Can a library technician fill a librarian's shoes, or how I learned to stop worrying and love cataloguing

Library technicians taking over roles traditionally held by librarians: is it an affront to the industry or an acknowledgement of the technician skill-set?

Several small libraries (notably the Association for the Blind of WA and FPWA Sexual Health Services) have recently chosen to promote library technicians in lieu of hiring qualified librarians. In these cases, after the only employed librarian left the organisation, management decided to advance the senior-most staff member to fill the position, hiring a library assistant to fill the technician's position. Several interesting questions leap out at this point: are library technicians qualified to run a library? Is it ethical for someone lower down on the 'library hierarchy' to perform these duties, especially if they are not being paid on the same scale as the previous librarian? And lastly, what exactly is the difference between a librarian and a library technician? Welcome to the world of the 'higher duties' Library Tech.

For years, public libraries have been populated by library assistants holding library technician or librarian qualifications. Although never spoken, it has long been whispered that some libraries do not look at applicants with qualifications below library technician when recruiting library assistants. Anecdotally, most of the assistants I have worked with have held such a degree, or were working towards 'improving' to a full librarian degree. Indeed, my current assistant holds a librarian qualification (a recent graduate) which raises the question: is she more suited to running the library than I am? Is it the public stereotype that only librarians work in libraries (ever tried explaining that you're a library technician to someone, only to be confronted with 'Oh, so you're in IT?'); or is it our own industry that places the limits on what a library technician is capable of, making it more financially enticing to get that librarian degree?

Some may see a library technician qualification as a way into the library assistant world. I have seen many people go no further than assistant and be quite comfortable in this role; in fact, for some, this was their goal. Many argue they are wasting their qualification and pushing the expectation for the average technician below the standard. Would this be true, if more technicians started acting in librarian roles? Who would complain more: librarians saying their role's expectations have been reduced – how can a technician be expected to perform at the same level as a librarian? – or technicians complaining the bar is set too high, forcing them to complete a librarian degree just to apply for a library technician job?

It is true that not all library technicians are capable of running an entire library; the same may be said for some qualified librarians, and could apply across other careers. Rather than place all technicians in the same category, prior experience, skill sets, and competency should be taken into account when applying for a position. Personally, I have been running the FPWA Sexual Health Services Library for the past two years as well as adding IT Officer and Graphic Design Officer to my job title. I now employ a library assistant to aid with the tasks, which, ironically, I was first employed to do ALIA states on their qualifications page that senior library technicians are capable of managing a small library or information service. Why, then, is it not the norm for more library technicians to be employed in these roles? More importantly, can one transpose the skills and experience of running a small library into a 'Librarian Qualification' when applying for another job?

If I were to leave my current employment, would my library technician qualification override my experience when it came to applying for a job as librarian? What if I did secure another job managing a small library, would I be employed as a librarian or as a technician? Both employers stated at the beginning of this article are not-for-profit, non-government, and the libraries fall under the control of another unit, managed by staff with no knowledge of the library world. To them, the difference between a librarian and a library technician is simply a few thousand dollars a year. Both are capable of doing the job, yet one is cheaper and more appreciative of the higher duties.

Could this be a trend we see replicated as librarians leave for greener pastures? For the most part, this technician is happy in his extended role and will continue to enjoy the freedom and responsibility of running a library, but when the time comes to move on, will I apply for a librarian or a technician position; or will I forget the whole thing and just swap places with my assistant?

Andrew Kelly
Library Technician/IT and Graphic Design Officer
FPWA Sexual Health Services, WA
library@fpwa.org.au

Leadership workshops lead the way

Under the leadership of Kevin Dudeney, convenor of the ALIA NSW Library Technicians Group, and Victor Davidson, teacher librarian and past President of ASLA(NSW), library technicians in NSW have been challenged and rewarded when attending the Leadership for Library Technicians workshops. The purpose of these workshops was to help library technicians, library officers, and library assistants become more aware of their own professional standing in the workplace. Every member of a library team has the potential to be a leader. Workshops clarified this distinction between managing and leading by identifying the skills and behaviours of good leaders and providing practical ideas for library technicians to develop these qualities. Attendance at each workshop was limited to 20 participants per session, enabling a hands-on style of workshop, giving maximum benefit to all. This keeps the group on a personal level, with discussion and questioning readily forthcoming from participants and facilitators. Theory is interspersed with games and was well-received, according to the evaluations made after each event. Participants overall have praised the effectiveness of the day.

Since its inception in November 2007, we have held five workshops in total, three on a Saturday and two during the week, with 81 library employees participants. Whenever we announce a new workshop, some of the same employers are sending more of their staff, and we never have problems filling the training centre room with new applicants, especially on the weekday workshops where we end up with waiting lists to attend. This not only gives us the opportunity to widen our ALIA NSW LT membership, but also enables us to form new friendships in our library community. It has been a wonderful experience to meet these colleagues and network with one another. Through constant contact via our database, we hope to be able to further foster their interest in our professional organisation and assist them to pursue professional learning on a new level.

The NSW Department of Corrective Services has been very generous in providing facilities at their training centre free-of-charge for all of our leadership workshops. This has helped us enormously to run these programs at a very reduced cost, which we believe has been the major attraction for employers in sending their library employees to our workshops.

It has been a pleasure organising these workshops, especially when, after conversing by email, we get to meet the participants face-to-face and see how enthusiastic they are to participate in all the activities at hand. We all learn from each other while networking over morning tea and lunch, and it is a great thrill at the end of the day to see their determination to put into practice what they have learned.

We are now embarking on the next level by introducing Leadership 2 – a follow-up program. This is the result of numerous requests for more of the same from those attending our Leadership 1 workshops. We will be able to continue our liaison with these colleagues, not only to keep in contact, but also to follow up on their progress. At our Leadership 2 workshops we are encouraging participants to share their experiences since our last meeting and provide group suggestions on how they can further improve their leadership situations at their workplace, and, of course, great networking opportunities are always available. This will also give us feedback on how we can further improve our Leadership 1 workshops for future participants.

Those who are attending the upcoming ALIA 2009 National Library and Information Technicians Conference in Adelaide will be able to undertake one of these workshops when Kevin Dudeney and Jennifer Dyer present a full day Pre-Conference workshop on Monday 14 September 2009 (see **http://conferences.alia.org.au/libtec2009/programs.php**).

Jennifer Dyer
ALIA NSW Library Technicians Group
Convenor & National Treasurer
j.dyer@bigpond.net.au

Good advice? Depends what you do with it...

As a mature-aged student commencing library studies at TAFE, two pieces of advice were offered to my class: don't seek volunteer positions, as that is work for a paid employee, and don't join ALIA until you are employed, as there is no benefit for students.

Loving a challenge, and suspicious of what he was hiding, I applied to join ALIA and phoned the Gardiner Library Service at the John Hunter Hospital requesting volunteer work. The benefits of these actions were, I believe, immediate.

Joining ALIA provided access to services and opportunities I would not have otherwise known about, including delivery of the *inCite* magazine and an e-list email offering students free half-day access to a conference. For students or job seekers, the website, magazine, and e-lists provide a wealth of information relating to the types of libraries and roles available in the information sector, are a great networking forum allowing communication with peers nationwide, and advise of employment opportunities, events, workshops, and conferences.

Volunteering allowed me to assimilate theory with practice and I gained valuable experience for my résumé. While I operated small hospital branches independently, no doubt taking paid employment from someone, I was employed as a casual within 12 months and remained there for three years.

A senior librarian at the hospital library became my mentor, encouraging me to ask questions, generously sharing her knowledge and skills, and advising me to engage a mentor whenever possible throughout my career. I have since found mentoring to be the most effective method of ascertaining organisational history, culture, policies, and staff dynamics.

Upon graduating with my diploma, I held casual and contract employment in public, TAFE, and medical libraries, and I continued to seek permanent employment. Another ALIA e-list email offered a short-term contract at the University of NSW, and while this involved commuting daily from Newcastle to Sydney, I absolutely loved the academic environment and determined this to be my career goal. Contracts at NSW Health and the University of Sydney library preceded my current permanent position, Acquisitions Technician at Avondale College, a beautiful library among picturesque surroundings, just a short drive from home.

I am thankful I challenged that teacher's advice as it provided valuable work experience and awareness of our extensive library world. So, what is my advice to today's aspiring technicians?

Be pro-active and committed to your career goals, but, most importantly, be seen. Attend conferences, seminars, training courses, and workshops when possible. They provide networking and professional development opportunities, communication with industry representatives, and information on new trends, programs, and activities undertaken by other libraries. While attending Information Online in January, I was invited to join the ALIA accreditation panel for my local TAFE course recognition process, another valuable learning experience.

While OH&S regulations restrict volunteer options, it is valuable experience and provides a referee when job seeking. Subscribe to ALIA e-lists and track down local libraries. School and special libraries usually welcome unpaid assistance.

Join ALIA. Pursue training and networking opportunities and meet a range of library employees by attending local ALIA group meetings, workshops, and social events. I assist ALIA Hunter by organising events, attending meetings, and administrating the Facebook site.