

Australian Library and Information Association



LIBRARY TECHNICIAN OF THE YEAR AWARD

Nominations are now being called for the 1999 award

This award promotes the role of library technicians in library and information science, and the role and image of the library technician. Nominees must be a personal member of the Library Technician Section and hold a library technician qualification recognised by ALIA. Members should note that any nomination for the award must be made in strict confidence.

Entries should be sent to ALIA National Office, PO Box E441, Kingston ACT 2604 phone 02 6285 1877, fax 02 6282 2249 e-mail awards@alia.org.au URL <http://www.alia.org.au/awards.html>

Nominations close 1 June 1999

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Outsourcing technical services: a study of six public libraries

Noel Willis, acting technical services librarian, Fairfield City Library

Australian libraries face pressure from funding bodies to adopt competitive, 'market-tested' procedures in order to reduce costs and improve productivity. Not surprisingly, concerns are often expressed about outsourcing, including the effect upon employment, de-skilling, staff morale, cost-effectiveness, quality of work, and service-delivery.

In April 1998 I conducted an ILANET survey of Sydney public libraries which yielded responses from sixteen libraries. Of these, eight libraries were outsourcing end-processing, two also outsourced cataloguing, while four others had carried out trials of outsourcing. Six libraries were then contacted for a more in-depth interview with responsible staff. They were: Liverpool City Library; Marrickville City Library; Holroyd City Library; Wollongong City Library; Sydney City Library; and Baulkham Hills Library.

Results

For processing work, contractors included library suppliers, 'sheltered workshop' institutions, and even local people working at home. Charges ranged from 70 cents per item to \$2.65.

At Baulkham Hills Library and Sydney City Library, where outsourced cataloguing was begun less than one year before, the contractors providing the cataloguing services are their major book suppliers.

All six libraries reported that the standard of processing work performed by contractors was usually as high as that done by library staff. Most of the libraries reported quicker turnarounds of stock, with Marrickville and Liverpool stating that big delays had been experienced when all stock was processed in-house.

Three libraries reported improved levels of customer satisfaction in recent surveys. Over 1997-1998, Baulkham Hills (up twenty per cent) and Sydney City Library (down sixteen per cent), showed dramatic changes in circulation, however in both cases there are other factors than outsourcing which help to explain this (see full report for details).

Outsourcing did not result in a significant reduction of staff hours, except in the case of Sydney City Library, and Baulkham Hills to a lesser extent. Some staff were relocated to other duties, usually involving more direct customer service, but the need for in-house work was not eliminated. Processing of repairs, and non-book format materials, for example, are still normally done by library staff. Continued cataloguing

of some classes of material in-house, as well as quality control of outsourced cataloguing, means that staff with the appropriate skills are still required, even if on reduced hours.

Although it was not possible to really assess from the data the cost-effectiveness of outsourcing technical services, four of the libraries had been outsourcing end-processing for several years, which seems to endorse its usefulness.

The quality of processing provided by the contractors is generally good, but developing detailed specifications beforehand, and updating them when necessary, minimises the need for quality control and reduces turnaround time.

The quality of cataloguing supplied by contractors sometimes falls below the required standard and constant quality control is essential.

The main benefit of outsourcing is greater efficiency, that is the reduction in the turnaround of new stock, which means that library users are able to access new books faster.

Some of the fears about the impact upon staff were not supported by this study, except perhaps in the case of outsourced cataloguing.

Overseas, outsourcing has been applied to functions which would normally be seen as 'core' activities, such as book selection, or even to whole public library systems, but not always successfully as the example of Hawaii State Public Library System shows.

Outsourcing is obviously not appropriate in every situation, but it is clear that it can have very real benefits if properly planned and applied to selected operations which are not closely related to the core mission of the library.

Perhaps the best approach to outsourcing is summed up by Hirshon and Winters: 'With so much attention having been paid of late to outsourcing, it is important to keep in mind that outsourcing is not an objective, but a tool. ...the library should look for ways to improve its internal processes and to become as efficient and as effective as possible'. [*Outsourcing library technical services: A how-to-do-it manual for librarians*]

Copies of the complete report can be obtained from Noel Willis, Fairfield City Library; Ph: 02 9725 0361, Fax: 02 9728 4617 or nwillis@fairfieldcity.nsw.gov.au ■

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ALIA MANAGER OF THE YEAR AWARD

Nominations are now being called for the 1999 award

The ALIA Manager of the Year (previously Library Manager of the Year) award recognises and encourages exceptional management practices within the library and information sector. Nominees may be a personal member responsible for managing a library service or individual library, or responsible for a significant service or project within a larger organisational unit.

Entries should be sent to ALIA National Office, PO Box E441, Kingston ACT 2600 phone 02 6285 1877, fax 02 6282 2249 e-mail awards@alia.org.au URL <http://www.alia.org.au/awards.html>

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