

THE VALUE OF EXPERIENCE

In 2012, after 10 years of bookkeeping following 10 years in pharmacy, ELIZABETH KHATER decided at age 40-something that she needed a career change. She was very familiar with libraries as a patron, having spent many hours browsing the shelves, borrowing books and enjoying the library atmosphere and the educational and recreational opportunities it offers. Elizabeth tells us about how organising a workplace experience position led to a full-time role in the LIS sector.

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO CHANGE YOUR PROFESSION?

It was on the advice of my partner, who suggested that I turn to a career based in an environment that I enjoyed so much. In July 2012, I enrolled in the Certificate III in Library and Information Services at Western Sydney Institute of TAFE, Mount Druitt. Having completed that in the six months July to December and absolutely loving every bit of it, I went on to undertake the Diploma of Library and Information Services in 2013 (a 10-month full-time course).

Having loved that even more, and particularly through the experience and insight that work placement provided me with while undertaking the diploma, I knew that libraries were exactly where I wanted to be.

HOW DID YOU ORGANISE THE WORK PLACEMENT?

Ordinarily it would have been at the discretion of the Industry Placement Coordinator to place students at the various libraries that participated in the program, however my placement was organised differently. One of my teachers at the time, Manjit Uppal, was (and still is) the Children and Youth Librarian for Fairfield City Library Services. Manjit taught the Children's Literacy study unit at TAFE and it was through her classes that I came to know her and learn of Fairfield City Libraries. When it came to placing me at a library service for my work placement, it was requested that I be sent to Fairfield for both the experience that I was looking for and the convenience of location to home.

HOW DID YOU FEEL BEFORE YOUR FIRST DAY?

Like most new experiences, the thought of walking into a workplace where I didn't know anyone with exception of Manjit, and learning the practical aspects of working in an environment which to date had simply been all theory to me, was very nerve-racking.

Underneath all the nerves, however, were feelings of excitement and anticipation of big things to come. I had heard the success stories from teachers about how your work



Fairfield City's Whitlam Library, Cabramatta, NSW

placement performance could potentially lead to that much sought-after break in the industry, so I was determined to prove myself worthy of that break should the opportunity arise.

I made sure I had brushed up on knowledge and skills I had learned throughout my courses so that I felt relatively comfortable in my ability to understand some aspects of the work.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS YOU LEARNED?

I would definitely have to put teamwork up there as the most important thing I learned. Teamwork was discussed in just about every unit of study in both Certificate III and the Diploma and I came to understand why it was so important through my work placement.

Communication skills were another significant aspect of library work that again, like teamwork, had been stressed repeatedly throughout my courses. Communication encompasses both internal (with other staff) and external (with patrons) and I learned that effective communication skills are vital for maintaining a productive, efficient and harmonious workplace.

The third most important thing I learned was the value of providing excellent customer service in the workplace. Like any other service provider, the library relies on satisfied patrons to justify keeping the service operational in the community. Since

libraries use statistics rather than dollars to validate their existence, excellent customer service is the essential key to keeping the library doors open and library workers in their jobs.

WAS THERE ANYTHING YOU LEARNED THAT YOU HADN'T THOUGHT OF BEFORE?

There was so much I learned about backroom tasks that I hadn't thought of before work placement or even knew existed. To most people, library workers have this relatively easy, mundane job of simply checking books in and out all day long and placing them back on the shelves in some bizarre order to be borrowed again. Even as a library student you still can't grasp the enormity of what goes on behind the scenes of running a library until you experience it first-hand.

I was extremely fortunate in that my Workplace Supervisor, Daniel Ferguson, the then Collections and Assets Coordinator for Fairfield City Library Services, ensured that during my work placement I spent time every week with a member of his team observing, learning and partaking in the various tasks involved in collections management.

Fairfield Libraries had, at that stage, and even more so now, started to outsource most of the acquisitions process. What I didn't realise prior to work placement was the amount of work involved in setting up the outsourcing of what were once in-house processes. The compilation of customer profiles, selection criteria, cataloguing specifics, and end-processing requirements are just some of the supplier documentation required for the various processes.

Other things I hadn't considered prior to work placement were tasks like rostering and the complexity involved in managing a team of 50+ staff to ensure desk shifts are always covered, programs are always staffed and special needs considered.

Another major realisation was that most libraries, as is the case with Fairfield City Libraries, are part of a much bigger organisation, and as such, need to work in conjunction with other departments and services to meet the overall objectives and goals of the organisation as a whole.



Welcome display at the Whitlam Library, Cabramatta, NSW

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT ANY EXPERIENCES YOU HAD WHILE WORKING AT FAIRFIELD? HOW DID EXPERIENCES HELP YOU IN THE ROLE YOU NEXT WORKED IN?

The extensive experience I gained working at the circulation desk was probably of most benefit during my work placement. Working the desk allowed me to, first and foremost, get to know the patrons who frequented the library. It allowed me to get to know the collections and make the connection between collection management and customers. Desk work also exposed me to teamwork and the importance of being a responsible and proactive team member.

But I was surprised to discover how noisy and unconventional libraries had become as result of the change in community needs. I was used to my local library, which is conservative in that it is a quiet, sedate place where the only form of food and beverage allowed is bottled water. But here I was in a bubbling hub of a place where the noise level, particularly in the children's and youth areas, resembled that of a playground environment, and food and beverages of every description covered tables and floor space in picnic-like setups everywhere.

I was able to capitalise on my desk and backroom experience when applying for and securing both the casual library assistant position in September 2012 and later the full-time permanent position in December 2012 by using practical and current examples throughout the interview process.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW?

A month after beginning work placement at Fairfield in August 2013 I secured a casual library assistant position in their service.

Three months later, in December 2013, just after completing the Diploma of Library and Information Services and while still employed as a casual at Fairfield, I secured a full-time position at their Fairfield Branch.

Eighteen months after that role started, I was offered the opportunity to be the first to fill a new role with the library service, that of Youth Support Officer in the Library Programs Teams, which I enthusiastically accepted. I am now relocated in the main branch at Cabramatta and working with the backbone of the library service. I am also working directly under, and with, Manjit Uppal, Children and Youth Librarian and my former TAFE teacher.

I couldn't be happier with where I am and what I am doing now. I love my job, I am blessed with the people I work with and learn from, and I am very much looking forward to the endless opportunities for growth, development and fulfilment that libraries have to offer. ✨

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