

FORUMS FINDING THE SWEET SPOT

The Inaugural Leadership and Innovation Forums around Australia in 2015: Finding the innovation sweet spot.

At a series of evening Leadership and Innovation Forums across Australia in 2015, ALIA Members had the opportunity to hear directly from an impressive array of leaders and influencers in the GLAMR sector, KIRRIN SAMPSON reports back.

In September 2015, the new Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, announced that innovation was ‘an absolutely critical theme of our government’. We decided to explore the hot topic of innovation with Australian GLAMR leaders.

The challenge we put to our expert panel in each state and territory was ‘finding the innovation sweet spot’.

Questions posed were inspired by a *Harvard Business Review* article, ‘Innovation Isn’t the Answer to All Your Problems’ (<http://bit.ly/1GjogVH>). It explores the various ways an organisation can innovate and suggests that organisations need to step back and ask a fundamental question: What problem does innovation need to solve? Innovation is a long game, and ‘is not a one-size-fits-all proposition’.

We were pleased to be able to have a range of speakers at each event, with great representation from library leaders but also from across the GLAMR sector. We asked them about their approach and vision for innovation and change in their organisations, and across our industry. With some variation, these questions covered three areas.

WHAT IS THE ‘FUNDAMENTAL’ YOU THINK NEEDS ADDRESSING BEFORE WE LOOK TO CREATE NEW ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES? WHAT’S THE PROBLEM WE’RE TRYING TO SOLVE? HOW DO YOU WORK TOWARDS THAT WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION, AND ACROSS THE SECTOR AS A WHOLE?

At most events it was reiterated that whatever innovation took place, it should be first and foremost ‘customer focused’. If it doesn’t benefit the customer, forget about it.

In Victoria, Christine Mackenzie said it was absolutely critical to clarify the problem that innovation seeks to solve, and suggested visiting designthinkingforlibraries.com to find tools to work through that identification process.

The WA panel all agreed that innovation must be useful and not change for change’s sake. Alison Sutherland identified the safety and future accessibility of both physical and digital collections as fundamental.

Queenslanders considered ‘random acts of digitisation’, and questioned if we always knew why we were taking on digitisation projects, and whether we had reviewed the need to do so in relation to the bigger picture.

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‘For being the 2nd oldest profession, tonight has demonstrated how much we have adapted and innovated over time #libraryleaders @ALIAVic.’

Jo Freeman in SA also agreed that it’s very easy to lose focus if we become distracted by every technological trend.

The old cataloguing chestnut was mentioned at the ACT forum. We can sometimes be pedants for things that no longer really matter to our users, and can be more worried about pleasing ourselves or following outdated rules and conventions. Professor Harriet Edquist suggested that our core values should remain the same, while everything else around them could change.

In NSW, it was suggested that the ‘innovation sweet spot’ is to identify what it is that we do well and what is unique to our industry.

IN YOUR ORGANISATION OR PRACTICE, HOW DO YOU PROVIDE THE OPPORTUNITY FOR INDIVIDUALS TO FOCUS ON IMPROVEMENT, INNOVATION AND CHANGE? HOW DO YOU GET IDEAS INTO ACTIONS?

Christine Mackenzie said that from the funds given every year by the government for ‘local priorities’, she sets aside some for research and development and takes advice from her staff as they know what their customers want.

The concept that an organisation must develop a culture of ideas and creativity to be innovative was reflected across the country. ‘Fail forward’, ‘okay to fail’, ‘fail fast and fail often’, and ‘failure is part of an innovative organisation’ were phrases heard repeatedly. Leaders need to include risk management as part of the equation, and

budgeting needed to be entrepreneurial – flexible enough to allow for failure. The National Library Director General, Anne-Marie Schwirtlich, said it was essential to continually plan for the future.

There was a general view that staff should be allowed time and space to ‘think, link and tinker’. Queensland panellists reiterated the importance of supporting staff to attend forums and conferences, to learn from and share ideas with a wide range of peers.

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'Getting human resources right' was a common theme. It is important to have the right people in your team and not carry those who do not share the vision for innovation or who do not possess the right skills or attitude. Others highlighted the usefulness of having a variety of skills and viewpoints represented, and that staff were the most valuable asset for any organisation. NSW made reference to US business guru Jim Collins's theory of the importance of 'the right people on the bus' as expressed in his book *Good to Great*. On a similar theme, the Queensland forum spoke of investing in individuals with potential, not just focusing on those with experience.

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST INNOVATIVE DEVELOPMENT YOU HAVE SEEN IN YOUR ORGANISATION OR OTHER LIBRARY SERVICES IN AUSTRALIA OR INTERNATIONALLY OVER THE LAST THREE YEARS?

'Ideas are cheap, true innovators implement ideas.', one commented.

Patti Manolis said it was important to look for ideas internationally, and Kate Davis said we should look outside our industry for ideas and approaches that can be repurposed for our contexts.

Trove was given a lot of love across Australia. The application programming interface (API) was cited as an element that embodied useful and significant innovation.

Digital-based innovation, such as touchscreens, QR codes for e-resources and the like were often referred to and in WA, Constance Wiebrands stressed that great innovation is not necessarily 'customer-facing'. An impressive innovation in her view are the improvements to the procurement service at Curtin University that meet the requirements of electronic resources and licensing. In Queensland, 3D modelling, open data, mass digitisation and transcription were nominated as significant. In South Australia, the statewide One Card program that allows access to all public libraries was nominated as a favourite improvement. In NSW, Alex Byrne was pleased with the way SLNSW collected and preserved social media

activity relating to the Lindt Café siege in December 2014, supporting the notion that our role should include the reflection of our contemporary culture.


Several participants and panellists highlighted non-digital innovation. David Fricker from National Archives of Australia spoke about the development of innovative partnerships with Ancestry.com and the History Channel. He said that we are more powerful than we think we are, and should seek to leverage that power in the pursuit of innovation. NAA have flipped their mantra from 'storage' to 'access' and pursue innovation under that broad goal. Pursuing partnerships with other sectors and business was also a recommendation from South Australia.

Other topics that arose from around Australia included innovative human resource management; looking at staffing and culture; formal programs that allowed staff to take time out to think and try new things; rebranding library jobs and reframing what we do to highlight new possibilities to our users, our partners and ourselves.



We thank Ex Libris, without whom these events would not have been possible, for supporting our sector in such a valuable way.

We are in the early planning phases for some more excellent Leadership and Innovation events for 2016, so please keep an eye out for announcements about these events later this year.

Follow the #libraryleaders hashtag on Twitter for a review of thoughts on last year's events. 

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