EEI... ENERGISE, ENTHUSE, INSPIRE

NAVIGATING A NEW FLIGHT PATH

Alisa Howlett is putting the I(nformation) into aviation.

Didn't think aviation was a career possibility for information professionals? Think again. I stumbled upon my first library opportunity last year as a Technical Librarian for a regional airline. Surviving a steep learning curve, I have since moved on to a similar position at Virgin Australia. I've been asked what it is I actually do in aviation, so it's time I shed some light on this ever-changing industry I have come to appreciate and to which I have become (almost) addicted.

An airline's engineering functions involve a massive amount of aircraft technical data, manuals and other documentation. To give you an idea, nearly every component installed on an aircraft has a manual for its maintenance. That's a lot of manuals! But wait, there's more. Documentation, such as 'service bulletins', and many other document types are also issued by vendors who either manufacture the aircraft and/or the parts.

There are two functions of my role which are absolutely critical to the Engineering Department: currency and control over distribution and access to technical data and documentation. There are two reasons why. Firstly, in order to continually improve an aircraft's reliability, the latest data, advice and instructions issued by the manufacturer are required, and secondly, technical data and documentation is like intellectual property, only those who carry out maintenance tasks on the airline's aircraft may have access (they are called 'copyholders'). It is the responsibility of the technical library to ensure the collection is maintained and managed in a manner which responds effectively to the information needs of its users, as well as ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements directed by the Civil Aviations Safety Authority (CASA) and the Civil Aviation Act 1988.

I may have swapped the Dewey Decimals for Air Transport Association (ATA) Chapters, but a library and information management role within the Engineering and Maintenance Department of an airline isn't so strange, I assure you. My desk is where reference enquiries are answered, over the phone, via email and face-to-face, where research is conducted, cataloguing and maintaining a document database takes place, where liaison with those who are involved with collection development (that's the engineers) occurs, and from where documentation is loaned or accessed. I also maintain subscriptions to vendor documentation. So, while not a library in the traditional sense, but a highly technical environment, my focus and passion is still very much on delivering exceptional information services to the technical library's users.

By being involved in a slightly out of the ordinary library role in a corporate setting, where library and information skills are not quite understood, I do face some challenges, both every day and in the longer term. Firstly, library tasks and responsibilities are assigned and organised differently. Those tasks and responsibilities usually assigned to a librarian 'type' position reside in another department heavily focused on information technology, so my role tends to be a cross between library/reference assistant and technician.

Secondly, technical library positions often require no qualifications, and consequently I share the technical library's responsibilities with someone who possesses a completely different skill set (ex Cabin Crew), so it is difficult to be recognised as a professional. And finally, while I'd like to stay in aviation, at least for a while, I struggle to find a place where an information professional may exist both in engineering and the industry in general.

But these challenges present opportunities. I've recognised a need for a qualified information professional to be involved in the technical library. There's more to consider than day-to-day processing and IT systems. By identifying ways my (developing) information skills and knowledge can contribute to implementing and maintaining improved information services, and managing and coordinating the flow of technical data and information within the Engineering Department, I take a proactive approach to navigating my own 'flight path' within Virgin Australia and the aviation industry. Led by my commitment and support from other information professionals and my supervisor, my flight path gives me the potential to pursue and create a niche in the profession.

Without a doubt, I work in a unique setting for an information professional. Aviation is an exciting industry; every day I see aeroplanes take off and land, and it's satisfying to know my role makes a significant contribution to keeping the fleet in the air.

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Alisa Howlett has recently embarked on a career as an information professional in Australia's aviation industry. In addition to her work, Alisa is a Coordinator for Queensland's ALIA New Graduates Group. A Masters student at QUT and completing her studies in library and information science, Alisa is committed to continued, active participation in the profession. She will be presenting at the New Librarians Symposium in Perth this year.

Follow Alisa's 'flight path' on: - acrystelle.com and on Twitter - @acrystelle