

Tomorrow's world today — role of the cybrary technician

The following is an edited version of a speech presented at the Queensland Library Technicians annual dinner by Queensland University librarian, Janine Schmidt. In light of many previous words on teams, and the identity crisis, Janine's topic highlights our future direction as para-professionals. I thank Janine for giving her consent to the publication of her lecture. Yvonne Brock, president of the Queensland Library Technicians section

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There have been many attempts to differentiate between the work of librarians and library technicians. The ALIA-produced *Work-level guidelines for librarians and library technicians* defines the roles and tasks of librarians and library technicians in various settings and at different position levels and have assisted in determining the relative value of work carried out. The ALIA statement on the role of librarians and library technicians states:

The role of the librarian focusses on the design, management, direction, policy formulation and application of services which meet the information need of clients. This can involve planning and evaluating library and information services; the provision of access to information resources and collections, including the design, development and delivery of highly-specialised research services for discrete client groups; the organisation and management of these resources; as well as the establishment, management and supervision of systems and their associated technologies.

The role of the library technician focusses on the operational and technical aspects of library and information services. This can involve the operation and maintenance of systems which support acquisitions, organisation and management of library and information services, resources and client access to information. Library technicians may have responsibility for the supervision of other staff. At senior levels, they may manage a small library or information service or head a section in a large library or information service.

In the world of work, the range of employment in various professions is constantly changing. Andrew Abbott, in his article 'Professionalism and the future of librarianship' which appeared in *Library Trends* (vol 46, n° 3, p430) stated:

There is thus no sense in differentiating professions and semi-professions: they are all simply expert occupations finding work to do and doing it when they can.

While the differences within professions are blurring, the nature of work in any job or profession is also changing. The reasons for these changes are many: the environment changes, society changes, new needs emerge, technology develops, and the way work is organised alters. Expertise develops as educational and knowledge levels increase. The development of competencies within the profession of librarianship has recognised the changing level of expertise within librarianship.

Some of the most significant changes in our profession relate to the use of technology. The main technology used ten years ago by a library technician was the photocopier.

Understanding the running of terminals was also important. Entering data onto a mini- or main-frame computer via a terminal was also a key activity. The other aspect of technology dealt with by library technicians was the wide range of audiovisual media — videos, tapes and films. Today's information technology relates to file servers, PCs, the internet and the web, e-mail, multimedia, e-publishing and a shrinking world where we and our users communicate with colleagues and perfect strangers instantaneously over significant distances.

But the changes in technology are not the only changes about which we should be concerned. Our clients are more sophisticated. Libraries have competitors in the marketplace. Funds available are contracting. The nature of the organisations in which libraries exist is changing dramatically. It is difficult for small libraries to operate efficiently.

At the University of Queensland Library we have coined the phrase 'University of Queensland Cybrary' to describe amalgamating the physical place and cyberspace in the delivery of library and information services to support education, learning and research activity. This development is sometimes referred to in the literature as the hybrid library. I prefer 'cybrary'. The cybrary provides shortcuts to scholarship with access to information at any time, any pace, and any place. The roles of the librarian and the library technician have changed dramatically. They are no longer guardians of collections. They provide the interface between the information and those who need it. They make sense of the plethora of 'disinformation' made available in an information society. Indexing, databases construction, and resource selection are all significant tasks to be carried out. On the other hand, client assistance to ensure the retrieval and assessment of relevant information is also a vital activity.

Library professionals must also market the services of the library — and I do not just mean advertise. We must ensure that our services are located conveniently, designed efficiently, are at the right price and meet customer needs. We must also ensure our clients are aware of the services and resources available, and are able to use them efficiently. We must also behave profession-

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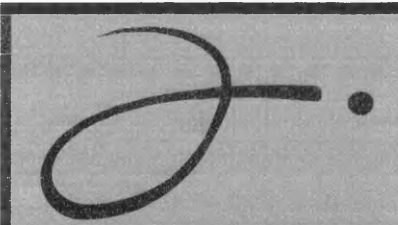
ally. We must be nimble and flexible, changing ourselves, what we do, and how we do it in response to these changes. I sometimes describe myself as the university cybrarian, although I am not sure that many of our staff find the term a comfortable one. I recently found web goddess being used, but I am not sure that that term will assist in my acceptance within the university as a sensible manager of academic services. And what about cybrary technician?

The brave new world can be a very confusing one. It is more important than ever to guide and assist our users. The cataloguers sitting quietly analysing the contents of materials is now a myth. Analysing resources is still critical, but multi-faceted and requiring wider knowledge. Integrating web resources and locally-held materials is the key to the effective harnessing of new resources. Getting reference staff out from behind their desks is presenting (in many ways) a bigger challenge than changing the

role of the cataloguers. Knowledge managers need to be out amongst the people they are serving. The role of education and training is vital in ensuring that make the transition from book and journal workers to knowledge workers.

In order for people to be happy in their work, three things are needed. They must be fit for it; they must not do too much of it; and they must have a sense of success in it. For individuals to feel successful, there must be a personal satisfaction of a job well done, recognition by others, not to mention some kind of financial reward. We shall also feel successful when our libraries are successful — when they have excellent facilities, are financially well-resourced, receive letters of congratulations and few complaints, are benchmarked satisfactorily against others and lead to successful outcomes for our organisations and clients — whether that be related to teaching and learning, people's everyday lives, or financial improvement. ■

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