

## Employment growth: a complex future



**Phil Teece**

Adviser,  
industrial relations  
and employment  
phil.teece@alia.org.au

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In writing the first year-2000 Work watch [*inCite* Jan-Feb 2000], I headlined the column 'Labour markets and the difficulty of forecasting'. This last column for the year now reaffirms that theme.

In 1995, the major report *Australia's Workforce 2005: jobs in the future* was released by the federal government. It was the largest, and ostensibly the most authoritative, study of job prospects yet produced. It was very positive about the profession of librarian. Depending on which of three different economic scenarios eventuated, the report forecast increases of between 61 and 74 per cent in jobs for Australian librarians over the period 1995/2005.

Five years on, the government has now published its update, in the shape of the new report *Job Outlook* [Department of Employment Workplace Relations and Small Business, AGPS November 2000, ISSN 1329 5888]. To say that the data show a change of tack on librarians is to put it mildly. The reality has been one of rise and fall over the past twelve years. The total number of librarian jobs is now slightly higher than it was in 1988. There was a strong rise in the first half of the 1990s; but this was almost precisely counterbalanced by falls in the following five years. The 1995 forecasts clearly extrapolated from the rise still evident when data were collected in 1994. In fact, subsequent years have seen a fall of more than 3000 in total librarian jobs.

For some ALIA members, these data will confirm their worst fears: their profession is declining and the future looks grim. But the picture is far more complex than that. While librarian jobs have fallen, those for 'information professionals' have exploded. A loss of around 3000 jobs in the former category contrasts sharply with a gain of 4500 in the latter. Since 1988, librarian positions have increased marginally. Those for information professionals have more than doubled, with a gain of more than 8000 jobs.

For the optimists, this will vindicate positive attitudes to the future: stagnation in traditional librarian jobs will be more than compensated for by the surge in new information opportunities. Unfortunately, things are not as simple as that either. The vital question is: how much of this 'information work' is and will be available to librarians? And when apparently new jobs are filled by librarians, how often will they constitute additional opportunities, rather than mere redesignation or reshaping of tradi-

tional, existing jobs? In short, how can we estimate what the real combined potential job market will be for ALIA members interested in both its 'L' and its 'I'?

To fully dissect the components of the 'business information professional' category would take a column in itself [some detailed discussion can be found in *Work watch*, October 1999]. Put simply, parts of the category are made up of jobs to which librarians cannot sensibly aspire. Close analysis of the current data suggests that total accessible professional jobs for library and information science graduates in the combined librarian/information specialist category have fallen a little in the past five years. But the strong gains in the preceding period mean there are more jobs available than twelve years ago. The question is: what will happen in the future?

Given the gulf between projections and results for the 1995–2000 period, there is room for scepticism about any new forecasting for the next five years. Labour market statistics always warrant careful treatment. But we can only deal with the data that are available. The new *Job Outlook* report forecasts modest growth in librarian positions of around one per cent annually over the next five years. But prospects for information professionals are much better, with strong annual growth of at least two to three per cent anticipated. Based on the current library and information services labour force, this should mean a real increase of around 1500 to 2000 jobs by 2005, or up to two per cent per annum.

This is a much more sober picture than that painted by the 1995 analysis. But it does at least indicate growth, albeit of modest proportions. While job shedding is continuing in some areas, the wholesale public sector downsizing of recent years is diminishing. Public sector employment is expected to stabilise. Clearly, the search for work will increasingly involve looking beyond the 'L for Librarian' column in the newspapers' situations vacant column.

Overall, the picture emerging from these data — while necessarily inexact — confirms that neither recent extreme pessimism ['the profession is dying'] nor its wildly optimistic opposite ['new information opportunities will easily exceed any losses in traditional librarian positions'] is likely to present the real story. As usual when black and white absolutes are invoked, reality is likely to be found in the murky grey between those two extremes. ■