

America shows the way on ageing workforce



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For at least five years ALIA — and this column — have been warning the sector of a looming age-related workforce crisis. Basically, the reaction has been a collective yawn.

In 1998, ALIA collaborated with the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training [ACIRRT] to produce a profile of Australian library workers. In describing 'demographic features', it found that: 'the data shows that library workers are considerably older than both the public sector and [total] labour force averages'. Seventy-two per cent of library workers were over forty, compared to forty per cent in the total Australian workforce. ALIA presented this data to the sector as strong evidence that 'more effective succession planning via employment of younger people should clearly be a vital policy issue for the sector' [<http://alia.org.au/publishing/incite/1998/04/library.workers.html>].

In 2002, ALIA warned the sector again that employers may soon have to 'rethink their whole approach to the workforce' to combat serious skill shortages if all their older workers were not to be lost at virtually the same time ['Coming soon: a very different labour market' <http://alia.org.au/publishing/incite/2002/03/workwatch.html>].

More recently, we have also provided data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the federal Department of Employment to emphasise the worsening problem [<http://www.alia.org.au/publishing/slideshows/200309a/13.html>].

Not all our organisations have ignored the issue, but few have demonstrated any sense of real urgency about it. On the contrary, many continue to follow the current labour market fads of casualisation, insecure work and increased reliance on labour hire companies in a quite spectacular demonstration of potentially self-destructive employment policy. On the cusp of an era when employers' most vital competitive edge will come from attraction and retention of a skilled and committed workforce, many are going out of their way to make their organisations less attractive as places in which to work.

With this in mind, recent developments create mixed feelings for ALIA: encouragement from confirmation of its judgement by broader emphasis of the problem elsewhere, but concern and disappointment that its warnings continue to go largely unheeded in its own area of interest. The recently-released *State of the Service Report 2002-03*, for example, warned that

the Australian Public Service faces losing a quarter of its staff to retirement in the next five years as a result of its increasingly aged workforce. A major program is now being introduced to combat this risk through new policies aimed at retaining skilled older workers.

In the United States, the library world seems much more alarmed than we are. Yet Australia's problem appears at least as serious as theirs. Analysis by the Monthly Labour Review estimates that fifty-seven per cent of American professional librarians are over forty-five. *American Libraries* magazine, using Census data, estimated that almost sixty per cent of librarians will reach age sixty-five between 2005 and 2019. A very similar situation prevails here.

The difference is that the Americans are doing something about it. Their 'Librarians for the 21st Century' program is a fine example of imaginative action to combat the problem. The Institute of Museum and Library Services [IMLS] is driving this innovation which is providing \$US10 million in grant funds to 'recruit and educate a new generation of librarians' in its first year of operation. This follows intervention by the First Lady, Laura Bush, who in 2002 announced the United States President's 'support of librarians' and 'a new initiative to help offset a critical national shortage of these indispensable professionals and educators'. Grants include provision for tuition assistance, job placements, recruitment of non-traditional students and research programs to support and evaluate successful recruitment and education programs. The Institute received applications totaling more than \$US27 million for 2003. Those accepted will immediately increase the number of library science students at para-professional, masters and doctorate levels.

The IMLS is an independent federal grant-making agency dedicated to creating and sustaining 'a nation of learners'. Its charter is to foster leadership, innovation and lifelong learning by supporting America's 15 000 museums and 122 000 libraries. Australian librarians can only lament the lack of an equivalent body or program of support here.

President Bush has recently called for \$US20 million to be made available for the program's 2004 allocation. For Australia, Prime Ministerial patronage on this scale may be too much to expect. But perhaps this is one area where Australia's apparent preoccupation with adopting all things American would be very welcome. ■

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