

'All things to all staff': working as an OPAL in the ACT

OPALs – one-person Australian libraries – are small special libraries that operate within a wide range of organisations, including government agencies, hotels, prisons, and professional associations. The OPAL faces a range of challenges in its everyday operations, as the librarian tries to be 'all things to all staff'. However, I find it a rewarding and varied job, and one that, on the whole, provides good job satisfaction.

What we do:

I work in a one-person Australian library in the ACT, in a medium-sized government agency. We have a distributed library, with small sub-collections in nine different locations, including each of the capital cities. These are run by non-library staff, so we are always available to them for stocktaking queries and to catalogue any purchases they make. I have a 0.6 assistant, so we are 1.6 FTE serving 500 staff. Between us, we provide all the services that a larger library provides: from current awareness to cataloguing, providing inter-library loans, managing serials (both print and electronic), managing acquisitions, answering reference inquiries, managing the library budget, and devising and performing outreach activities. This outreach includes writing for the staff intranet and maintaining our library intranet pages; the list goes on, as you would know.

How we do it?

Being a small library, we try and provide a personalised service with as few protocols as possible. Staff members contact us through emails to a dedicated library box, or they ring or visit us. Our standard of service is same-day where possible, and we hand-deliver or deliver to the desktop, depending on where the staff member is located. Within the organisation we are embedded in the Human Resources team, and our library is located in the basement of our building; we sit two floors away. The library has been refurbished with a contemporary colour scheme and furniture, so it is quite popular with staff as an alternative office and meeting room.

Since we are embedded in a section which is not a library or information management area, we have had to manage that relationship. Sometimes it is handy to have non-IM people to test things on; likewise, we can provide the same opportunity to the HR team. It has been a steep learning curve for both of us, and we now have a much better understanding of each others' roles.

As part of our outreach activities, and in keeping with the marketing strategy of taking the library to where the users are, we have 'taken over' the breakout area on our floor, which serves as the staff amenities room. We have a magazine stand, a newspaper stand, a bookstand and a fiction swap box (which now has a life of its own). That way, although we have a predominately technical library, I can indulge my passion for getting people to read by providing lots of encouragement as they have their lunch. Often this does encourage staff members who are not library users to venture down to the basement to visit the library.

We have extensive library pages on the staff intranet, and I put up a newsletter-style article fortnightly, advising staff of new acquisitions and anything else that I think needs to be publicised.

Cons of being in a one-person library:

The one-person library is not the place to be if you want a high-flying career. You will be a middle manager, doing mostly operational tasks, with little access to high-level strategic planning. So if you have plans for a high-flying career you

may want to consider an alternative path, although time in a one-person library does provide the opportunity to consolidate your skills. It is a position where you work on your own, or possibly in a team of one to five people. You may be the only professional, so you don't really have collegiate support. There are many trained librarians at my workplace, but only one (my predecessor) has experience like mine. Consequently, it is vital to network outside your own organisation so you get to 'talk shop' on a regular basis.

Pros of being in a one-person library:

If you like being your own boss, as much as you can in the public service, and like to perform a wide variety of tasks – for example, not just reference work – then being an OPAL librarian is for you. You will be mainly hands-on and operational, and need to be able to 'do everything' from photocopying and scanning to ILLs, shelving, and reference; from recruiting to web page maintenance; and from outreach activities to providing research support to your Executive from time to time. You will be the one who learns the new technology (for example, how to use RSS feeds, what is cloud development) so that you can pursue innovation in your library. You will be the one to write your policies (or at least the drafts), and procedures, and maintain them. Needless to say, time management must be a forte!

As you can see, my list of pros outweighs my list of cons, so I can certainly recommend working as a librarian in a one-person library. You can really influence your organisation's attitude to libraries.

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Sustainability



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