

‘Experience required’

Volunteers and new graduates walk a hard road



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Halfway through the International Year of Volunteers, our library and information sector's report card scores a rating of 'fair — can do better'.

There are certainly examples across Australia of libraries making constructive use of volunteer workers, to the benefit of both customers and volunteers. But problems exist at both ends of the volunteer spectrum. At one extreme, qualified librarians — keen to gain experience through voluntary work — are encountering unnecessary barriers that prevent their doing so. At the other, and especially in rural Australia, there are genuine concerns about misuse of volunteers to moderate labour costs. This is unfortunate in a year when governments around the world have pledged increased support for volunteers. Australia's espoused objectives include a quest to have 'the community, business, the media and government work together to build an Australian society that encourages and nurtures a culture of volunteering'.

Recently-qualified ALIA members regularly express frustration at their inability to get a start in their chosen profession because they lack experience. How, they ask, can they gain experience if they cannot secure employment? Many seek voluntary work as a first-step alternative avenue but cannot access the labour market even when they are prepared to work for nothing. Their problems are clearly exacerbated by the trend — evident across all industry — away from graduate recruitment programs. Not very long ago, employers, as a matter of course and with an eye to the future, took on new graduates in the full knowledge that they would require further training and active socialisation into the workplace. Those days seem to be gone in the minds of many employers.

Members who comment on employer reluctance to engage them as volunteers almost unanimously report that 'problems with insurance' are cited as the primary objection. ALIA does not see any major insurance difficulty for volunteer programs. And those many organisations that successfully operate such programs clearly agree. It is normally a very simple and inexpensive matter to extend general workers compensation insurance policies to a volunteer work group. And public liability insurance will generally deal with other potential incidents involving volunteers. There seems to be no real barrier to a volunteer program if employers genuinely wish to have one.

On the other hand, concern is being expressed about inappropriate use of volunteers when funding is tight. The Country Public Libraries Association of New South Wales, for example, has expressed disquiet about the boundary between volunteer and professional employee work in public libraries. They fear the distinction is being blurred, with volunteers increasingly being used to do work which should be paid for. Limited funding and a lack of local government understanding of professional requirements are cited as major causes.

ALIA's position on voluntary work in libraries is quite clear [<http://www.alia.org.au/policies/>

<http://www.alia.org.au/policies/volunteer.workers.html>]. The Association sees a genuine role for volunteers, especially where their engagement can assist members to gain employment opportunities. Moreover, voluntary activities through Friends of the Library, and similar groups, are highly valued. But volunteer programs are not desirable substitutes for graduate recruitment.

There is an irony here, of course. Australia's library and information workforce is a rapidly ageing one. Even more than in teaching, librarianship is heavily populated by people who are now in their late 40's and 50's. Inevitably, the next ten years will see wholesale departures as the so-called 'baby-boomers' reach retirement age. Coupled with reduced new-graduate recruitment, this is certain to make effective succession planning a major challenge for many organisations in the not too distant future. It is difficult to see how these challenges can be met without heavy engagement of the new graduates who are now leaving the universities. The danger, of course, is that recognition of this might in many cases follow a retirement-induced workforce crisis, rather than anticipating it.

Libraries and information services have a vested interest in staffing policies that acknowledge the imminent challenges of their ageing workforces. Refusal now to employ younger, and other recently-qualified, graduates simply because they 'lack experience' is arguably penny-wise, pound-foolish policy. Organisations may save some initial time and money by ignoring them. But real skill shortages could arise quite quickly as large numbers of experienced professionals retire from the workforce.

Librarianship is just one of many occupations where dissatisfaction is being expressed about the 'quality of graduates' and this is sometimes being used as justification for not employing them. Active steps are always necessary to further develop qualified people for professional practice. But that will never be possible solely within the universities. Much of it has to take place at the workplace after employment begins. It was ever thus. It is distinctly possible that much of the expressed employer dissatisfaction with the product of university courses results from a failure to compare apples with apples, from comparing experienced with inexperienced professionals. New graduates have always presented difficulties not encountered when experienced people are employed. But that did not stop industry taking the longer view and employing them. How many of us would be where we are now without the helping hand of an employer who once recognised potential in us, despite our youth and inexperience?

While it is reasonable to ask that they be as 'job ready' as practicable, it will never be possible to make new graduates anything but what they are — qualified but inexperienced professionals. It is unrealistic to expect them to fit into the workplace as easily as experienced people do. Recent graduates will always need seasoned professionals to assist and encourage them. Employer recognition of that reality is an investment in their and the organisation's future. It is an investment industry would be foolish not to make. ■

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