

Librarians in the job market: a strange dichotomy



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What is really happening in the library labour market? Is there an imminent crisis sparked by serious shortages of qualified professionals? Or do we have a disturbing oversupply of graduates unable to find rewarding work? As usual, it depends whom you ask. There are vigorous advocates for both propositions.

Not only in fashion can the dowdy transmute suddenly to the chic. It happens in business policy too. The 1990s saw job cuts, downsizing and cost minimisation as managerial holy writ, with little sympathy for a longer view. Now skill shortages, labour supply and recruitment difficulties dominate a new discourse. Is it mere cynicism to connect the two?

Right now there is a surge of apprehension about the ageing library workforce which the profession's statistical profile suggests may be valid. But are potential labour supply problems only the product of experienced older professionals heading into retirement? Or is the problem made vastly more challenging by years of failure to bring in more recent graduates in anticipation of demographic change? Confronted now by the consequence of complacency, are organisations rushing to redress it by mass recruiting of graduates? Well, seemingly not. Recently qualified professionals still report great difficulty in finding work. There is a huge gulf between the experience of hirers and the would-be hired in today's library world. A number of members have very lucidly described to me their frustration when they read that there is a severe shortage of qualified people. As job seekers their experience suggests, in fact, a serious glut. They are not getting jobs. 'Is it unreasonable to expect to get a graduate job within a year or two of graduating?', asks one. It is a fair question.

And this is not just an Australian problem. Writing persuasively in the *Library Journal* (May 2005), two young Americans mirror the concerns of many Australian contemporaries in reporting on their investigation of 'the job landscape' from their perspective as new librarians. To get a feel for what new graduates face when entering the job market, over a two month period they surveyed almost 900 job advertisements from ten websites that focus on library jobs in the United States. They found only 230 vacancies for full-time, permanent librarian positions. In other words, at the threshold they confronted a major issue for new librarians. Most positions advertised were part-time, para-professional or, at the other extreme, required upper-management credentials. Looking closer they found only 99 jobs for which new professionals — those with no more than one year of professional library experience — would be regarded as at all qualified. Of the nearly 900 jobs analysed, barely 11 per cent

might be available to new librarians. The authors say their evidence strongly suggests new librarians are neither sought nor considered for what once would have been entry-level positions. Now they are going predominantly to much older, experienced people. Paraphrasing peer group comments, they say librarianship is seen as 'a profession that focuses obsessively on past accomplishments and not on future potential'. In a tight job market, they find 20-something candidates being asked to have the same qualifications as a 35 or 40-year-old in order to compete. 'But', they say, 'new blood is so vital to the profession'. They believe new professionals have a lot to offer: 'we are eager, full of new ideas, have yet to be poisoned by burnout, and — through our newly-earned education — are up-to-date on the latest technologies and trends'. Who would sensibly dispute their contention that 'the profession needs us as much as we need it'?

Perhaps these contrasting pictures of the library labour market result primarily from increasing employer complaints about the quality of graduates. Might there be less a shortfall of able people so much as a belief that 'qualified' does not mean 'fully qualified' from an employer vantage point? A lack of 'job readiness' appears to be the most common criticism, in this and other sectors. Yet, if that term is to be defined as 'able to fully replace experienced employees', when were people beginning their professional lives ever 'job ready'? Are modern employers being too demanding for their own good?

Time was when everybody accepted commitment of resources to orientation, mentoring by older workers and early socialisation to the workforce as fundamental employer obligations and a vital element of any professional career. Recently reading Hugh Lunn's hilarious account of his early blundering as a young Brisbane reporter (in *Head Over Heels*), it was impossible to ignore the debt he owed — and acknowledged — to patient veterans who nursed him through a cadetship more than 40 years ago. Hugh was certainly not 'job ready', yet he went on to become a major figure in Australian journalism and an Age Book of the Year and multiple Walkley winner. Almost certainly, he would not have achieved any of this had he been expected to be fully 'job ready' from day one.

Have our organisations lost a culture of patient support for people with potential? Is the concept of 'investment in people' anything more than a glib slogan? Do we perhaps need to revisit the concept of professional cadetships? People of my age have always been fond of lecturing the aspiring young about realistic expectations. Could it be that it is now we who need the lecture? ■

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