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## Farewell to turbulent times

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**B**ecause I am retiring, this is my last Workwatch. For well over a decade, I have enjoyed compiling this monthly column on Australia's labour market and its effects for library and information services. I hope readers have got something from it too. Over that time it has run to around 15 000 words – enough for perhaps three novels.

The lifespan of Workwatch has coincided with a period that, indisputably, has seen the greatest upheaval since Federation in labour relations, employment law and most aspects of the world of work. I have tried in this time to capture the essence of some of these very important developments, to identify both desirable changes and mistakes and to help ALIA members deal with them by analysing just what was going on in a rapidly changing environment. The column has often been consciously iconoclastic. But a golden rule has been that its arguments must be evidence-based so that readers can test them by further reading and research.

When I began writing the column in 1993, deregulation of Australia's labour relations was just beginning in earnest. The Keating federal Labor government brought in enterprise bargaining, while in Victoria Jeff Kennett's Conservative administration went much further by abolishing traditional arbitration and industrial awards. For the first time, enterprise agreements became a dominant feature of Australian labour law. Since then, the whole process for regulating work has been revolutionised, to such an extent that any industrial relations specialist who left the field in 1993 would find it daunting to resume now. It is a different world.

For ALIA members, all this has brought many challenges – the more so because it has coincided with massive shifts in basic aspects of their profession, many brought on by technological developments. Riding such surging waves of change has called for strong stomachs and not everyone has survived the journey unscathed. For many, casualisation has made it difficult to maintain satisfactory employment. Work intensification and longer hours have often meant negative effects on family life. And downsizing policies, organisational restructuring and use of labour hire have become so common that insecurity stalks an increasing number of people. But most members have coped and many have prospered. For those

in reliable employment, aggregate wage levels have held up and even improved. Demographic factors suggest demand for labour will increase in the years ahead.

By far the most important achievement for librarians in this whole period has been the pay equity case conducted in New South Wales through the late 1990s. Because it did not spawn direct wage increases for all library professionals, it is easy now to underestimate its significance. But it truly was a momentous event. This essentially modest, unassertive profession has been unused to taking the lead in anything so earthy as industrial relations or wages policy. Yet that is exactly what librarians did in the Pay Equity Inquiry. Many still do not understand that the Industrial Relations Commission 'test case' which produced wage increases of up to 37 per cent for experienced librarians in state employment was notable not only for the library sector. It was also the test case for a major new piece of NSW law, specifically a new wage-fixing system based on entirely new equal remuneration principles. No other employment category had accessed these laws at the time and very few have done so even now.

While the new pay scales applied directly to state employees only, many other library workers in New South Wales have since gained increases indirectly. And interstate members have used the findings of the case on work value to boost their own claims for adjustments, some successfully. The findings of both the Inquiry and the NSWIRC judgement remain a powerful evidentiary resource for all librarians seeking to improve their conditions. But, just as employees involved in the case had to work very hard to promote and ultimately win their argument, so others must understand that improved conditions do not emerge fully formed from the ether. They have to be won. That involves an active approach that goes far beyond wondering why somebody else has not done something about it. All ALIA members can learn from the outstanding persistence shown by the small group of workplace delegates who achieved such satisfying results in New South Wales.

Finally, I hope ALIA and its diverse membership will thrive in the years ahead. I will no longer be involved, but I wish you all success, good fortune and – above all – good health down the years. \*

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