

Working in remote and isolated libraries

Picture this: you are a library technician and you work in a small two-person library in a remote part of our country. The nearest library and/or group is at least a day's travel away. Due to a lack of funding, you rarely get assistance to travel or attend professional development (PD) activities or conferences. Luckily, you have e-mail!

This situation is not unusual. There are a number of library technicians who work in remote areas of Australia. The distances may not always be as far as those mentioned above, but still far enough to make getting to regular group meetings or PD activities difficult. And often they do not have access to mentors.

Those of us who are fortunate to live in a capital city may not be aware of the difficulties that some of our colleagues face. We usually have access to regular meetings, social gatherings and affordable PD activities run by local groups or private organisations, and we can network with a large number of people from within ALIA and outside.

Information gathered from technicians in isolated situations has highlighted five main difficulties:

Isolation in general — Even with the advent of e-mail and other instant communication, there is still a feeling of isolation. This is felt by individuals and by groups, and especially in non-library technician conference years.

Mentoring — Most of the mentoring groups in each state are found in the capital cities, making it hard for individuals in remote areas to attend meetings and get-togethers.

Professional development — There is a lack of activities available in isolated areas; the cost of travelling to other areas makes it extremely expensive.

Conference funding — Most small libraries do not have the funding to send staff to conferences. Besides the cost of the conference itself, there are other expenses including travel, meals and accommodation that add to the overall cost.

Networking — A lack of events means that it is harder to build and sustain networks.

What can be done to help?

ALIA offers services that may assist members in isolated situations. Most are e-lists that are designed to meet the needs of members in various interest groups.

Isolation — ALIA's aliaRILNET is an e-list for rural and isolated libraries. There is also ALIA Chat where ALIA members

can choose from a number of rooms, or they can create their own chat room and even become a moderator of their own domain. It is very easy to use and a tutorial is provided to assist new users. A simple registration process can get you up and running in no time.

Mentoring — ALIA offers various mentoring groups. Most of these are face-to-face groups located in the capital cities. Some of the groups do offer an e-list for members who join these mentoring programs. ALIA also provides the e-list group aliaMENTOR, which members can access.

The National Library Technician Group has been looking at setting up a mentoring group specifically designed for library technicians. At this stage it is still being discussed for viability and interest. Stay tuned!

Professional development — The ALIA PD program offers an e-list — aliaCPD. This e-list can assist in organising your PD activities, providing information on what courses may be available online or off-campus. This is worth checking out.

Communication — aliaLIBTEC is an active e-list for library technician members. It offers the opportunity to communicate with others on a wide range of issues. This is additional to the service provided by the ALIA chat room.

Conference funding — A number of the state groups offer conference grants to members. The amounts vary between groups, so it is worth checking with your state library technician group or the relevant page on the ALIA website.

Various state libraries offer funding for library and information workers to attend conferences; some may require a report to be written on return. Most of these organisations are required to provide opportunities for their workers to attend continuing professional development. If you have not had the chance to check these out, it is worth following up with your organisation's human resources department or your union representative.

I have not tackled the tricky issue of poor network service, but it is an issue that can affect everyone and we may look at that down the track.

Looking forward to seeing everyone at the 2005 ALIA National Library and Information Technicians Conference at the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour, 6–9 September 2005.

Rebecca Evans, convenor, National Library Technician Group

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