge are created and validated. This, to your editors’ minds, signals a real and continuing opportunity for information specialists.

Sometimes activities that seem simple are far more complex. Nils Bojin and colleagues have researched a real Web 2.0 challenge. Whilst crowdsourcing is an increasingly accepted way of enabling collaborative content creation and distilling consensus, the team has explored how to make this work when the number of contributors is small. The principal risk is that dominant voices will influence and crowd out others and bias the consensus. Avoiding this risk requires an infrastructure design that prevents collusion amongst collaborators and this was the aim of a fascinating case study. Exploring how to improve the selection of creative works for advancement by an intensely creative community established by Psyncopation Inc. required an equally innovative solution. An approach where an individual’s real contribution to the community dictated the value of their vote in competition was tested and worked to an extent, though the routes to ensure that an individual’s merit is adjusted as their contribution changes over time require further work.

In this issue we return to cloud computing. In 2010 Roger James explored the transformation that operating in the cloud could bring to content management and records management as well as the attitudes of organizations to opening up their information. In this issue Charles Oppenheim, well known for his expertise on copyright, has turned his attention to the legal issues that need to be considered as organizations contract with cloud service suppliers. Data privacy may be at risk if suppliers do not recognize and adhere to national data protection legislation and laws covering data transfer. Ownership of data transferred onto the cloud is a further issue. The consequences are frightening. Clearly changes in legislation which recognize the need for internationally agreed approaches are now urgently required.

Allan Foster’s Initiatives completes this issue of BIR and balances the overall content between information professional and vendor news. Collectively we hope that the articles will stimulate and inform.