

The CILIP Conference 2023: a report - by Marlène Kikteff Rak, Subject Support Librarian, UWE Bristol.

[Adapted from a blog post I shared on CILIP's South West Member Network blog, August 2023].

CILIP is the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals. CILIP's annual conference took place at the Hilton Birmingham Metropole on 12th-13th July this year, attracting established, new and emerging leaders from across the library, information and knowledge management sectors. Speakers covered a range of topics currently affecting library and information services nationwide and beyond. Recurring themes were: Artificial Intelligence (AI), leadership, engagement and wellbeing.

Opening the Conference, John Trevor-Allen, CILIP's President, reminded us of how much our association has achieved over the past 125 years, uniting practitioners across sectors, as well as internationally. This conference is an opportunity for us all, he told us, to make and renew contacts, learn from each other, look to the future together and inform the services that we offer to society at large. Bringing and sharing ideas and initiatives that we can then cascade on to colleagues has the potential to touch millions of lives. Indeed, sparking inspiration in others to help moving our profession forward is what information professionals do. "Wherever the next 125 years take us, it starts right here [...], it starts right now, and it starts with you", enthused Trevor-Allen¹.

Rebecka Isaksson (AI Lab Sweden AB), who confessed to finding knowledge management rather boring at first (before finally embracing it), delivered the first keynote on driving value through AI-powered Knowledge Management. Her excitement for generative AI was palpable; her eagerness and energy set the tone for the rest of the day. Despite her background in business and management, Isaksson admitted that she had found, amongst this group of friendly information professionals, her new tribe².

Throughout the two-day event, speakers shared their ideas, dilemmas and solutions on key issues currently affecting our profession. Their vision for what is yet to come was offered with a touch eagerness and joy; sometimes, apprehension too; never indifference.

Generative AI is a challenge for many, but it has the potential to create more opportunities than cause risks, as long as ethical considerations (such as data privacy, copyright and biases) are rightfully addressed first. There is a lot of hype going on around artificial intelligence and reactions to it can be rather emotional. It is crucial to remember that we live in a very polarised world, with the truth lying somewhere in between. We ought to accept that AI and human intelligence, aren't in competition with one another; rather, using both concurrently may well foster improvements. "*ChatGPT is NOT cheating, it's working*

¹ John Trevor-Allen (2023) '*Opening Ceremony*', CILIP Conference 2023, Birmingham.

² Rebecka Isaksson (2023) '*Driving business value through AI-powered Knowledge Management*', CILIP Conference 2023, Birmingham.

*smart*³ reassured us Rebecka Isaksson. Despite these technological advancements, however, we do need to remember that many are at a great risk of being left behind. We still need to build a digitally ready workforce; this applies to the UK's overall workforce, not just information specialists. Our future will look very different from what we are currently familiar with, with both opportunities and implications we can neither understand nor be aware of just yet.

On the theme of leadership, it is worth highlighting that being a leader doesn't equate to being in a managerial position. Leadership is about having a vision that will foster courage and motivate others to innovate. Anyone, regardless of their job title or length of service, can inspire others. Nevertheless, the lack of diversity within our field is a challenge. Opportunities for the younger generation are scarce, regardless of how much skills, passion and energy new cohorts bring in. The risk-averse nature of librarians also needs addressing, as our work culture differs greatly from the more reactive environments that have been long adopted by other industries, such as IT. Harnessing the power of apprenticeship further could go a long way as there is great value in mentoring in the workplace and creating opportunities for newer professionals. Incidentally, CILIP was instrumental in the development of the English Level 3 Library, Information and Archives Services Assistant Apprenticeship, and we know that this is helping to open the profession to a wider population⁴.

The thought-provoking keynote from Masud Khokhar (University of Leeds) on the second day of the conference encouraged us to reflect on, and foster, new alternatives. "*Change is external, transition is internal*"⁵ emphasised Khokhar. His talk on redesigning leadership for continuous innovation was a spectacular dive into the human mind and showed us how the latter does shape the way we select, and process, information. Khokhar advocated for a cultural and functional shift to take place, with culture and function brought at the same level, so that the changes that we aspire to can become a reality. Ultimately, leadership is a human story, not a technology-driven phenomenon. Being authentic, genuine and helpful certainly is something that speakers at the Hilton Birmingham Metropole valued unequivocally. So is being consistent and building rapport with people: facts that were truly at the heart of this conference.

Later that day, Sathnam Sanghera, splendidly led by CILIP's former president Kate Robinson's considerate chairing, reminded us that literacy helps escape the poverty trap. Now a celebrated British journalist and best-selling author, Sanghera, the son of an illiterate

³ Rebecka Issakson (2023) '*Driving business value through AI-powered Knowledge Management*', CILIP Conference 2023, Birmingham.

⁴ <https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/LISApprenticeships>

⁵ Masud Khokhar (2023) '*Re-designing leadership for continuous innovation*', CILIP Conference 2023, Birmingham.

dad and a mum who doesn't speak English, did not own a single book until the age of 10. Lamenting the lack of funding for public libraries, and the general apathy towards some of the truly shocking statistics on the percentage of children in the UK not owning a single book due to poverty⁶, Sanghera joked that "maybe we need a footballer in the room"⁷. And perhaps, this very last point is the one that unites us all together: the irrefutable truth that, as put across by Nick Poole (CILIP's CEO) in his welcome note on the morning of that very same day, "We love libraries not just for what they are, but what they represent: an opportunity for everyone"⁸.

⁶ 18% (see the 2019 survey conducted by the National Literacy Trust on over 56,000 children, aged 9-18, across the UK - <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/gift-reading-childrens-book-ownership-2019/>)

⁷ See <https://theweek.com/107268/marcus-rashford-letter-mps-free-school-meals>

⁸ Nick Poole (2023) 'Welcome Address', CILIP Conference 2023, Birmingham.