

Identity crisis: senior library technicians trying on librarian's shoes

Mary Harlow, Queensland library technician

Library staff appreciate the flexible skills of the library technician. Library technicians play an important role in maintaining a successful team environment. But what happens when the librarian in a team moves, goes on maternity leave, goes overseas, or relieves in higher duties? Library managers can decide to outsource the short-term position or they can rely on the expertise of the rest of the team.

What is a librarian? A librarian is a professional who has the knowledge and expertise required to perform certain tasks. I find it amazing that in some libraries librarians are doing virtually the same work as library technicians. Fine lines have been drawn between the librarian's duties and the supportive role of the library technician. What happens in situations where the librarian and the library technician do many of the same duties? In some state government departments when the librarian goes on leave for a short time, management employs a librarian from an agency. This impacts on

the rest of the staff because the contractor has, for example, to be trained in the use of library databases and become familiar with internal policies and procedures.

The opportunity for library technicians to relieve in senior library technician roles is rare. What about library technicians relieving in librarians positions on a short-term basis? The benefits could outweigh any old-fashioned views about the dividing line. If a library technician has the skills necessary to perform a librarian's role for a short stint, savings could be made in not having to train contract staff. There are obvious limitations to the level of duties performed, but there are technicians out there who are well-educated and experienced enough to perform them. The team would function as a multi-skilled group with position flexibility and the ever-present potential to fill someone else's shoes. Management should seek to identify opportunities for staff to be challenged and extend their skills. Allowing staff to relieve other team

members is a perfect means of achieving this goal.

One Queensland library has provided a supportive environment for library technicians in giving short-term relieving stints in librarian positions. So far, these developmental opportunities have been successful, and it has given many library managers the opportunity to be more creative in filling positions.

Any human-resource management considerations relating to such arrangements would be minimal in contrast to those involved in employing contract staff. Not all technicians could do such relieving work — we are a diverse lot with many different backgrounds and experiences. The technician who adopts new roles in the future would possess the ability, the skills, and suitability for the role in the team. Each team should be assessed individually, and managers should be open-minded about the way of the future. Embrace your future, technicians, for the sky is the limit! ■

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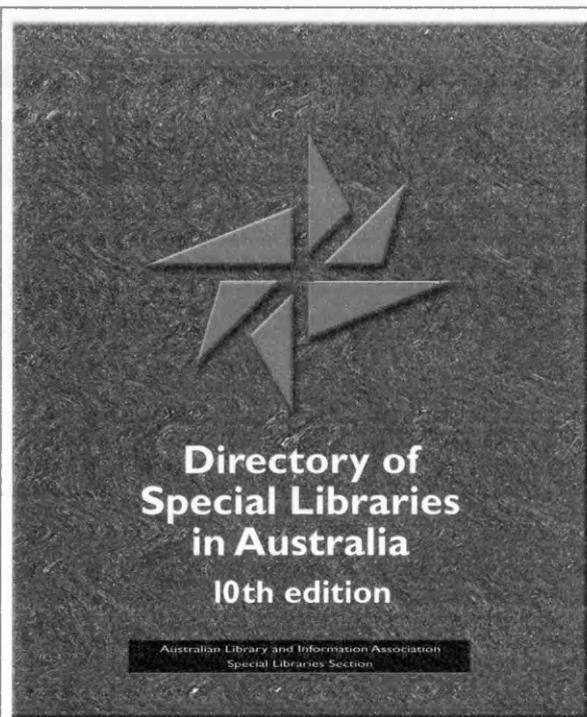
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