

# EEL... ENERGISE, ENTHUSE, INSPIRE

EEL gives a voice to the new generation of library and information professionals. If you have any suggestions or topics for this column, please contact the column co-ordinator Lesa Maclean at [maclean.lesa@gmail.com](mailto:maclean.lesa@gmail.com)

## Librarianship: more herding cats than calm

A friend once described working in a public library as something like trying to herd cats. When I looked confused, she explained you spend your days running from one end of the library to another, troubleshooting IT, answering questions, and generally dealing with chaos and noise.

I didn't believe her. My experience of libraries was as quiet, calm places with books and learning. And my role would be to connect people to information. How was that anything like what she was describing? Until that was, I started working on the circulation desk during school holidays. In between answering information enquiries, sorting IT problems and managing staff, I had to agree; sometimes an LIS professional's job is very much like herding cats.

Looking back it's amazing how little I knew about the industry I decided to join. I enrolled in library studies because I loved books and wanted to spend my days surrounded by them. In the second semester, I realised being a librarian has nothing to do with books. While loving books is an excellent place to start, if I wanted to be enjoy working in the industry I needed to let go of my romantic ideas and embrace something deeper.

Libraries at their heart represent the highest ideals of a society – where everyone has equal access to information, resources, and services. In a consumerist world, making knowledge freely available to everyone is brave. I believe in the role libraries play in society. In the services, support, and opportunities they provide to communities, our position is as keepers of the 'stuff' of human history, and as navigators through a high-tech information rich world.

But it has also meant coming to terms with some of the more practical aspects of working in libraries. If I imagined my job would just be easy and nice, I was very much mistaken. In fact, it's quite physically demanding. I spend a great deal of my time on my feet, walking, lifting, bending, shelving, and sometimes even crawling on the floor. I am often covered in dust.

Dealing with the public has also required a bit of adjustment. I knew this would be a large part of the job, but was perhaps unprepared for how unrelenting, at times difficult, and even weird, it can be. Most days, working on the desk dealing with the public is a happy and rewarding experience. Knowing you have helped connect a person to a resource or information makes you feel good about your work.

Other days you feel you have wandered into a parallel universe, where everything looks the same, but is slightly different in a way you don't understand. These are the days when maintaining a sense of humour and having a good network of colleagues around you is integral.

Public libraries by their nature attract a wide array of people. They could be non-English speakers, children, and families, students, homeless, or seniors, and they all have different needs and expectations for the service you can provide. Generally, most people are lovely, but, unfortunately, some are not. Dealing with people who are having a bad day or who may have a drug dependency or other issues, is difficult.

Occasionally other situations will arise – crimes being committed, someone falling ill. Nothing in your library studies degree or previous experience can prepare you for this. When these things happen – which is rarely – all you can do is your best. Don't panic, remember your library procedures, try not to take it personally, and hope there is a cold bottle of white wine at home in the fridge.

In writing about some of realities of working in libraries, my intention is not to paint a negative picture of the industry, but a more realistic one. The idea of librarianship as something nice and comfortable with books and a quiet existence persist. As a new graduate, I want to help dispel the myth, not so those interested in librarianship doubt their choice, but so they can make a fully informed decision. We are, after all, in the business of connecting people to the right information.

For those students out there reading this, here is the secret to dealing with the realities of this career. You need to really love it and be dedicated to promoting libraries not just as places with books. Being a librarian is nothing like what I expected. It is something much much better. Especially on days when you are standing in the library, feeling like you are trying to herd cats.

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