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Info Pros as a Service

One of the more interesting trends of the last year was the rapid growth of Everything as a Service (sometimes abbreviated as XaaS). This follows the rise of Software as a Service (SaaS), Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS), Platform as a Service (PaaS), and many others. While most instances of XaaS are in the IT context, the impact that XaaS will have on the expectations of information center users could be significant. In fact, libraries and information centers may need to consider an approach similar to the XaaS model.

And I need to pause here to note that some of us who are chronologically gifted are feeling a bit of déjà vu regarding XaaS. We remember the days when we finally gave up our CD-ROM copies of Compact Disclosure, PsycLit, or Compendex for the online versions. While we initially had sticker shock at the thought of having to pay for each transaction (yes, those were the early days of online pricing), we soon grew to appreciate the constantly updated information and the ability to identify and charge out for the direct expense of each search. Our profession has been familiar with the experience of moving from annual subscriptions to "Information as a Service" for a very long time.

The philosophy behind as-a-service solutions—both back in the 1980s and today—is that both providers and customers benefit when the customer avoids investing in large, upfront expenses to acquire the software, hardware, network, and personnel to create a solution to a business problem. With XaaS, customers pay a monthly subscription to have access to a cloud-based version of the solution, with the assurance that features and capacity will grow as needed. The provider benefits by having a renewing revenue stream, ongoing insights into how their customers are using their service, and the ability to improve, modify, and scale the service as customers' needs change. In an uncertain economic environment, customers prefer to pay monthly and cancel at any time rather than make large annual payments, and providers benefit from more predictable revenue.

Looking at this from the perspective of an information professional, we can benefit from the agility and flexibility that has become commonplace with XaaS. Our users don't expect us to maintain legacy services or products that no longer support the current focus of our organization and various client groups. Instead, they are coming to us asking for support in identifying open access (OA) datasets for a data mining initiative or needing an API to incorporate the library's resources into their internal workflow. We info pros need to focus the library or information center on facilitating the interconnection of people, tools, and information—both internal and external, licensed and open source.

If we are in the business of providing "Insight as a Service," offering access to valuable information resources is no longer enough. Now, it is our job to help our users make the connection between these resources and their current needs. That means engaging in ongoing outreach to learn about new projects, teams, and initiatives and participating at a consultative level to ensure that the available information resources are embedded in their research process.

Insight as a Service means that we are committed to ensuring that the resources we manage are, well, of service. Conducting regular scans of the information landscape and staying aware of new information alternatives are two valuable and strategic features of an information center. The conversation about why we are paying for information when "it's all available for free on the web" will always be with us, but we can proactively address it by highlighting our familiarity with information sources and alternative tools, as well as by adjusting our suite of resources as the needs and priorities of our users change.

Just as XaaS and the OA movement have led to the explosion of self-service tools, we can help teach our user groups how to get more insight from the resources we provide. One outgrowth of the open source philosophy of software development is the facilitation in learning how to use those resources. The Carpentries, a nonprofit organization that sponsors workshops to teach software engineering and data science skills to researchers, recently formed the Library Carpentry community (librarycarpentry.org). Librarians and info pros can not only build their software and data skills, but also learn from Library Carpentry-trained instructors how to organize and teach the workshops themselves. This peer-training network enables librarians to teach their clients data skills that they can apply in their own specialized setting, thus further contributing to the library's Insight as a Service.

We information professionals and library managers have always had to be agile and responsive to our users; today's XaaS world requires that we shift even further to an even more flexible approach to our users' information needs.

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