

Front Line



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Self-esteem and confidence to sell ourselves as 'information specialists' are direct results of upgrading our knowledge, skills and competencies.

IN A January 1 letter to *The Australian* Howard Coxon, the South Australian Parliamentary Librarian, challenged librarians to learn to love themselves and to be rid of their image as 'defensive' and 'tentative'. Librarians, he claimed, 'are crippled by false notions of professionalism'.

Howard Coxon's thoughtful and provocative article which looked at the librarians' input to the Jones inquiry into Australia as an Information Society suggests that when it comes to speaking out on important issues librarians are weak and tentative. What is our notion of professionalism? How much is it tied to an idea of 'have qualifications, will survive'. This notion does little for our own self image and self respect.

Some of us believe that our education and our qualifications make us professionals. Some will tell you that training has nothing to do with qualifications and belongs in other sectors of the workforce. Self-esteem and confidence to sell ourselves as 'information specialists' are direct results of upgrading our knowledge, skills and competencies.

If we could harness the energy of members who see themselves in need of continuing growth and development we could turn the library world upside down and challenge the rest of the world to try to get along without us. But for every one of the 'true professionals' there may be seven others who just do their job and wonder why they have to fight the label 'clerical' or continually defend who they are and what they do.

It is not enough to say that training opportunities do not exist. We need to make them happen. I have seen ALIA Branches, regional groups, sections and interest groups put their hearts and souls into organising workshops, seminars and conferences to which the same small group comes again and again. I hear the others saying that ALIA does nothing for them. I suspect that nothing is really all they want if it means making the effort. ALIA provides the infrastructure and the opportunities: it's up to the individual to take advantage of them.

What is happening in Australian industry and business with projects by the Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET), the National Training Board (NTB), the National Board for Education Employment and Training (NBEET) and the Australian Skills Formation Council (ASFC) is designed to identify needs and upgrade the skills/competencies of the Australian workforce. As employers look at their workforce no group will be singled out for special treatment. Their productivity and even their survival will depend on the competencies of everyone.

An effective way of getting rid of people who fail to meet objectives of the organisation is to close that part of the operation. Employers are not interested in how well we interpret subtle variations in DDC, how well we use CD-ROM equipment or what reader education programs we have performed. They are interested in how we as individuals or as essential members of a team perform in the interests of the organisation. If they see the results they want in their library service then some other group will get the chop in hard economic times.

We have heard of the need to develop management and administration skills. Of course managers must focus skill development for their staff, but we must take responsibility for our own personal skills. We cannot continue to blame those who manage us. How can we label ourselves 'professionals' and leave the responsibility for our own development to someone else?

The surviving library professional will be developing skills through three distinct yet inclusive channels:

- education
- professional development (continuing education)
- on-the-job training

We neglect any of these at our peril.

You will hear that an important focus for ALIA in 1992 is on the Library Workforce Project as it seeks to develop with and through other bodies such as DEET, Arts Industry and Local Government Training Councils a database of the competency needs of the library and information workforce. From this database will flow benefits to library educators who will use this information in the planning of education programs at entry level and for practising librarians and library technicians. ALIA will use the information to set in place a wide range of professional development activities to meet the needs identified in the project.

You and I can start the ball rolling by jumping up and down about training needs in our own patch. This will mean a close examination of the job we do, of how that job fits into our employers' objectives and of the training opportunities on offer. If these opportunities don't exist is there a way that we can make them happen?

We have nothing to lose but our defensive and tentative image and our professionalism will undoubtedly take on a new meaning. Let's do it.