

Emerging information work: no panacea



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Australia's frenetic adoption of internet technology is having major effects on the jobs of many of its citizens. Few occupations have not been changed already and much more is to come. Nowhere is this more evident than in the library and information sector.

For many librarians, the 'net has taken on the spectre of both threat and opportunity. Threat because their traditional role is under pressure from an increasingly popular view (often held by those with little understanding of what a librarian actually does) that 'libraries are an anachronism now'. The days of the book are numbered and with it the utility of library services: it is all about 'information' now and people can find their own through the internet. Or so the argument goes.

Confronting this sort of superficial cloud, it is no surprise that Australian librarians are searching for a silver lining. They seem to be finding it in perceived opportunities from an emerging labour market for information professionals. Some are even prepared to be complicit in moving beyond the time-honoured description 'librarian' in an attempt to stake out new ground for their profession.

This is understandable. And it is true that some new jobs in non-traditional areas are appearing. But it would be silly to overstate the extent of this. In particular, it would be a pity if the profession sought to combat superficial, ill-informed assumptions about its role and its value, with equally questionable calculation of the size of potential new labour markets for librarians. While the word 'information' is on everyone's lips, we need to be careful about assuming that this means any so-called information job will be available to people trained as librarians. The road to organisational ruin is paved with the ambitious plans of those who moved away from their traditional base yet failed to capture the new markets they saw as their salvation. In employment terms, this might mean that, while the 'I' in ALIA is important for expansion, continuing recognition that the 'L' represents 'core business' is possibly more important. Any over-emphasis on the former at the cost of the latter could be regretted later.

There is minimal empirical evidence on just how the 'information labour market' is emerging for library studies graduates in Australia. But it seems clear that among occupations caught by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) category 'business information professional', only a small proportion could reasonably be regarded as coming within an

expanded librarian's role. Unpublished statistics obtained recently from ABS indicate that at the last Census some 342 000 Australians could be described as business and information professionals. Less than a third (about 102 000) of these were categorised as 'miscellaneous business and information professionals', which is one of four sub-groups. About 10 000 of them were librarians. Traditionally-related categories within this sub-group included records managers (1300), archivists (600) and health information managers (1000). But the miscellaneous sub-group was overwhelmingly made up of people employed in one of four categories: business analysts, human resource officers, mathematicians/statisticians/actuaries and property professionals. None is an area where training in library and information science might be expected to confer extensive eligibility.

More broadly, the remaining two thirds of Australia's business information professionals were working in the other three major sub-groups: accountants/auditors/corporate treasurers, sales/marketing/advertising, and computing professionals. Again, these are not categories which suggest any surge in opportunities for librarians.

Rather more analysis of this topic has been done in Canada and Britain. It confirms the danger of exaggeration where 'new information jobs' are concerned. In their book *Librarianship and the information paradigm*, ISBN 0 8108 3273 9, Canadians Richard Apostle and Boris Raymond describe confusion resulting from misuse of the pivotal term 'information' in this context. Specifically, their research indicates that when making predictions about the future of the information profession the use of the term 'information', without prior definition of just what type of information is being referred to, has spawned several ill-fated policy decisions. In their detailed research of job opportunities they show clearly that in Canada, library and information skills are not perceived by most emerging information market employers as relevant to jobs in their organisations.

In Britain, Nick Moore's major study of emerging markets confirmed the suspicion that new information opportunities are sometimes overstated. His detailed assessments suggest that emerging non-traditional jobs for library studies graduates might amount to around six per cent of total traditional employment of librarians. The British research conclusions emphasise the distinction between the many predominantly computer- or technology-based jobs which have been cre-

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ated and a much smaller component which can genuinely be seen as potential opportunities for librarians. Moore calculates that around 350 jobs annually might be available in this new market to qualified British librarians. In the United States, while research is limited, studies indicate that new opportunities for librarians are a smaller proportion of the total emerging market than in Great Britain. New information jobs there are seen as even more closely tied to straight computer activities.

Clearly, some Australian librarians will see their jobs changing further in the next few years, to the extent that a greater proportion of ALIA's membership may well be working in positions no longer described as 'librarian'. New categories will develop beyond traditional boundaries and there may be opportunities both for individual professionals to obtain interesting work and for ALIA to spread its membership net a little wider. But, while significant, the trend appears peripheral in aggregate employment terms. It seems doubtful that it can act as a panacea for the profession's problems.

And an easy assumption of access to all emerging information jobs could, in fact, prevent the careful targeting of relevant niche opportunities which will be necessary if some advantage is to be gained from a developing information labour market. ■

These and other job advertisements may be found on ALIANet at <http://www.alia.org.au/aliappointments/>



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is seeking applications from enthusiastic and suitably-qualified people for the position of

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The successful candidate will play an important role in ALIA's National Office operations by providing high-level specialist advice and services to Association members, ALIA General Council and its committees, and to external organisations and individuals.

Candidates should be able to demonstrate an understanding of issues of significance to the library and information services sector, and particularly how these are related to policy development. Candidates will require an understanding of the political environment in which libraries and information agencies operate, and the role of a professional association within that environment, and must have experience at a senior level in a complex organisation, including experience in planning, organising and managing.

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Further information and selection criteria may be obtained from Jennefer Nicholson, executive director, ph 02 6285 1877 or from the Association's website, ALIANet, at <http://www.alia.org.au/aliappointments/1999.10.html>. An attractive remuneration package will be negotiated with the successful applicant.

Applications should be forwarded to: The executive director, Australian Library and Information Association, PO Box E441, Kingston ACT 2604

by 22 October 1999

EDITOR

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5 November 1999