

About this looming skills shortage

I find projections of a skill shortage when baby boomer librarians begin to retire and the focus on encouraging young people into the industry as the solution intriguing. I wonder whether the challenge may actually be one of managing sufficient numbers who are mobile and minimally trained, rather than one of scarcity.

In 2003, I completed a Graduate Diploma of Information Management, a fast and light introduction to the required skill set. The great majority of students were middle aged; another great majority were already employed in the industry. Obviously these overlapped. The picture of people undertaking tertiary library qualifications was therefore of middle-aged people planning to remain in the industry and looking to improve their participation through study and ultimately more responsible appointments; more middle-aged people with experience in other industries investing significant time, energy, and money to enter the industry; and younger people, some wanting to enter the industry, others consolidating careers already begun.

The GDIM completed, I found getting a job difficult. A lecturer had advised me to emphasise my marks when applying for jobs, to counter my lack of library experience; this wasn't particularly effective. At NLS4, many people said that short-term contract work was the way (eventually) (perhaps) to get a permanent job. I didn't take up that option because, being used to a permanent position and full-time income with the usual related encumbrances (mortgage, etc), living contract-to-contract did not appeal. Instead I took the other option, dramatic or drastic depending on your view, and moved to a remote area for my first job. This experience is not unusual.

That is not the picture of an industry even beginning to scabble for staff. That jobs are changing rather than increasing in number; that certain sectors, eg school libraries, are contracting; and that the costs and strains of insecure employment or major relocation are personalised and accepted as normal, indicates an industry generating a reserve pool of un- or under-employed.

The picture at Alice Springs Public Library (ASPL) where I work, also counters suggestions of a looming skills shortage or that recruiting young people is the answer: ASPL has 13 permanent staff, five are new graduates or new starters, that is they've entered the industry in the last five years. Of six casuals, four are new to the industry and three of those are undertaking library studies. Of the newbies, including the casuals, four are baby boomers, three are in their thirties, and the remaining two are in their twenties. At ASPL, many of the newcomers are as grey-haired as those expected to retire in the next decade.

The oldest casual, and one of the most reliable, is a woman past retirement age who has returned to the industry after many years; she is only interested in casual work. Another, also much called upon, is much younger, has worked in 'heaps of libraries', is passionate about them, but has no intention of getting a permanent library position. Another, also approaching retirement age, loves the library because it's the first place to give her work after undertaking the retraining that so many injured older workers find so fruitless (her study wasn't related to the industry); she too is not looking for a permanent position but she is committed to the library. So the casuals who aren't aiming for a job intend nevertheless to work as often as they're asked (and frankly ASPL can't offer them anything more than casual work anyway).

Other aspects of the picture at ASPL reflect broader social trends: most of the staff are women, and a lot of women don't

have enough superannuation to retire early. The other baby boomer newbie and I are or have been supporting parents and have the amount of superannuation that you might therefore expect. We will be working until retirement age, unless we somehow get extraordinarily lucky – that's at least thirty years in the industry between us.

The oldest staff member at ASPL is approaching seventy: she is still working partly because "there's so much going on [in the industry, she] can't retire" and partly because there are incentives to keep working until 70. Those incentives and the rising age eligibility for the aged pension are bound to keep some people in the industry.

Finally, the youngest staff member is considering leaving until her children are at school: childcare on trainee wages and the hours of day care, pre-school, and full time work are difficult juggles. If she leaves, she will be hoping for another traineeship when she can return.

ASPL staff exhibit these characteristics: stability – the three longest serving staff have worked for nearly eighty years between them; new blood; a high level of commitment to the industry either through study or being available to work whenever required; the work-life 'balancing act'; and age cohorts reflecting an ageing population.

Secondary students are told that they will not have a job for life; rather they will work at a number of jobs in up to six industries during their working life. That's between six and ten years per industry. It's conceivable that the first industry they work in may be one they leave promptly and never return to; it's likely that it won't be the one they finish working in.

Alternatively, changing careers requires a significant investment; late new starters will want to work long enough to justify it.

I wonder whether the workforce will be characterised not by scarcity but simply by the opposite of the industry's traditional stability: enough staff, who span working life but are concentrated in the pepper-and-salt or definitely grey-haired brigades, who spend a limited time in the industry and whose skills may not be as established, their training as comprehensive as is normal now. Support for new starters should be spread across all age cohorts because chances are they will all contribute equivalently.

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Best practices observed

OCLC Research commissioned a study of current ILL practices by California Environmental Associates, a firm of environmental impact consultants. Using data provided by OCLC and gathered during interviews with staff at a dozen US libraries, the consultants correlated specific interlibrary practices with measurable impacts on greenhouse gas emission levels. These findings, along with key recommendations and best practices, are included in the report, which is available for free download at <http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/library/2010/2010-07.pdf>. It's also cataloged in WorldCat.