

OPINION

Each month, OPINION features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

What is a library technician? Does that job title accurately describe the skills and work library technicians do today in a modern library?

I have just received an email from a library worker who has not yet finished her Certificate IV in library studies, but runs the children's services in her library. A qualification is not required by her employer. Technically she is a library assistant. In many libraries, her position would be occupied by a qualified librarian.

If the only people who understand the librarian/library technician/library assistant hierarchy are the workers in the industry, we have to ask, is that hierarchy still relevant?

Ask the public and they will say anyone who works in a library is a librarian. It is a generic title for a workplace: the job title Library Technician does not exist in the common lexicon of most Australians. If most people don't understand the difference between librarians and library technicians, I wonder why we bother with the distinction.

I teach the library technician's course and I know how capable they are, how broad their skills, and how competent they are to work in a range of different libraries. Library technicians work alongside librarians in our state libraries in customer service roles, in universities, and in public libraries, and they usually run school libraries. They actually have more hours of cataloguing training than most graduate diploma librarians. They have comprehensive training in database searching and are capable of assisting clients with most reference queries that present at a standard reference desk.

These higher order skills are not always recognised by employers, unfortunately, so the current trained library technicians are often underused.

There is also wide variation in the way employers perceive the importance of the training and skills of a library technician, and frequently choose to pass over qualifications, with the belief that you can train a person in the job. Does anyone really know what or who a library technician is?

The Macquarie Dictionary defines a technician as someone skilled and knowledgeable in a particular area. Therefore a library technician is someone

skilled in library work. This is admirable, but without a significant profile that elicits respect and recognition, library technicians are the invisible workers propping up libraries. I think we need a new title that reflects the current and future state of library work. While we are at it, 'librarian' could do with a shake up too. The public perception of library work is still of something dull and old fashioned, which we know does not reflect the changing work and the exciting world of libraries. A new job title may be what is needed to change this negative perception.

Vox Pop: What do you understand by the term Library Technician?

Someone who works with machines (member of the public)

Someone who does all the operational work in the library (member of the public)

Someone who works with computer hardware in a library (an IT specialist)

I have never called myself a library technician because it means nothing to anyone who does not work in a library. It gives the impression that you are doing something behind the scenes and not meeting or engaging with the library patrons. It is a paraprofessional qualification but library technician does not fit the role like lab technician does... At Women's Ed, my title was Administrative Library Coordinator. In schools the techs definitely have to take a back seat, but at TAFE (until recently), techs were as much respected by students and staff as qualified librarians. (long time library technician)

I've never been enamored of this title. It's a bit like nail technician – read manicurist. I feel it's a mouthful and I can see people's quizzical expressions when I say it. Sometimes, I just 'lie' and say I'm a librarian. When I first heard the expression, 'library technician' the first word clearly explained to me the work I wanted to do, the second word made me think I needed to go to Bunnings. I'm not sure what I would replace it with; a one word job description would be a preference. (Library Technician, 5 years)

The title "Library Technician" is such a naff name, to be honest. If you say you are a library technician, it is automatically assumed you work with the computers/dvd players etc... A library technician has such a diverse role in libraries, so how do we fit everything we do into one title? When I started in 1970 I was a plain Library Assistant, then the Technicians course started – the role I was initially trained to fulfil as a technician changed vastly to the role students are training for today. Are we Library Officers? Sounds a bit military, then again we do patrol and police :) With the progression of the course from the initial certificate that was offered to the diploma of today, maybe we should be called Assistant Librarians? Then again maybe what we should be doing is not thinking of a new title, but rather claiming the title of Library Technician. You know, be loud and proud about what we are qualified to do. I know I don't claim the title because I get tired of explaining what I am and do to people with no knowledge. Rather I say I am a librarian; everyone knows what I mean when I say that as that title means something outside the library world. That is a sad reflection, isn't it, on work I love doing and on work I am proud to do. I'm always saying circulation is the heart of the library, time to claim it as a tech!! (Library Technician, 35 years)

I think of technicians as having practical skills and experience in working with the core aspects of library services, all the things that make the library run from day to day.

I think also Lib Techs like to band together, and sometimes want to differentiate themselves as being the ones who do the work in libraries and are in touch with the real world. Librarians may be seen as dealing with "other stuff" like planning, staffing, and management issues, especially in big hierarchies. Of course to the library user, everyone's a librarian. So why we continue to maintain the name difference I'm not sure. I think the idea of having Library Officers or Librarians at different levels to show experience/level of qualification would be good enough. (Librarian in TAFE)

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