

Workwatch

Industrial relations, role of volunteers and stresses of moving offices

Considerable press coverage has been given to foreshadowed federal industrial relations (IR) changes following election of the Rudd Government. This month's article refers to the main features of coming legislation. Another matter coming to ALIA's attention in recent months has been the role of volunteers in the library sector, while an internal ALIA initiative is the refurbishment of the National Office.

IR changes

Prior to the 2008 federal election, the Labor Party indicated that one of its priorities in government would be the abolition of Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) and, separately, introduction of tighter unfair dismissal laws. The new Parliament will have assembled by the time this article is published and details of proposed changes to workplace laws should be announced by the time you read this. The employment pages www.alia.org.au/employment of the ALIA website will be regularly updated with reports on IR legislation and transitional arrangements.

Since the election, a further development has emerged concerning the national IR regime. During January 2008 the NSW Government released a report entitled *Working Together* by Professor George Williams, a Commonwealth Constitutional law expert, proposing means of achieving a harmonised national IR system. Although commissioned by the NSW Government, the report's recommendations are not specific to that state and the basic findings of the report have attracted favourable comment from various levels of governments, industry and unions. Aside from agreement that scope exists for greater IR efficiencies, there is support for the principle that IR laws should not be subject to substantial shifts whenever a change of government occurs.

The first meeting of 2008 for federal, state and territory IR ministers agreed with the principles contained in the Williams Report. As frequently occurs in a federal system, it may be difficult to obtain agreement on detail as to how recommendations can be achieved. A first step has been an intention to work towards greater harmony in workplace safety laws, an area which was excluded from the reach of the *WorkChoices* legislation.

The full text of the report is at www.industrialrelations.nsw.gov.au/action/inquiry.html. The report includes an executive summary.

Volunteers in libraries

Many libraries benefit from the contribution of volunteers. Often volunteers in libraries are members of the public who enjoy using libraries and wish to contribute actively, or are retired librarians wishing to maintain contact with the library and information sector. In addition to performing roles such as assisting at library reception desks and shelving library materials, volunteers can be the core of 'Friends of the Library' groups and similar organisations.

Some concerns have, however, been expressed by ALIA members who believe that libraries occasionally take advantage of the work of volunteers as a substitute for the paid services which should be provided by qualified librarians, library technicians, and by library assistants. Beyond a certain point, engagement of volunteers can deprive library and information workers of gainful employment and compromise the level of services provided to library users, who are also within ALIA's constituency.

Library staff and managers seeking guidance on this issue should refer to ALIA's policy on the role of volunteers in libraries www.alia.org.au/policies/volunteer.workers.html

Office refurbishments: OH&S aspects

The ALIA National Office is currently undergoing refurbishment, which means that staff are engaged in moving files, disposing of unwanted material and becoming oriented to the new office layout. As part of this exercise, the National Office has consulted a nearby firm of occupational health consultants to provide advice in aspects of the office redesign. In particular, our advisors have stressed the need for observing correct manual handling procedures, with which many library workers should be familiar. It is also important to give staff a realistic timeframe for each segment of the process.

Stressful situations in the workplace are usually associated with personnel difficulties or incidents caused by falls or faulty equipment. It is often overlooked that the seemingly simpler exercise of moving or refurbishing has its own stresses in terms of potential for injury and disruption of normal routine.

It is recommended that workplaces in the library and information sector consider seeking guidance from counseling and OH&S professionals, internal or external, when significant office disruptions are planned.



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