Looking Back, Looking Forward
by Susanne Bjørner

This special issue of the ASIS&T Bulletin is not the first to be written by members of the Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP). Fifteen years ago, a cover story on “Information Brokering” featured eight articles by AIIP members. This time around, we are glad to be called independent information professionals, and we are pleased to provide even more articles showing the diversity of our businesses, both in the clients we serve and in the services we provide.

The cover story for the February/March 1995 Bulletin (www.asis.org/Bulletin/Feb-95/index.html) was not the first to bring information brokering to ASIS&T members. Alice Sizer Warner, writing “Looking Back, Looking Ahead” in the 1995 issue, looked further back to February 1976. Then Bulletin editor Lois Lunin presented a 10-page article, “Information Brokers: Who, What, Why, How,” and added an editorial affirming that “Yes, information brokers can succeed.” In that 1976 publication, an information broker was defined as “an individual or organization who – on demand – seeks to answer questions using all sources available and who is in business for a profit.” Warner went on to say that early brokers disliked the “on demand” part of that definition, since “no one ‘demanded’ that we do anything – we had to beat the bushes for customers.”

Some things don’t change. Customers still don’t fall from trees, but we have become much better at marketing and the business side of business. Another thing that has changed is that the information broker term has receded in usage, and independent information professional has risen.

Adding Value: Independent Information Professionals

(The former gets barely half the hits versus the latter in a Google search.) Information broker lost favor at least partly because of its connotation of selling information, although brokers endlessly stressed that they were selling convenient access to information, not information itself, and that information professionals adhered strictly to ethical requirements of copyright and licensing.

The Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP) can certainly take some credit for the increased use of the IIP term. It has now been almost 25 years since AIIP founder Marilyn Levine invited participants to what she called the first international meeting of information brokers. Twenty-six individuals converged in Milwaukee in 1987, agreed that they had enough in common to meet again, formed an organization and chose independent information professional as a more encompassing term to describe themselves and their businesses. Even those at that first meeting offered far more services than online or manual research alone: document delivery, indexing, library set-up and support services, legal filing, consulting and technology training. We have only to look at the papers in this issue to see how businesses have diversified even more and kept up with changing market needs, challenges and opportunities brought on by the Internet, social networking and mobile access.

The Lives of Independent Information Professionals

What do we know about independent information professionals over the last 35 years and how information entrepreneurship has fit into their careers? Not all IIPs are or have been members of AIIP, but I will use that gathering point as the basis for my observations. I have been a member of AIIP since its beginning; I worked in libraries for nearly 20 years before then.
**Experience and education.** Most individuals who start an information business do so with some years of prior working experience in other organizations. Many have worked in library or information-related enterprises; about an equal number have been employed in organizations whose primary missions were not information-related, though they often worked in information-intensive positions in those organizations. They tend to have between five and 20 years of prior employee experience. A high percentage have master’s degrees; only about half of these are master’s degrees in library/information science.

**Full-time vs. part-time.** A recent AIIP member survey reported that 80% of IIPs devote full time to their information businesses – or have done so in the past. But over half said that they work only part-time in their businesses – or have done so in the past. In other words, many people work part-time and full-time at various points in their independent careers. It’s not uncommon for new information entrepreneurs to start their businesses while they are employed part-time elsewhere. It’s not unheard of to be employed full-time, though it’s tough to start or run a business if you are working full-time for someone else.

Part-time work has been a solution for many business owners when they have family responsibilities or other personal situations that put demands on their time and energy. More than one business has survived due to close networking and subcontracting to other IIPs when the principal chose to care for ill parents.

**Age.** The AIIP membership is growing somewhat older. The increased number of members over 60 is due to two factors. First, members who joined when in their 40s or 50s are remaining members even as they add birthdays. (Many continue in the full member category, which supports current business owners, but AIIP has also added retired and emeritus member categories). Second, some new members are joining at an older age. This trend reflects current employment realities of business closings, layoffs, buyouts, employee burnout and gradual retirement – all phenomena that can encourage individuals to test the idea of professional independence.

**Moving On**

Any look back reveals the absence of previous members, whether through death, full retirement or leaving the entrepreneurial effort to return to employment status. A significant number of members do eventually accept employment – often from a client – after several years as independents (and later some come back again to independent status). Charter members Roberta Brody, Rose Falanga, Sue Feldman and Barbara Rehkoph have each gone on to share talents honed with their entrepreneurial experience at City University of New York, the Exploratorium, IDC and Washington University.

Still, many IIPs have remained independent for decades, inventing and reinventing their businesses through changing times. Law Library Management, for example, continues providing “the services of a full time law library staff on a part-time basis,” as principal Ray Jassin explained at the first AIIP meeting, though the techniques used are different from those in 1987.

Only a few IIPs have been forward-thinking enough at the start to develop their businesses so that there was something to sell when they left. The usual model in earlier times was that when the principal moved on, the business closed. That is no longer the case. Several businesses now have acquired tangible and intangible assets in the form of patents, proprietary technology, business techniques, products and clients: their owners have succeeded in finding buyers for all or part of their firm when they retire or move on.

It’s not easy starting and growing a business, but it can be rewarding professionally, financially and personally. Information professionals now planning to work independently should look forward to hard work and constant change, but they can also look toward hundreds of models of success.