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Provocative thoughts of a new generation of librarians

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Abstract:

With over 70% of the library and information industry workers in Australia being over the age of 40, and similar statistics recorded around the world, one of my greatest concerns is that the knowledge and skills that have been developed for the industry will be lost. This paper explores the issue and discusses ways in which to involve new librarians into the library and information industry and the workplace. Activities conducted by the Australian library and information industry to counter-act the loss of knowledge and skills will be presented.

‘Recruiting “new blood” younger staff with different skills and attitudes will be essential if libraries are to survive, not simply as physical entities, but as facilitators of the changes in scholarly communication as the end user becomes the judge and the jury of access to information’ – Colin Steele, former University Librarian, Australian National University. (Steele and Guha, 2000)

Colin Steele’s message is not new, nor is it only relevant to the Australian library and information industry. Colin’s belief is shared in library communities around the world. I also share Colin’s belief.

Studying to become a librarian seemed like the natural thing to do when my mother and I discussed my career prospects together. I was passionate about books and organising them (my own books had borrower slips!), and I idolised my childhood librarian, Fran Doig. I wanted to be just like her - an inspiration to read and learn, and help people find the information they needed.

One of the greatest concerns I hold for the longevity of the library and information industry in Australia is that without involving new librarians in all aspects of this wonderful industry, the knowledge and skills that have been developed and created by past and current librarians will be lost.

According to a report commissioned by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) in 1998, over 70% of the member base had an age profile of 40+ years. A number of recommendations were made in order to address this issue. The final recommendation stated that while the aging issue was not a major problem at the time, the Association needed to continue to be active in recruiting and encouraging new and young members to maintain the viability of the Association (Wakely, 1998).

In addition to this, statistics from the ALIA report and statistics from reports from other countries indicate that the library profession has one of the highest rates of workers aged forty or older. These reports are a wonderful starting point for the recognition of the problem. We now need to work together to put thoughts, practices and strategies into place, to ensure the longevity of the world's library and information industry.

While there are many people in the world's library and information industry who do embrace and involve the new generation of librarians, not everyone is taking part. Time is not on our side and we need to be more proactive as a whole.

On January 9th, 2002, Mrs Laura Bush, the wife of the President of the United States of America, announced a proposal of a \$10million initiative for 2003 to recruit a new generation of librarians (Eberhart, 2002). This initiative is a wonderful opportunity and it shows that the US government recognises the serious nature of the problem in our industry. Other countries, including Australia, share the same problem and concerns, however we do not have the funding that the US has been given to raise the profile of the library and information profession.

Even without this level of funding, we can make a difference. We need to continue the work that is already being done and we need to use other resources we have - new librarians. Without encouraging and involving new librarians, the long-term future of the library and information industry is unstable.

What is Australia doing about this issue?

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is engaging in a number of Key Initiatives – one being to develop and market new services for students/new professional members. As part of an advisory board, I am assisting the ALIA Board of Directors in the delivery of the project. This Initiative involves the creation and delivery of new services for library and information students and new professional members of ALIA. Further information about my role in the advisory board and the progress of the Key Initiative will be presented during the IFLA conference.

Some of the proposed services included in the Key Initiative are an employment alert service for ALIA members, a job seekers guide, a chat room and an e-list for recent graduates, and life-long learning career development with universities, technical and further education institutes and commercial providers.

One of the new services outlined in the Initiative is a conference for new librarians. The purpose of the conference is: to encourage the participation of new graduates; to start networking processes among new graduates and experienced industry professionals; and an opportunity to exchange ideas and knowledge. The conference is an outstanding initiative and one that will benefit both new and experienced librarians.

The advisory board in itself is an initiative that is bringing together experienced and new librarians. It is very exciting to be a part of this Key Initiative with ALIA and working with librarians who have so much knowledge and experience to impart.

From an Australian perspective, I do believe that we need to take some more action in addition to this initiative, both at an association level and a workplace level.

We need to:

- Continue to identify champions in the industry who are passionate about their work and about their profession. We need to work with the champions to share ideas and assist in maintaining and continuing the development of the industry. Some ways to utilise the champions would be to create new advisory boards or create a position for a new librarian on the director's board of your industry association.
- Involve new librarians in decisions about the direction of the industry and involve them in industry activities. By participating, the new librarians feel valued and learn the same passion for the industry that has been upheld in the past and to this point of time. This is an excellent opportunity for experienced librarians to impart important knowledge and skills to new librarians and share ideas.
- Create more work experience opportunities for students and new librarians. During my degree education, I found work experience to be one of the most important parts of my learning. Immediately I was able to apply theories and practices through actions and I began to create and develop networks with experienced librarians and learn from them.
- Involve new librarians in decision-making and management responsibilities in the workplace. Create opportunities for new librarians to participate in the direction of the services provided by the information service or library. This is the only way new librarians are going to learn the knowledge and skills from the experienced librarians. This involvement may also break down any barriers between new and experienced librarians. New librarians need guidance from experienced librarians.

There are so many activities that can be initiated, or integrated into the industry or workplace: activities like mentoring schemes, encouragement awards for new librarians taking an active part in the industry and providing information services for new librarians. Some will be successful and some will fail. What we need to keep in mind is the need to keep trying different ideas and the need to ensure that the knowledge and skills are passed on.

New librarians are being taught different skills that complement traditional library skills and that are suitable for the technology of our age. To embrace new ideas does not mean to throw away everything that has already been established. It means to consider new ideas and attitudes from new librarians and incorporate them into what has already been established.

My university lecturers and employers have already encouraged me and have fostered my development as a new librarian. In turn, I have absorbed their knowledge and skills, which have helped me to get to my current position in my career.

Without fostering participation and involvement with both new and experienced librarians, there is the risk of losing these new librarians to other industries that do embrace “new blood”. Through retirements in the next decade, there is also the risk of losing the abundance of experience and knowledge we already have in the industry.

Library and information management is such an important part of the world – it is something too important to lose. We are in the business of preserving information and information provision. We need to start preserving our knowledge, our skills and ourselves for the future of information provision.

To ensure the longevity of the library and information industry around the world, we need to embrace the future so that the future embraces us.

References

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