

IT REALLY IS ALL ABOUT THE 'L' WORD

When I began work in a library position descriptions were pretty well non-existent. The library managed its own appointment process and successful applicants were expected to work at a level commensurate with their position, in a department with a name that did a pretty good job of defining and identifying the work carried out within it.

There was a strong collective library-focussed culture that had been developed and refined over the years – over the centuries – into an institution and profession that was receptive to cultural and social change, while at the same time honouring a mandate as cultural custodian and undertaking the task with skill and deep knowledge.

No-one had to ask what our purpose was; there was no undermining of the professional culture and there was a certainty as to the place of the librarian within the wider culture. Booksellers might have been the “most agreeable servants of civilisation” but librarians weren’t far behind.

In the mid to late 1990s economics theory began to seep into libraries, replacing their humanist values with those of the business world. Administrators and leaders began incorporating alien organisational practices and structures into their libraries. In many instances these changes included the destruction of the traditional library career path and professional grades within librarianship, which freed up the

pathways to advancement for many. Staff became human resources. New roles and titles came into being and, with them, new position descriptions. There was a major dismantling of positions that were once thought of as core to the library’s role. Think ‘cataloguer’, for example.

Nowadays, while I might question the need for such positions as team leader, communications and marketing manager, learning commons supervisor or the ubiquitous manager, they at least give a clue as to the type of work or such a person might do within the library. The most peculiar job title I have come across so far has to be that of ‘host’, used to describe a position in a public library with a primary role of providing “excellent, proactive customer service to library visitors by anticipating, recognising and responding to customers’ needs with confidence and pride”.

There is no place here to analyse such a risible job title but it, and its role, encapsulate much that is troubling about our profession today. Which bring us to the problematic ‘L’ word, with its faux, transgressive allusions. How, as a profession have we come to the point where ‘librarian’ is so excoriated that it cannot be named? Perhaps it is time to reclaim the word and to reposition the librarian at the heart of the library.

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