

Your voice

What direction libraries?

Customer service officers (CSO) without any library training are commonly employed in public libraries in particular, but other libraries have begun to follow this model. I wonder if this McDonald's model is putting an extra barrier between the client and the library staff. How can I help you? Do you need a book with that?

This sort of service may be adequate for directional queries, but anything more library/information centred has to be deciphered by the CSO then allocated to an appropriate staff member. The client has to explain their need twice before they even begin to get assistance. In my experience many people are not able to articulate clearly what information they really need, even when it seems quite simple. Do they even go to the CSO or do they ask the staff in the shelves who may or may not have any library training either? Are they really being served?

After many years in the library industry it seems to me that clients or customers have the perception that all staff in libraries are 'librarians'. They are not aware of the different training that produces different levels of expertise and skill in library staff.

As a result they perceive some staff as more capable than others and the introduction of CSOs further complicates this perception. How do they know 'the best' person to help them? The decreasing level of library skills required of staff being employed undermines the profession as a whole. Or is it really an identification of something missing in library-trained personnel?

If library managers are searching for, and not finding, library-trained staff with the interpersonal skills that create great customer service responsiveness and creative, innovative attitudes to use and promote new technologies, new services, and new relationships with their communities, it should be of grave concern to the library profession.

Good customer service must always be an imperative in libraries. It focuses on understanding what the customer needs and meeting that need as efficiently and effectively as possible. Libraries are far different places than they were 20 or 30 years ago. What users need and want from libraries is vastly different, yet one element is the same. Relationships are still the vital element in any successful library service. Despite the word 'service' being attached to libraries, the connection with people does not always seem to be made.

We need to marry these skills with library and information management skills to create a new image of librarianship that truly reflects the profession as it is now, and will take it beyond the 21st century.

What library courses feature these elements in their training? Library courses attract good numbers of students but are we attracting the right people for the new environment? Librarianship still struggles to overcome its dated image. Not wishing to insult all the daring, creative, and dynamic librarians and library technicians I know populate the profession, the stereotype still smacks of cardigans, glasses, and shy retiring types who enjoy telling people to 'shush'.

Does our training fit the needs of the new library environment sufficiently to equip our graduates to get jobs? Is there enough focus on honing people skills, and not just those required for

Note to Members

We welcome letters on any issue of relevance to the library and information sector. It is important to note that the opinions expressed in Letters to the Editor are those of the authors and not necessarily the official policy of the Australian Library and Information Association.

Deadline for letters is available on the website and they should be no longer than 250 words. Please include your name and postal address as anonymous correspondence will not be reproduced.

dealing with users, but colleagues too? Do employers know what skills are being taught in the library courses? Is it time to change the profession's name?

If library-trained applicants are not seen as value-adding to positions then the profession is looking at a bleak future.

Kathryn Leong
Teacher – Library Studies
Centre for Information and Communication Technology
k.leong@boxhill.edu.au

Dear Editor,

I thank Neil Radford for his congratulations on my election to the ALIA Board as Vice-President /President-elect. (*inCite* vol 30 Issue 5 May 2009 p.6) Upon hearing that I was elected unopposed my initial thoughts were of success and pride, then very closely followed by disappointment. I was especially disappointed for the Association that there was to be no election. There should be, for the highest role in the Association. As Neil quite rightly points out, providing members with a genuine choice in determining the governance of the Association is a healthy feature of the democratic process.

Helen Partridge outlined in her response to Neil (*inCite* vol 30 Issue 5 May 2009 p.6) that the Boardroom Bound program has been established with a view to providing insights about the Board and the role of Board members. As an organisation with a constitution that requires a constant turnover of Board members, it is important that we continue to foster interest and encourage participation at the highest level. Over the next two years I shall be doing what I can to encourage members to participate in the Association's electoral process.

As Robert Kennedy once famously said, "There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why..." We need to encourage members who look at roles such as Board members and Vice-President and say "why not?"

Graham Black
ALIA Vice-President
graham.black@alia.org.au

Dear Editor,

I am delighted with the recent issues of *inCite* that have begun appearing at my doorstep. I'm a new Associate Member in the U.S., working in a corporate setting, and find this magazine (complete with punchy title) has re-connected me with the excitement of my profession.

The most recent issue (April 2009) addressed multiculturalism, a topic very much in American minds, providing inspiring examples of Australian achievements, such as the multilingual glossary and WESCOL cooperative collection venture.

The previous issue (March 2009) also held great appeal with its clever marketing ideas that rang true to someone like me, working at a large advertising agency. I was particularly taken with the ambitiousness and creativity of the Yarra Plenty Regional Library's approach.

The reference issue (December 2008) was also good, reminding me of my public and university library days and the importance of the reference interview, which is often discarded in this digital age.

As I begin contemplating a change in workplace – I do have my hopes about working in Australia, yes – I am pleased to have *inCite* along side me for the journey.

Best wishes,

Stephen Constantelos
Chicago, USA
sbconstant@hotmail.com