

I looked at as a bonus, not a real possibility. I'd 'been there, done that' and didn't want to do it again with regards to management. The technicians course was much cheaper ... and by now I was on unemployment benefits so cost mattered. Thus, I began a Diploma of Library & Information Studies at Box Hill TAFE.

While you no longer needed paid employment to undertake the technicians course, practical experience was still necessary. The formal industry placement would be arranged via TAFE but I felt more was necessary on an on-going basis. Thus I contacted the nearest secondary school to me. Robyn at Siena College in Camberwell, Victoria, took me on without any fuss at all, but certainly it ate into her time and caused a bit of disruption to her and her team.

Until that time I was not a great library user. I had used libraries as a place to study, sometimes using books from library shelves, sometimes simply sleeping. As a student and as a leisure reader I'm a gift to authors, publishers, and booksellers – I buy books. The business side of a library therefore was a mystery to me. I started with shelving and I did a lot of it. But each week when I arrived, Robyn asked what we'd been doing in class over the past week and sometime during my morning I would be shown the practical side of my lessons and be given good opportunity to put theory into practice.

Eighteen months into the course I applied for a job – one day per week on a short-term contract. Robyn gave me a good reference and I got the position. Time passed, I completed the technicians course, the job evolved to four days per week on a permanent basis. Was I pleased not to have anything to do with Centrelink any more! And last year I took long service leave from the A Bruce Currey Educational Resource Centre at Box Hill Hospital.

Having been a paid Coordinator of Volunteers it was an interesting experience to be on the other side of the fence. I was paid to assess the suitability of people offering themselves as volunteers, to train them, place them according to their skills and aptitudes, and to support them. In Robyn I was very lucky to receive what I had tried to offer my own volunteers. I did do a lot of shelving, but in the tuition and practical experience I received in all things 'library' that I received in return, I know I got more out of the experience in practical terms than Robyn did. I do hope though that she gained in terms of satisfaction in seeing a raw beginner go on to get a job.

In a world of budget cuts I know volunteers are increasingly asked to take on what should be the role of a paid member of staff. There is a line that needs to be drawn in fairness to both volunteers and to those seeking paid employment. Neither should a volunteer be given only the tasks that no one else wants to do. However, when volunteering is of the type I supervised and when volunteers are treated as well as I was at Siena, the benefits to those on both sides of volunteering are inestimable.

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A voyage to volunteering

Community groups are inspiring places and when you join one that represents your personal interests, you are set for a rewarding journey.

My journey started after I retired. A library assistant at the Melbourne Athenaeum Library, where I am a member, asked if I would like to be a volunteer. This unexpected opportunity to fulfil a childhood dream was irresistible. During the past five years I have performed a range of duties: helping members choose their books, processing book requests and reservations, assisting at the circulation desk, answering phones, and devising book displays. I also work on special projects, my most recent being to research the history of the library's many artefacts and write a promotional brochure about them for visitors.



Carol with one of her displays

There are other volunteers helping in the library, who help prepare or lead the library's special events. A separate dedicated, and enthusiastic group assists the volunteer archivist.

There are many benefits from volunteering: it does more than just make one feel good. Commercial office and business skills are easily transferable to the operations of a library, so for retired seniors it is a wonderful way to keep skills up-to-date and exchange knowledge with others in a friendly and supportive atmosphere. Non-profit libraries welcome a range of volunteers, from graduate students who need to broaden their experience while waiting for a placement, to book lovers taking a break from full-time work or who just want to do something purely for pleasure.

Australia has a long history of volunteerism and without it much of the community's needs would not be met. Who else but a volunteer would pore over faded 19th century hand-written documents to understand the minutiae of the past, or clean out old boxes and cupboards to rescue a precious book, or devise artful submission strategies to apply for a small grant for conservation purposes? And only a volunteer will love doing it all and come back for more.

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