

Cause for cautious optimism



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ALIA is commissioning quality research on major library and information sector labour market issues, with a view to gaining a better indication of what is really happening to jobs and working conditions across Australia.

Job insecurity remains a dominant social and political issue for Australia, including its library and information sector. Despite a steady improvement in a variety of national economic indicators over the past few years, job losses and unemployment have continued to be a blight on optimism.

So recent tentative indications of a turn around are very welcome news, even though there is a need for caution in interpreting them.

The latest *Job index* report by leading employment consultants Morgan & Banks, for example, reports a significant up-turn in every state except Queensland. For the second consecutive quarter, the report finds a strong positive net effect in the employment intentions of Australian industry. A net employment effect represents the average intentions of all organisations surveyed. It subtracts the percentage intending to cut staff from those which are increasing their workforces, so providing a better indication of results of both positive and negative policies.

Based on detailed sampling of more than 3 000 organisations across all industry sectors, the 1997 first quarter report finds almost thirty-six per cent of employers are increasing their workforce in 1997, while fifty-two per cent intend to hold staff numbers steady. Less than twelve per cent plan to cut staff. This gives a net employment effect of almost twenty-one per cent, the most positive result for several years.

Perhaps the most important element of this is a strong improvement in employment intentions in larger organisations (more than five-hundred employees). After many quarters of negatives, this report finally shows more large employers increasing staff numbers than reducing them, although the margin is narrow (twenty-seven per cent increase versus twenty-six per cent decrease, with forty-seven per cent steady). This improvement is held back by continued tightness in the public sector, which is confirmed by the finding that the ACT is far and away the least optimistic area with only a four per cent overall net effect. This compares with New South Wales' twenty-six per cent and Western Australia's twenty-five per cent. Even in the ACT, however, a sharp improvement is noted from the previous quarter's minus 3.4 per cent result.

The Morgan & Banks report also confirms yet again the diversity between economic activity in different sectors of industry. Just as national measurement of economic growth masks huge differences in perform-

ance between sectors, so job prospects also vary widely. High-tech sectors (including telecommunications, information technology, electronics and engineering) continue to head the field, with tourism, especially in New South Wales, showing strong recent growth in optimism. Government employment is now the only sector showing a negative net effect, although this is markedly improved from a year or so ago. Financial services shows declining employment intentions, no doubt related to continuing merger activity and consequential 'downsizing' strategies.

The massive shift toward part-time, casual and contract work which this column has often pointed out also receives further confirmation in the Morgan & Banks report. All states and territories, all categories of employer (small, medium and large) and all industry sectors, except retail, report an intention to increase their reliance on these forms of employment, a development which is correctly described as one of the major labour market changes since the second world war. Lest librarians generally, and ALIA members in particular, are in any doubt that these changes extend beyond their own sector, it is worth noting the huge emphasis on non-permanent positions in telecommunications, advertising and, especially, engineering. There is emerging evidence that engineering, in particular, is now concentrating heavily on a temporary workforce, which is sufficiently flexible and mobile to meet the changing demands of new projects which are coming 'on stream'.

These are interesting general findings and cause for cautious optimism. But they do not allow us to be sure about precisely what is happening in our own sector. Undoubtedly, some of the trends identified for industry as a whole are equally applicable to libraries and other information agencies. The emphasis on less traditional jobs encompassing casual or temporary work, for example, is clearly evident to many of us. It can be dangerous, however, to extrapolate too broadly, whether by assuming national trends necessarily reflect sectoral or geographical realities, or by assuming one set of experiences automatically captures the broader picture.

With this in mind, ALIA is commissioning quality research on major library and information sector labour market issues, with a view to gaining a better indication of what is really happening to jobs and working conditions across Australia. We hope this will encourage both informed debate and more focussed action to address the many new challenges which are emerging in the working lives of ALIA members. ■