PART I
The Independent Information Professional as Government Contractor
by Phyllis Smith

Many government agencies are heavy users of information. Some publish information for distribution, and they value information from reliable sources, including other government agencies, private industry and academia. Many departments are supported by information centers – special libraries – that focus on highly specific areas of interest. Despite having information expertise in-house, an independent information professional (IIP) can also add value.

It is not necessarily easy for an IIP to get individual projects from a government client. There can be processes to follow that make it difficult for a department to hire an IIP unless they are contracted for services over time. The IIP remains independent and may have other clients, but is also committed to the department for the duration of the contract. The IIP who wins such a contract can find it to be a rewarding experience.

One of my longest-standing and probably favorite clients is a Canadian federal government department. The department frequently acts as an advisor to the different levels of government in Canada and abroad and also to private industry. Staff members have a broad range of education, experience and expertise. Their information needs are equally wide-ranging.

I have been on contract to the department’s information center for several years. On a daily basis, the information center team responds quickly to client requests for access to specialized resources, and they gather obscure data to support department obligations. Their priorities change quickly with those of the department. To say the information center is busy is an understatement. They also train new hires, develop proprietary information resources and monitor a rapidly changing environment on behalf of their clients.

Through the information center, I get to work for many people serving a variety of roles in the department, knowing that their needs somehow revolve around information. I’m frequently asked to provide research services, but the subject matter varies greatly depending on who is doing the asking. However, research is only part of what I can do.

I have also conducted training and written user guides to help department staff make better use of key research tools developed by the information center. I’ve ventured into marketing by conducting and analyzing client surveys, looking for ways to improve services. Sometimes I create presentation and training materials for others to deliver. I have consulted on decisions to improve or change their services. I frequently support the information center team, allowing them to focus their energies on the services that can only be handled in-house.

Occasionally I am offered assignments that are labor-intensive and time-consuming. One such large project took several months to complete and offers a good example of how an IIP can provide value to a government department.

The department often partners with municipal, provincial and federal government agencies involved in the preparations for international events being hosted in Canada. To support their partners during one such international event, they decided to develop a publication that would provide background information and highlight issues that could pose problems at the event in question.

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The project involved the collection, analysis and presentation of data to be drawn from a variety of reliable sources. It was clear that the information center needed and wanted to be involved, but they wanted to be certain that they could provide a quality product while maintaining the high level of service their clients expected and enjoyed. And that is where I stepped in.

While my colleagues continued to serve the daily needs of the department, I committed myself to this one project. I handled all of the details of identifying reliable resources, analyzing and selecting the key data based on expressed needs and organizing it all so that it could be translated and published with a minimum of fuss. The information center staff worked with me to coordinate the final steps of the project, but they experienced little of the stress that comes with juggling such a complex project with their day-to-day work.

The final product was a professional-looking publication that met all of the requirements, ready for distribution. The department impressed their partners with concise, targeted information, and the information center impressed their department clients by producing a quality publication on time with apparent ease. So impressed were they that the information center was asked to produce similar publications for a number of years.

Could the publication have been completed without an IIP involved? Certainly, but it would have been at a cost. Regular information center services would have been affected if one or more team members were responsible for developing the publication. Inevitably, more urgent priorities would have interfered with the staff meeting the publication deadlines. In this case, an IIP easily met the deadlines with minimal supervision and minimal impact on the information center team.

The value I bring to my government client in all of the work I do for them is simple: they get more done in the same amount of time because they attend to high priority requests while I meet lower priority deadlines. And I save them money since I require few of their limited resources in order to get the job done.

An IIP whose client is a government department, like all IIPs, is skilled in the identification and retrieval of accurate, timely and targeted information and needs to be particularly skilled in the subject areas of interest to that government department. My government department client trusts my knowledge and ability to help them achieve their goals.

IIPs have the flexibility to fit neatly into the government department’s style of work. They add value by filling in the gaps. Those may be gaps in knowledge or expertise, or gaps may exist because of increased demands without corresponding increases in personnel. An IIP can be a trusted partner who understands and is committed to the goals of the government department client.