

A stressful workplace in 1998



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With another year almost over, the workplace remains challenging for most ALIA members. 1998 has seen a further twelve months of continuing change. And there are few signs of calmer waters ahead.

Real wage growth has been generally solid this year. Wages have increased nationally by more than four per cent, against an inflation rate of less than two per cent. But, as foreshadowed in a *Work watch* review this time last year, we have seen marked differences in pay outcomes in particular industry sectors. Heavy industry and construction workers, for example, have gained more than five per cent, while those in the recreation and personal services sector were restricted to only three per cent. Sectors in which librarians are well represented, such as public administration and community services, averaged around four per cent. ALIA's latest figures suggest that, overall, wage increases for librarians remain below the national average.

Diversity within industry sectors continues to be a feature of wage-fixing 90s style. In public administration, for example, a national average of four per cent cloaks individual-enterprise outcomes as high as thirteen per cent and as low as 0.3 percent. This trend is certain to continue. It is one of the clearest indicators of change to Australia's traditional approach to industrial relations. Another is the way in which pay rises this year have increasingly been tied directly to performance. A surprising number of enterprise agreements are now including Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as a part of formal pay processes. In several, achievement of these standards is the sole avenue for any pay increase. Some agreements include several different pay outcomes, for different levels of performance, based upon agreed KPIs. Salary packaging is also becoming much more popular, with even public sector agreements now providing opportunities for staff to tailor remuneration, to suit their own particular circumstances.

1998 has been the first full year under the federal government's new workplace relations legislation. Its focus on non-union agreements and individual arrangements has already had a marked effect on national industrial relations processes. Almost 600 non-union agreements have been approved by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. One, incidentally, is the *ALIA (National Office Staff) Enterprise Agreement*, certified by the Commission in October. By September, more than 30 000 individual Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs), involving around 800 employers, had been approved by the Employment Advocate, the new statutory office created by the Government to oversee the move to individual agreements. To date, only a small minority of ALIA mem-

bers have been directly affected by AWA provisions. For the labour market as a whole, their introduction is significant, but the vast majority of employees who are covered by formal agreements continue to be subject to collective arrangements.

Looking beyond direct negotiation of wages and conditions, the spectre of downsizing continued to dog organisational policy in 1998, especially in the public sector. As a result, the jobs of many ALIA members have been under pressure this year. At times, the urge to reduce labour costs has seen whole library services under threat. And, occasionally, employers have handled these developments very poorly. In extreme cases, staff have been terminated with little notice and asked to vacate the worksite almost immediately. This is foolish management practice, not just in terms of its unfairness to those departing but also because it can only have very negative effects on those who remain.

It is important to emphasise that these trends say more about overall managerial style than about the long-term future of the profession of librarianship itself. They are affecting all workers. But this is of little consolation to members who are being adversely affected at the moment. It is certainly no surprise that ALIA's recent national survey of employment issues revealed almost sixty per cent of respondents had experienced a sharp increase in stress at work in 1997/8. These findings are consistent with major whole-of-industry research [see, for example, the ACTU report *Stress at work: not what we bargained for*]

A body of quality research on job-shedding continues to build. It shows quite clearly that downsizing is not a 'silver bullet' for effective change. In fact, further Australian analysis [see, for example, *Downsizing organisations: the dilemmas of change*, Professor Craig R Littler, Human Resource Management Bulletin, 3/98, CCH Australia] shows incontrovertibly that knee-jerk downsizing is often preventing the very productivity improvements which are sought from job redesign and a leaner workforce. While staff reductions can reasonably be one possible *outcome* of restructuring, they should never be its starting point.

Official employment projections continue to show a generally positive longer-run future for librarians in Australia. Developments on pay equity offer potential for better rewards too. Before ALIA members can be genuinely confident about their working prospects, however, Australian organisations — and governments — will need to adopt a more careful and thoughtful approach to change and restructuring. Perhaps the research now emerging can influence them to do so in 1999. But don't bet on it. ■

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