

Front Line



Bev Kirby
ALIA President

IN ADDRESSING the *Towards a Skilled Australia* conference in Sydney, 10-11 March this year, Mr Frank Hegarty, Director of Employment and Training in the NSW Department of Industrial Relations, said there was general acceptance that half the job titles that would be in existence at the end of the decade did not yet exist.

Whether this will be due entirely to the effects of broadbanding or to the changing face of the workplace with its new skills, the library and information workforce will inevitably be affected. We do not yet know all the implications of award restructuring, and we certainly do not know to what extent job titles will change to reflect the notion of multi-skilling. There are wider concerns as we witness the loss of a large number of experienced and qualified people when they not only move into other fields but also cease to be identified as part of our professional group and decide to not to continue membership of ALIA.

ALIA divisions are currently being invited to contribute to General Council's discussion on recruitment to the profession. The Board of Education has recommended a campaign which in addition to improving the quality of recruitment to the profession, is designed to widen the public perception of librarianship to include other areas of the information industry. Do we also need to look more closely at our perceptions of the roles of library and information professionals, with a view to widening what we consider to be the boundaries of professional practice and identifying other related areas to which our unique, specialist and multi-faceted skills may apply?

In recent times we have seen an increase in the number of people who, having developed specialist skills in areas of planning, administration, training and management, are snapped up by organisations or seek career opportunities in the wider sphere. This may be more obvious in areas such as education or government, or in the public sector generally. It happens increasingly in all groups, to people at a variety of levels. Many of our colleagues are welcomed into the commercial world.

As I move around the country talking with members I hear that some people who leave traditional library and information industry jobs are expected no longer to identify with the profession and to find it hard to get back in.

While I am concerned about this brain drain I am more concerned about the loss to us of both their new expertise and their new sphere of influence.

How do we encourage these people to stay with the Association and hence with the profession and encourage them to contribute and participate?

Branches and Sections have continually considered the issues of retaining members. I have heard concern over members who may decide not to renew their membership for a number of reasons. But whenever it is someone who no longer works in traditional library and information areas we seem to do little to try to hold them.

I spoke with a group of library technicians who were graduating with their new Associate Diplomas. I had given the speech to the graduating class and told them of my work outside of libraries. I suggested that they could consider career paths in the wider sphere after clearly identifying for employers the way that their skills apply in alternative areas of work. Some said that however much they might wish to move into these areas, they were afraid that they would not be able to return to traditional libraries later because of the entrenched attitudes of potential employers. Is this the message that we are conveying?

As a result of the Corporate Plan and Review process ALIA changed its name to reflect the changing nature of the information scene. Over the years there has been a great amount of discussion of methods to encourage information people into the Association. I suggest that much of our activity should be directed towards identifying opportunities out there in the marketplace, outside established library and information areas. We should help our members demonstrate the relevance of their knowledge and expertise in these other roles. We should recognise these career choices as legitimate and desirable and promote these choices as a good way to develop our skills base? Some of my colleagues say leaving librarianship is easier than getting back. Is this attitude widespread and if so, can we change it?

How many people can we name who may have been lost to the Association? Can we encourage them to identify with us again? Are there benefits in wooing them back and in making sure we don't lose others? If Frank Hegarty is right we may lose many more just because of name changes. Would this be a crisis for us? I think it might be.

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