

The more things change, the more they stay the same

— Elizabeth Bunker reports

In the old days, when printing was first invented, books were expensive and heavy, and needed careful looking after lest they were stolen, or eaten by rats, or spoiled by water or fire, or simply mislaid. Today things are very different in many ways, but books (and now a vast range of other materials) are still expensive, heavy, and need careful looking after lest they are stolen, mislaid or spoiled. What has changed is the productivity required of the librarian, who is now expected to be able to catalogue books, move books around, shelve books, and look after books with a previously unheard of speed and efficiency, while at the same time working under the stress of being without privacy in an open-plan area.

Of course, this is all achieved by the use of computers, which make so many previously boring jobs effortless. Unfortunately, this is not so. The computer has not made books any less heavy and computer programs can be user 'unfriendly'. The computer is incapable of keeping an eye on valuable books, and unable to find mis-shelved books. Their use does mean, however, that librarians now have the additional task of making sure that information is fed, accurately and efficiently, into the system.

What can be done to make this situation better? Well, there is ergonomics — the science of designing work practices, places and equipment so that people can use them effectively.

I have recently had the opportunity to work with the library staff of some large academic institutions, to address some of these problems. Take, for example, the work of preparing newly purchased books for the shelves. Heavy books being held in awkward positions will at the very least cause back ache, while trying to operate a computer at the same time will add eye strain and neck problems. Ergonomists can help. The redesign of a work-

table or desk can enable a librarian to do all the things that have to be done in a librarian's day without heaving books about at arm's length, without peering at computer screens at odd angles, without twisting sideways, in short, comfortably and efficiently.

You will by now be saying 'What is it that enables an ergonomist to do all these wonderful things?' 'What kind of expert is an ergonomist?' Well, an ergonomist is certainly knowledgeable about a great many things to do with posture, lighting, muscle strain . . . and has expertise in engineering, physics, systems design, psychology, perception and stress management. In addition an ergonomist has the input of the people who actually do a job. They know most about it, and thus the ergonomist likes to tackle a job, such as the design of a desk for a library cataloguer, in consultation with the library staff who will use that desk. A mock-up will be made of the desk and the ergonomist will then watch, film, measure people using it, all the time refining the desk until it is right.

As part of my work with the National Safety Council, I have recently been able to follow this process through to the state where a desk, of registered design, is now commercially available. But of course, the desk is only part of the process, and an ergonomist would not dream of looking at just one part of the process in isolation: books have to arrive at the desk, be worked on, and then go elsewhere. Ergonomists can help with sorting out these processes, too. The layout of lending services areas has recently been addressed so that tasks performed can be done more efficiently and with less pressure on staff.

Perhaps before you spend millions of dollars on a new library building, or even thousands of dollars on extensions, or re-modelling, why not call in an ergonomist, not to design the building, but to help you decide what to tell the architect that you want to be able to do in the building, so as to make the whole working environment 'user friendly'. For more information please don't hesitate to contact me c/- National Safety Council of Australia (Qld Division), PO Box 133, Fortitude Valley, (07) 252 8977.

Elizabeth Bunker

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in Sydney. And the Chairman, Morris West lent his benign but active support to the whole enterprise. He is a distinguished and generous Australian author whose passion for ideas and for our country has been mobilised to great national use in this Library. As a citizen, I pay tribute to him and thank him.

To the Minister [Minister for Arts and Territories, Mr Gary Punch] I say: You have in your portfolio — and thereby in your temporary trust — a precious jewel of Australia: the National Library. These are hard times for libraries with the declining dollar and rapidly changing technology. Yet if a great disaster befell humanity and Parliament House was finally covered over entirely by the earth, and the High Court sank by its own weight into the lake, a future civilisation might stumble over this great Library. If they found just a few of the books in this collection they would say that here was a people who made many mistakes but occasionally turned from crass worldly pursuits, of football and circuses, to the world of the spirit.

Minister, it is a great privilege for an elected representative of the people of Australia to have in his charge this precious institution. It is an institution worth defending and supporting. And if you are in doubt, look about you in this Exhibition. As it was said of Christopher Wren, and is recorded on his tomb: 'Si monumentum requiris, circumspice' (If you really want our monument — look around).

**Justice Kirby is President of the Court of Appeal, Supreme Court, Sydney and Chancellor of Macquarie University. Formerly he was a member of the Library Council of New South Wales. The views stated are personal.*



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