

# Labour utilisation — old problem, new outcomes



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Librarianship 'must distinguish unambiguously between professional and non professional tasks'. So urged a 1923 American report *Training for library service*. More than eighty years on, role confusion and uncertain boundaries still plague the American and Australian library sectors.

The past twenty years have seen huge changes in libraries. The arrival of the 'information age' has spawned new tasks. The expectations of library users have soared. Budgets have contracted sharply. Workforces have been cut. Duties have been redistributed. One of the most obvious results has been the rise of the para-professional.

Library technicians are now routinely doing quite complex work formerly seen as exclusively the province of professional librarians. They are now playing a much larger role in directly providing information to library users. In many smaller libraries — especially in the private sector — technicians are fully responsible for day-to-day operations.

The relative surge in employment of library technicians in Australia can be seen quite clearly in national jobs data compiled by the federal department of employment and the Bureau of Statistics. In the past five years the number of people employed as library technicians has grown very strongly (see table). In the same period, jobs for librarians and library assistants have fallen. Since the late 1990s, the ratio of librarians to technicians has fallen rapidly from 2:7 to 1:7.

In the USA, similar trends are evident. The bulk of job growth has also been in the technician category. The fall in jobs for library assistants is almost identical. But librarian employment has at least grown, modestly, in America in contrast to Australia's recent experience.

## Five year job growth in libraries — Australia and USA

Category	Job growth	
	Aust	USA
Librarian	- 8.2%	+ 9.9%
Library Technician	+38.6%	+58.6%
Library Assistant	- 10.7%	- 11%
Total library workforce	- 2.2%	+11.6%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003

Clearly the nature of labour utilisation is changing in both Australian and American libraries. A quarter of all library jobs in this country are now held by technicians. In America the figure is forty per cent. If the trends of the past five years continue for the next five, each country will have virtually as many technicians

as librarians.

While increasing use of technology and related developments may explain part of the shift to para-professionals, it seems clear that other factors are also at play. Against a background of historic imprecise distinction between professional and technician staff, the drive for cost minimisation is clearly a significant factor too. Wage structures for library technicians are much lower. Accordingly, for some employers the attractions of handing over control of, particularly smaller, libraries to a technician are obvious. It has been claimed anecdotally for some time that this has been happening. Aggregate labour market data would now seem to confirm it.

A substitution effect is apparent. And working time differences between librarians and technicians can only compound concerns about it. Professional positions have traditionally been much more likely to be full-time. As a general yardstick, for most of the last decade around three quarters of librarian jobs have been full-time, though that is now falling. Full-timers have rarely approached half of all technician jobs. Presently, only thirty-five per cent of technicians work more than thirty-four hours per week. The conclusion that part-time library technicians are replacing full-time librarians is hard to avoid.

In New South Wales, the professional status of librarians has been strongly supported by the state's Industrial Relations Commission. In its 2002 full bench pay equity test case decision, the Commission held that 'in light of past injustices, it is necessary to ensure the professional status of librarians is clearly established in an industrial and award sense'. This followed attempts to abolish separate librarian and library technician classifications. For librarians it was an encouraging endorsement of their role. But its real value will be diminished if their wholesale replacement by para-professional positions gathers further pace.

Warning of the implications of this trend in his country in the 1990s, a much-published American university librarian, Larry Oberg, wrote that it threatened retention, or in some cases acquisition, of full professional status for librarianship. He urged librarians to redefine their role for current circumstances and to vigorously sell it. His conclusion was almost exactly the same as that advanced by the ancient American report with which this column began: 'Resolution of the troublesome problem of staff utilisation and role definition is long overdue ... curiously librarians remain reluctant to address [it] even though their reticence impedes development of the field and limits their own status'.

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