Special libraries are indeed special and yet many people aren’t familiar with what these two words mean when used together. Therefore, it might be asked, “what is a special library?” By definition, special libraries have a specific focus which is reflected by the type of services and resources offered. Their unique role can be found in a wide range of settings: a financial institution such as a bank, in a non-profit or professional organization, in a government agency, or in academia to support the study of law, medicine or business. Regardless of the environment, the successful special library must provide services that directly support the parent organization’s mission.

Current estimates are that the global volume of information doubles every two years. This makes a strong case for having more special libraries and information professionals who can access, filter and manage information. Yet in recent years, there has been a downward trend in the sheer number of special libraries.

Organizations without a formalized information service are at a disadvantage in today’s competitive economy. According to the 2012 McKinsey report on The Social Economy, employees spend 8.8 hours per week searching for and gathering information at work. That is time spent looking for answers but not contributing any value. This is time that could be reduced if a special library or information professional is on staff. Special librarians have value to the parent organization when they demonstrate a return on investment.

This volume presents both practical and novel ways that a successful special library can add value to an organization’s bottom line. Through networking and consortia, a library can expand its services and resources beyond its own walls. By using standards of practice and benchmarking, a library can evaluate its accomplishments and identify areas for improvement. Developments in technology such as
e-resources, social media and the cloud can enhance the visibility and delivery of services. Regardless of how a special library is structured, who the stakeholders are, and how it serves its community, being relevant and contributing to the organization in a meaningful way is the path for future success.

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