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# Networks, Networking and Computers - but what about the people?

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#### The Workplace Environment for Libraries - Overview

Few would deny that libraries as workplaces have changed tremendously in the last decade. For libraries, the pace of change, especially technological change, has been rapid. Meanwhile, the demands of our clients and their information requirements have also become more sophisticated. In a world where it is more readily recognised that information is power, the role and place of libraries within organisations and society generally has taken on a new dimension.

The range of knowledge, skills and abilities now required by library staff at all levels to work in this environment is quite complex and very different to a decade ago.

Libraries in Australia, like those world-wide, have experienced changes in electronic communication, and in networking technologies and facilities that are providing greater capabilities to control and access information. The industry in Australia is experiencing the impact of more powerful computers, increasing interaction between databases, sophisticated computing interfaces, and technologies for transmitting voice, image and data simultaneously. With the removal of geographical boundaries in the generation, distribution and consumption of information, Australian libraries are increasingly part of a world-wide information network. All this impacts on library staff, especially those who completed their initial education and training some time ago.

The resulting challenge for individual staff and employers is to ensure a workplace culture that recognises that continuous upgrading and energising of knowledge, skills and abilities is a critical success factor for survival in the libraries of the 21st century.

In this modern technological world and in an information age, how are employers ensuring they have a workforce capable of providing quality client service?

#### **The Australian Response**

In Australia, the library industry has in part responded by developing Library Industry Competency Standards, which have been endorsed by the country's peak education and training body, the National Training Board (renamed the Australian National Training Authority - ANTA, in 1996).

The movement to develop Competency Standards within Australia over the last decade has been part of a wider agenda involving workplace reform and a movement to improve the skills level of the nation's workforce through the development of a

comprehensive set of nationally endorsed competency standards for Australian library workers.

This paper overviews those developments as guided by the Federal Labor Government over the decade 1986–1996. It also looks at how Competency Standards fit into these developments, both at the macro (industry level) and the micro (enterprise level). Some case study examples from the Library and Information Service (LIS) at Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Western Australia, are used to highlight the value of competency standards for individual employers.

#### The Australian National Workplace Reform Agenda (1987 - 1996)

The competency standards movement in Australia began around 1988 and was part of a much broader national workplace reform agenda embarked upon by the Federal Labor Government to ensure Australia's international competitiveness.

In addition to the development of competency standards, other key features of the Federal Government's reform agenda were award restructuring, enterprise bargaining and the development of a new competency based system of vocational education and training.

The key aims of the Australian national training reform agenda during this period included:

- the introduction of flexible training pathways to meet individual and industry needs
- the transferability and portability of skills within/across industries, enhancing career path options
- the establishment of nationally recognised qualifications and course accreditation procedures
- the development of articulation and pathways between courses and institutions.

Underpinning these features of training reform was the development of national industry competency standards, which are statements that set out the knowledge, skills and their application required for effective performance in employment. Competency standards form the linchpin of the range of training and workplace reforms that are geared to the development of a national, industry-driven and relevant vocational education and training system. Associated aspects of reform include the development of competency based training and assessment, and the recognition of prior learning.

### **National Competency Standards**

The move to develop competency standards in Australia was announced in 1989 by the Hon. John Dawkins, then Federal Minister for Employment, Education and Training (Dawkins, 1989).

Competency Standards are statements that set out the knowledge, skills and their application required for effective performance in employment. Such Standards

provide clear benchmarks for the training system in developing and delivering courses relevant to workplace requirements.

Competency standards are also the means by which industry expresses its education and training requirements. Through the development of industry competency standards, industries are able to make explicit statements to education and training providers about the skills and knowledge they require from people in the workplace.

While competency standards will inform those responsible for curriculum development regarding industries' needs, competency standards statements are not curriculum documents. While education and training curricula will encompass competency standards, they will also contain additional information on context, content, process and so on.

Competency Standards can state what is required at three levels:

- 1. Enterprise competency requirements for people relevant to a particular enterprise are expressed; this can include job and worksite specific competencies;
- 2. Industry requirements that are common to an industry or a sector of an industry are expressed in a way that is relevant to the general requirements of enterprises in the industry; and,
- 3. Cross industry those requirements that are common across two or more industries. These can be drawn on for development of standards at the other two levels to enhance commonality.

There are also general/generic competencies that underlie all work, such as the Mayer Key Competencies (Mayer Committee, 1992). The teaching of the Key Competencies has generally been incorporated into post-compulsory school and vocational curricula. The Key Competencies are:

- collecting, analysing and organising information
- communicating ideas and information
- planning and organising activities
- working with others and in teams
- using mathematical ideas and techniques
- solving problems
- using technology
- cultural understanding.

The explanatory pamphlet produced by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) provides a useful diagrammatic representation of competency standards and their link with employment (ALIA, 1993). The ALIA Board of Education series of five workshop publications, Competency Standards and the Library Industry (1995), is designed to provide a perspective on the position of competency standards, in particular the Library Industry Competency Standards, in relation to the National Training Reform Agenda.

**Figure 1.** Competency Standards and Employment Where they fit in the reform agenda Source: Australian Library & Information Association, Information Sheet

## **Competency Based Training (CBT)**

CBT is concerned with what a person will be able to do as a result of vocational education and training. It focuses on the person being able in practice to demonstrate the ability to apply the necessary skills and underpinning knowledge required.

The aim of CBT is to ensure that the end result of training meets the required standards of industry. Therefore, if competency standards have been established for a particular industry, CBT should reflect those standards.

Under CBT people receive recognition and certification based on their skills or knowledge, instead of on the length of time spent in training. In the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector throughout Australia, it is now increasingly a requirement that vocational education and training be competency based. The benefits for Australian Workplaces of Competency Standards and CBT involve:

- being clear about what people need to be able to do;
- basing training on those identified outcomes; and
- certifying that people can actually do what has been identified as needed.

Enterprises and particular industries can achieve a wide range of specific benefits from competency standards, in most cases without the existence of a national framework. However, to achieve the additional benefits to be gained from directly influencing the formal education and training system, a structured framework for

national competency standards is needed. It is part of ensuring that what industry wants (stated as a competency standard) comes back in outcomes of training (represented by a credential issued to a learner). The traditional approach was curriculum and qualifications developed by education and training providers driving the skills which people brought to work.

The benefits of using competency standards accrue to employers and employees at the enterprise level, to employers and employees for each industry and more broadly across the economy, and to Australia as a whole.

#### **National Library Competency Standards**

The Library Industry Competency Standards (Arts Training Australia, 1995) were endorsed by the than National training Board in March 1995. The Standards cover a diverse range of work from creative and professional to technical and support roles at operational through to management levels.

Industry looked at the kinds of work done in libraries and defined three broad work areas or 'streams':

- Working with Clients
- Working with Information
- Working with Others

These streams can be divided into seven smaller subsets called 'fields'. They are the critical functions that workers need to perform within each stream. For example, Working with Clients has two fields:

- Providing services directly to clients
- Maintaining client awareness and education

The basic component of competency standards is called a 'unit'. A field can have any number of units.

Units are ranked in six industry competency levels as well as in fields and streams. Some units are essential competencies everyone must have at a particular level, regardless of the type of library in which they work. These are designated common units. All other units are specific units.

To demonstrate competency at a particular industry competency level, the common units and a certain number of specific units must be accomplished. Related units reflect competencies in similar work at different industry competency levels.

Units may occur in more than one stream or industry level.

#### **Competency Standards in Employment**

While Competency Standards are being developed primarily to inform vocational education and training, they are emerging as a new management tool, offering employers a new human resources management tool. (< AHREF="#ref10">Paris,

1994). Competency Standards can be used to improve organisational and industry efficiency by ensuring that vocational education and training are directly linked to the expressed needs of industry. The application of competency standards at the individual enterprise level requires both workers and managers to develop an appreciation of their uses.

When competency standards are in place, they offer individual enterprises many uses in human resources management, apart from the very important one of providing the basis and focus of training on skills, behaviours, action outcomes and understanding. Uses to which employers may put competency standards include:

- helping to define positions/jobs
- helping in the recruitment process
- assisting performance reviews
- setting and reviewing performance objectives.

As indicated by Paris (1994) Competency Standards lend themselves to a range of applications in the hands of creative individuals or organisations, and, in conjunction with the right organisational culture, can provide a sound basis for organisational and individual effectiveness and continual improvement. Progressively, Standards may be incorporated into individual Enterprise Agreements.

## Competency Standards at the Library and Information Service at Curtin University of Technology

At Curtin LIS we are managing the reconciliation of industry competency standards and enterprise competency standards (known as ROCS - or Results Oriented Career System). Again, the Curtin situation is part of a much broader picture. Figure 2 summarises the Curtin context.

**Figure 2:** Context for Competency Standards at Curtin (ROCS: Result Oriented Career Systems for General Staff)

#### **Conclusions**

This paper has attempted to overview the development of Library Industry Competency Standards in Australia against the context of the changing international information environment and to briefly describe how changes are being implemented both at the national and individual workplace levels.

For those keen to learn more about the Australian experiences, a new publication by Williamson and White (1996) provides more details.

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