

And finally...!

Martin White

My first ever airplane flight was to New York in January 1977, something I can date with precision as I still have my first passport, issued just in time for me to leave. Those were the days when you had to record in your passport the amount of foreign currency you were taking on each trip. Another feature of the passport was that you had to record your occupation, and in my case it said 'Information Scientist'. Thirty-four years and round about 200 return trips to the USA I still regard myself as an information scientist, and that is not just because of great memories of the Institute of Information Scientists. If you look at my Twitter stream you will see that my profile reads "Information scientist with a passion for intranets", and that probably sums me up fairly well.

When clients ask me about my background I tell them that by profession I am an information scientist. They then inevitably ask me what an information scientist is. Well, my wife has struggled with that for more than thirty-four years! My reply is that I have a professional commitment to make sure that information resources are used to the benefit of both business and society. It may not be a pretty definition, but it works. One of the virtues of information science is that the scope is so vast that almost everything seems to have a place. It is worth looking at the Wikipedia definition of information science to see an exceptionally good historical perspective of information science.

When visitors walk into the room that contains our main bookcases they usually fail to see what the connection is between the various titles. In particular I have a substantial collection of books on and by Richard Feynman, the Nobel Laureate physicist. What fascinates me about Feynman was that he was the most unassuming of men, and always positioned himself as someone who developed a tool kit (in quantum electrodynamics) that he hoped others would use to solve problems. As a consultant I see my task is to provide clients with a toolbox of techniques they can use. If I have done my job well they will never need me again! Another connection with Feynman is that he developed a diagrammatic way to calculate probabilities of reactions between elementary particles. My initial training was as a chemist, a science rich in diagrams, and I find time and again that drawing a diagram is a wonderful way of focusing people in on a problem, even though I find most of my diagrams are triangles.

Another group of books is about the Enigma code-breaking efforts of Bletchley Park during WW2 but the reason for that interest can wait for another column.

The challenges we face in both business and society about the use and misuse of information grow each day. As a professional information scientist what should my reaction have been to Wikileaks? A breach of trust or a necessary

freedom of information? I'm still not sure, and that in itself worries me. The ethics of information are incredibly challenging.

So as you can see the only mention of intranets comes at the end of this column. Dion Lindsay is taking on that responsibility. I'm hoping that in these codas to *eLucidate* you, and the Editor, will

allow me to ramble on about issues of information science and information management, and hopefully look beyond the digital workplace into wider issues that need attention from the information profession.