

Health and safety in libraries

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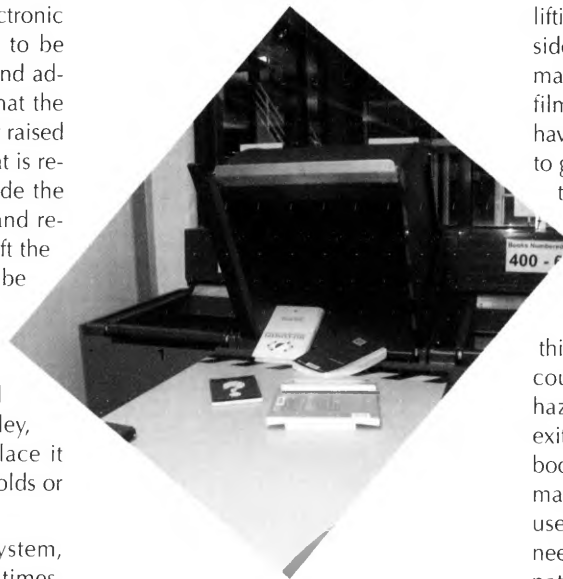
Many people do not believe that library staff have any health and safety issues. We do! The biggest concerns are usually manual handling issues. I sometimes wonder whether our customers really think about how the books they wish to borrow actually find their way to the correct areas and onto the shelves.

The main area of manual handling, for the majority of libraries, is the check-in area, where large numbers of books have to be checked in quickly and returned to the shelves. Our Bundoora branch library has a system specially designed to ensure books can be quickly checked in with the least possible handling by staff. The new system has reduced manual handling by approximately 80 per cent. The electronic system allows the check-in desk to be moved to the returned book bin, and adjusted to the required height, so that the books slide out of the electronically raised bins onto the check-in desk. All that is required is to raise the desk and slide the books in order to check them in and re-sensitise them, without having to lift the book at this stage. If the book is to be placed on a trolley for re-shelving, then the movement is a partial lift and slide onto the trolley. The first time the book needs to be picked up is when it is placed on the trolley, into boxes for other sites or to place it where students can retrieve their holds or reservations.

Before we brought in this system, books would be handled several times. They were picked from the return bin, slid under the check-in system, moved to a trolley and then to the pre-sorting shelves with several more moves before they actually got to the correct area. You can see why some staff considered duty in this area was aerobic exercise.

The acquisitions/cataloguing area is another area where a lot of manual handling is required. The books have to be unpacked ready for cataloguing and, in some cases, covering. Books can be pur-

chased 'shelf-ready', with ownership stamps, barcodes, and covers (where they have been kept). But not all libraries use this service. In this area, trolleys the same height as the unpacking areas and desks are helpful, as are scissor lift trolleys that allow staff to move boxes of books from section to section without manual lifting. Many libraries now ask their book suppliers to only pack boxes to a certain weight, and then they reuse these boxes throughout the library processing areas, keeping below safe lifting limits.



On desk shifts, many staff encounter the problem of non-ergonomic furniture. Do some architects really understand the requirements of library staff, when they design desks? One simple and helpful solution is to use a wireless mouse and keyboard (as long as we all know where the batteries go), allowing easy individual adjustments.

Individual desks should also be set up correctly. Many libraries are able to get specialist ergonomic assistance to ensure that chairs, or computer screens, are at the right height. We also need to remember to take those breaks, do a little stretching. Yes, it may look strange, but if groups did it together nobody would feel self-conscious – though perhaps not in the main

area of the library! Though maybe our patrons would follow suit and take a break from their work. You can tell staff to take 'stretch' breaks, but ensuring they take them can be more difficult.

There are other areas where manual lifting is needed, so OH&S should be considered...many libraries show films. How many of us realize how heavy a 35mm film is? A film consists of many reels that have to be lifted quite a few times in order to get each reel onto the projector. Again, the right equipment can make this task safer.

OH&S is not just manual lifting. When did you last do a hazard check of your library work areas? The things you find could shock you, and you could end up with a rather large list of hazards to be cleared. Are all emergency exits clearly marked, and not blocked with books or bins? In public areas, our hazard management is often better, but library users can create temporary hazards that need to be guarded against. Think of the patron with the laptop, could the cord cause somebody to trip?

Stress is an OH&S problem for many library staff, especially at exam or assessment time. We deal with difficult customers (who among us hasn't had a problem with this?) who may think that if they shout loudly enough they could get away with not paying a fine, or need the answer now because the assignment they are trying to print/finish was due in 30 minutes ago! It is sometimes difficult to remember that old adage 'the customer is always right' – well, nearly always.

Customer service training is available for library staff here at RMIT, and has recently covered difficult customers and dealing with mental illness. Training can be internal to the library or undertaken with staff from other areas of RMIT. It is often interesting to hear how staff in other areas of the organisation handle customer service. Library staff can also suggest areas they would like covered in our OH&S training schedule.

