New generation, old questions

Several years ago at the Canberra Institute of Technology I was one of three students of Generation Y (born between 1982 and 2001). The majority of the students, we learned from the getting to know you games played at the start of class, were ex-public servants looking for a career change or people who had volunteered or worked part-time in libraries. Alarmingly, there were only three males in the class of around 25 students, this number dropping to one after the first six months.

Every industry has its 'type' of person. The IT industry tends towards men and increasingly men under 30, perhaps due to the gaming generation. Ask many in the library industry when they decided to gain training in the field, and they will not say that it was their first career choice. Many I know have come from teaching, administration, the public service, and some from the IT and accounting fields. While this allows for a diverse range of skills in the industry, it also means that it lacks the 'new' skills that school leavers can bring.

I overheard one of our mature age students in class ask how to use a scanner: she was told to go and ask her children. It wasn't that the teacher didn't want to explain, it was just that she knew her children would almost definitely work out how to use it a lot faster than their mother, and could then help her to learn.

Often new technologies require training and months of practice to master and incorporate into the workplace. The younger generation, for reasons unknown, are often more adept at the latest 'trend' in IT. In the same way, they can bring fresh eyes to the workplace, helping to connect with a different client group and helping the library environment to update to the changing needs of its younger clients. This isn't just because they are younger; it is because they have not been exposed to the long-running stereotypes of what a library is. Most Generation Y people would never have used a card catalogue – they just know they can find a book faster by searching on Amazon.

Most school leavers don't begin a career in the library industry. Having worked in the industry for several years now, I have come to see that many think of the library as a place of study, or as somewhere that you can work part-time after school. They do not see the behind-the-scenes, the inner workings, the career. I am constantly correcting my friends and family when they ask if all I do is sit at the loans desk or shelve books. It's not that they want to bring down my chosen profession, it's that they honestly don't realise what goes into running a library. Many are surprised to know that there are nearly 30 people working in my current library, most in offices that can't be accessed by patrons. Libraries put a lot of time and effort into promoting themselves as places to go to read and study, few promote it as a place to build professional skills.

One student was shocked to find I had a Diploma in Library Studies: "But what do they teach you, how to loan books?" he asked, astounded. I patiently explained to him that the majority of my courses were IT and management. I learned to create databases, program macros, and create websites, I can pull apart a computer and rebuild it in less than an hour, and I can run a team of staff and manage a budget – all on top of the cataloguing, networking, and researching skills I developed. In fact many of our classes were combined with the IT students (it was like high school again with the IT boys on one side and the library girls on the other). By the end of our conversation, the student walked away with a website noted in his notebook for the CIT course in Library Studies. I like to think I may have contributed to the future career of another librarian, but, at the very least, I have educated another Generation Y student about how large a role their local library employee plays in their education and in the community.

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Success behind the scenes

Some of the most successful advocacy occurs out of sight and never receives any publicity. This activity is aimed at heading off a problem before it is enshrined in legislation or lands in the media spotlight's sometimes unhelpful glare.

This is where a well-established advocacy program steps in to underpin a specific lobbying target. One example of such a quiet achievement was undertaken by ALIA in the mid 2000s, when a proposal was made to remove libraries in for-profit organisations from the definition of 'libraries' for interlibrary loan purposes. Remember that one? Probably not. It didn't hit the headlines because it got stopped in its tracks.

In this case, the combination of facts and figures at the fingertips of ALIA's then Copyright Officer, Moyra McAllister, and librarians across all sectors came together to head off a change that would have denied access to these collections through interlibrary loan because of the perceived unacceptable cost to copyright holders. Here's the case Moyra and the librarians made so quietly yet so effectively:

- Corporate libraries form a valuable national resource for other libraries and are an essential component of the Distributed National Collection
- These libraries contain unique, highly specialised collections and resources not available through other libraries
- Corporate libraries are active participants in the collaborative activities between libraries to service the community, by participating in interlibrary loan schemes, listing their holdings on Libraries Australia and participating in specialist information networks such as Gratisnet (health libraries)

- Publicly funded institutions such as hospitals, government departments and universities rely on these collections
- Interlibrary loan traffic was not on the rise, in fact it was in decline, due to innovations such as electronic licensing of materials, commercial document delivery services and increasing – and free – resources on the internet (The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) and the National Library of Australia provided critical and credible statistics to demonstrate this argument)
- Interlibrary loans were unlikely to be abused by corporate libraries as interlibrary loan traffic was closely monitored; an unusual reliance on ILL from any one library would result in investigation and libraries can be excluded from the network for abuse of the system

If you are reading this having just completed an interlibrary loan to a corporate library, give a moment's thought to this victory. It's the reason you can still make those loan requests. And the reason it worked is that the arguments used to promote this change by agencies outside the library sector could be refuted, because the statistics existed and the network was effective.

If there's one lesson to learn here, it's be prepared, with your facts and figures ready and a healthy professional network of on whom you can call and with whom you can share.

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