

Where are the graduates?



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In these early months of my term as president I have been delighted with the many opportunities to meet with professional friends from earlier days. To present the Library Manager of the Year Award to Janine Schmidt, a former work colleague, was a delight and the occasion allowed me to talk to many people I had not seen for quite a few years.

But the warm glow has been tempered more recently with the realisation that the vast majority of the people I have been meeting through the Association are middle-aged or beyond. Sure, there have been some young people like the enthusiastic library technicians I met in Brisbane, but by-and-large I have had to acknowledge that we are an organisation with a lot of grey hairs. And it seems that this impression, built on meeting people at meetings, does not misrepresent the general situation. A 1998 ALIA survey of the library workforce showed that library workers are, on average, older than the total Australian workforce and older too than the average of the public sector.

And yet we all know that graduates continue to pour out of ALIA-recognised library and information courses. The question is, where are these graduates if they are not in the Association and why do we not see them more often?

An obvious answer is that these newer graduates are moving into the very jobs which they are being prepared for by the schools of library and information studies. The schools which have broadened the base of their programs are preparing graduates to work in a huge variety of information handling jobs across the public and private sectors. So that is good news as it means that we have a large number of well-educated individuals with a broad understanding of the theoretical foundations and commonalities of information practice out there. I am sure they are doing a good job.

But then there is the bad news. Why are these newer practitioners not visible in the Association, especially at the local level? Their numbers suggest that they should be making their presence felt by now given that they have been hitting the streets since the mid-1980s. Why is ALIA not attracting this new generation of information professional as active Association members — or even as members?

Inevitably the reasons are complex. We have, as yet, no real understanding of the dynamics of what makes an individual join and be active in the Association. But there

are some plausible explanations which we can explore.

The first likely reason for our failure to attract newer practitioners who are prepared to be active at local level is the phenomenon which affects all of us nowadays — the pressure of work and the squeeze on time available. It seems to me, however, that us older professionals have a depth of commitment and history of involvement which sustains and motivates us to continue contributing to the Association. Maybe it is age but there is a loyalty which seems to transcend what the Association actually does or gives to us. It seems to be a loyalty to a concept or an ideal of professional service or involvement. Commentaries on professional associations internationally say that younger professionals do not have this same sense of loyalty. They look to an association to provide services and benefits rather than a vehicle for expressing solidarity and unity of purpose with professional peers and shared ideals.

A second likely reason for our being not so attractive to newer practitioners is that our repertoire of strategies for attracting and retaining members needs developing for these changed times. We need to offer more direct benefit to beginning practitioners to attract and retain them through the different phases of their active professional lives. In a word, we need to use with the Association an approach which is fundamental in the way we work in our information jobs in designing services for users. We are well accustomed to using strategies of analysis of needs and tailoring of service outputs to meet user requirements. This is what we need to practise also in the Association. We need to recognise that it is not a case of one-size-fits all when it comes to supporting personal and institutional members. We have to take a much more targeted approach to devising a repertoire of Association activities at all levels of the organisation.

The work to develop an approach to differentiate and target ALIA activities and services has already begun. Our executive director has been laying the foundations for a careful analysis of the types of activities and services which ALIA might provide to meet the needs of the varied groups. And this includes a focus on the newer graduates who are not working in libraries but who are nonetheless operating in the information sector. As the year progresses, we will be looking to work with you in developing and implementing strategies to revitalise the grassroots level with an influx of new members who are prepared to be active in Association activities. ■

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