

Adding value to a library student's work placement

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My first opportunity to host the work placement of library students has occurred in my current position as a corporate librarian. UrbisJHD provides expert advice and assistance to the property industry. I am the sole librarian for this national firm with offices in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne, and over 200 staff with diverse needs. Subject areas covered include supermarket expansion, council planning issues, capital city development and aged care housing needs, to name just a few.

My library is the result of the merger of two companies, Urbis and JHD, over two years ago. Combining their libraries was not seen as a priority until I joined the firm ten months ago. To help with the merging of the libraries and to ensure I could gain skills in staff management, we decided to contact the library schools and offer the students work placements here, as there were a number of interesting projects they could work on. Projects include the merging of documents previously housed on each person's computer onto a centrally shared electronic drive and the cataloguing and organisation of specific sections of the collection.

While in their work placement, I drew on not only library work at UrbisJHD, but tried to give students an overview of how a range of other libraries would conduct their business. For example, this is how we conduct cataloguing here, but if you were at a university or government library it would be like this. Giving them an outline of the processes this library uses in comparison to others will help them ascertain the sort of library work they are interested in. Overall, I wanted the tasks I gave them to develop personal skills like time management, prioritising tasks, confidence in communicating with a variety of people, independence and the sense of accomplishment of a real task. Students were given one to three projects to work on and they were encouraged to arrange their

time according to when each project needed to be completed. So they might be doing cataloguing and then be asked to undertake a newspaper database search.

A question I asked myself before the students commenced was 'How I can add value to the experience of the library student?' I reflected on my experiences in 2001 when I was involved in the mentoring group with Kerrie Ludekins (CPA Australia) and Moyra McAllister (formerly of Blake Dawson Waldron), and I modelled the library student experience on what I gained as a protégé. Some skills I gained were confidence in leading a team meeting, insight into the way different libraries work and opportunities to speak with my mentor who has experience in the field.

With these memories in mind, I arranged for the students to visit the Athenaeum Library, Melbourne's oldest library, to meet Jill Bartholomew and have a guided tour. And the same students also met Anna Gifford, an information architect at Victoria Online, who spoke to them about metadata, taxonomies and thesaurus construction. These two meetings gave the students greater exposure to the library world than they might otherwise have gained. They also related these meetings to the theoretical work they were doing at university, which included the construction of a thesaurus, learning the components of metadata and web page design.

Being an ALIA New Graduate myself, I also gave the students some exposure to ALIA's activities including e-mail lists they can join. I explained to them the cost of joining ALIA as a library student and the benefits of joining before they are employed in the industry. They are also aware of the New Graduates Symposium in Sydney 2006. And at the end of their placement I talked to them about their resumé, how to complete a job application, some interview questions they might encounter and where they might like to work in the future.

The students summed up their experience as 'broadening the scope of my thinking' and 'work placement has given me an insight into the corporate world and it has helped to better my understanding of the role of the corporate librarian. It has been a great way to put some of the theory from university into practice and it was also a good opportunity to ask lots of questions!'

The students were a lot of fun to have around – they were enthusiastic workers and added new ideas. We'll definitely be participating in student placement programs again. I would encourage all librarians to get involved in the work placement of library students, as you will be supporting the next generation of your industry's professionals. ■

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