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## **Are We There Yet? Do We Have the Staff We Need to Meet the Needs of New Generation Learners?**

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# **ARE WE THERE YET? DO WE HAVE THE STAFF WE NEED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF NEW GENERATION LEARNERS?**

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## **Abstract**

Libraries of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are facing different challenges and opportunities in meeting the information needs of a new generation of users. It is important to ensure that libraries have the right number of people with the right skills and attributes in the right place at the right time. There are a number of issues that need to be considered to achieve this.

This paper summarises the key findings from research into the trends and issues affecting workforce planning in New Zealand university libraries. These are not unique to New Zealand and other locations may benefit from these findings.

First and foremost it is essential to recruit and retain staff who are skilled and innovative as well as flexible and adaptable. The staff we recruit should also reflect the increasingly transnational, diverse users we serve.

Alongside the need for new and talented staff are the concerns around the retirement of experienced staff over the next decade. This is a double-edged sword as many will retire but on the other hand many older people are working longer. This requires the fostering of knowledge transfer opportunities in both directions and career development pathways for younger staff.

## **Are we there yet? Do we have the staff we need to meet the needs of new generation learners?**

This paper summarises the key findings from research into the trends and issues affecting workforce planning in New Zealand university libraries. These are not unique to New Zealand and other locations may benefit from these findings. I conducted interviews with three different groups of participants. The first group was senior library staff, in most cases the university librarian from seven of the eight university libraries. The second was a very small group of qualified librarians born in or after 1975 who responded to a call for volunteers from the three universities with a campus in Auckland. The third group was senior human resources staff based in Auckland who provided a broader university context.

The participants were asked to identify what they considered to be the main issues and trends affecting universities and libraries in New Zealand in the next five to ten years and how they impact on workforce planning. Not surprisingly these were very similar to the issues and trends affecting libraries in other countries such as Australia, the UK, Canada and the USA. They include technological changes, library staff skills, service models, research support, funding and accountability.

## **1. University/Library trends and issues**

### **1.1. Technological changes affecting libraries**

The participants agreed that advancing and converging technologies are having a truly disruptive effect on the library as we know it and it will be important to take these changes into account as libraries increasingly interact with users in an online environment via the library website, learning management systems, mobile technologies and social networking tools. It is important that librarians work with the complexity and uncertainty of the digital future to ensure they are able to meet the needs of the new generation learners (Walter & Williams, 2010).

It was also agreed that cloud computing or software as a service should be more fully explored to further enhance user experience by providing rapid and seamless access to the resources they require (Corley, 1999).

### **1.2. Library staff skills**

Highly-skilled, e-savvy staff are a key element for the future if libraries are going to remain relevant in a primarily digital world. This will mean changing the staff profile and perhaps reducing the number of staff requiring a professional library qualification and considering qualifications and expertise in other areas such as data management and curation. This brings into question the relevancy of the Library and Information Science (LIS) qualifications and New Zealand is not alone in raising concerns in this area. It was felt that the educators do not really understand the increasingly complex library environment and the needs of academic libraries, particularly in the areas of information technology and data management and that the programmes need to be broader especially in the digital environment and scholarly communications areas. There is concern that new graduates are not adequately equipped for the jobs they are applying for. It was also acknowledged that libraries need to be looking more broadly for specialist skills in areas such as business, marketing, web development and computer science.

The participants stated that universities need to be more twenty-first century and aware of international trends, so that they can plan for the unknown and keep a finger on the pulse of changes in service models. A major shake-up of scholarly communication and knowledge management over the next five years will impact on the skills and knowledge required by staff to lead these changes.

Information literacy skills have become ever more important as the knowledge landscape grows in volume and complexity (Law, 2010). The participants agreed that it is timely to look more broadly at academic literacy which takes into account areas such as digital rights management, copyright, accessibility compliance, reference citation and plagiarism. These are all areas in which librarians are well-versed and could provide assistance to staff and students (Sutherland, Torricelli, & Karg, 2002).

Ongoing change is an important factor and librarians need to continually look at the relevance of the library within the institution and if necessary adapt library operations and the skills of librarians to keep abreast of these changes. Strong leadership and management are very important to ensure that these changes are implemented so that the library retains its relevance within the university.

### **1.3. Service models**

The provision of services that are relevant and serve the needs of new generation learners go hand-in-hand with skill development, as without the necessary skills staff will not be equipped to adapt from traditional librarianship to working in the virtual environment to meet these demands.

Teaching practices are set to move towards blended models of online and face-to-face teaching and libraries need to adapt and ensure their services remain relevant in this environment (Sutherland et al., 2002; Vandenabeele, 2008). To achieve this librarians need to take a far more proactive role and engage with academics, information technology specialists and online learning specialists to ensure they are equipped to provide relevant and innovative services at the point of need (Harle, 2009; Keiser, 2010; Law, 2010; Sutherland et al., 2002; Vandenabeele, 2008)

As library resources become increasingly digital and available online 24/7 and print collections remain static or dwindle there has been much speculation about the future of the library as place and the services of librarians (Harle, 2009; McDonald, 2010). It was acknowledged that physical library space needs to change to meet student needs for study space, wireless methods of communication and social networking. Libraries should avoid a silo mentality and work more closely with other areas such as student services and information technology services to provide a seamless customer service across the university in both the physical and virtual environments.

### **1.4. Research support**

Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF) and the drive to increase research capacity are important issues for New Zealand universities and this will continue to be the case in the next five to ten years in line with the New Zealand Tertiary Education Strategy 2010 – 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2010). The importance of the need to develop and support the research capabilities of the university was discussed by participants and the need for the development of skills that enable library staff to provide greater assistance to researchers was identified as essential.

As we know the growth of the internet and Web 2.0 technologies have offered opportunities for international collaboration of researchers and the sharing of not only research outputs but the research data too. This raises a number of questions around whether libraries have a role to play in the area of e-research by undertaking roles in open access publishing initiatives, metadata provision, data management, copyright and intellectual property advice and training in research skills (Herman & Gioia, 2001; Stokker & Hallam, 2009). Libraries in other countries have to a lesser or greater extent begun work in this area but it is an area that still requires considerable attention and more importantly funding in New Zealand.

### **1.5. Funding and accountability**

Underpinning all the issues mentioned above is the need for ongoing financial support from the university funding agencies. The impacts of the global economic situation as well as the impact of government funding were raised as a major concern as all New Zealand universities rely predominantly on government funding with additional revenue coming from international students. There was concern that there may be insufficient funding for the higher education sector in the next

five to ten years and that this will make it difficult to compete in the global market and more particularly Australia for the recruitment of talented staff and students. This will also impact on library budgets and affect both staffing and the acquisition of library resources. The Christchurch earthquakes have had a significant impact on the two universities based there as well as the New Zealand economy more broadly. However, New Zealand university libraries have not suffered the budget cuts that other parts of the world have.

Like the rest of the university the library is increasingly required to demonstrate its value within the university. It is necessary to understand who is using library services and more importantly who is not and why and to what extent this is impacting on their success as a student or researcher (Buerhaus, Staiger, & Auerbach, 2000; Keiser, 2010). The ACRL Report on 'The value of academic libraries' suggest a number of steps that libraries can take to demonstrate their value including collecting information on user behaviour and linking this to retention and completion rates, tracking library contributions to research projects and measuring the degree of support for teaching staff (Oakleaf, 2010).

## **2. Workforce Planning**

Taking these contextual issues into account it is important that workforce planning is part of the library strategic planning process to ensure that they have the right number of staff with the right skills and competencies to meet present and future needs with budgetary constraints (Boxall, Macky, & Rasmussen, 2003; Gruman & Saks, 2011; Stokker & Hallam, 2009). One of the challenges of workforce planning is to build a workforce that is flexible, adaptable and able to anticipate and embrace the changing environment so should include strategies for recruitment and retention of talented staff and make provision for training and development, succession planning and leadership development (Graham & Duffield, 2010).

Universities New Zealand HR Directors recently commissioned a report on workforce planning for academic staff but to date there has no formal workforce planning for the New Zealand university library sector. Some of the New Zealand University libraries have undertaken staff reviews and made changes to their staffing models to accommodate the changing library landscape but none has a formal workforce plan in place.

The impending retirement of older workers and the apparent dearth of younger workers to replace them is causing concern in many organisations including libraries. Succession planning as part of the workforce planning process is thus important to ensure continuity of leadership and transfer and retention of organisational knowledge (Barnett & Davis, 2008; Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Groves, 2007).

### **2.1. Ageing workforce**

The ageing workforce is already an issue for universities and this is set to become an area of increasing concern in the near future, with a number of staff choosing to work beyond the age of sixty-five, particularly as there is no mandatory retirement age in New Zealand.

The age demographic in New Zealand university libraries indicate that the majority of the workforce is over the age of 45, which is very similar to the statistics in the US, UK, Canada, Australia and other parts of the world.

This phenomenon presents a number of challenges for employers with regard to human resource management and workforce planning (Buyens, Van Dijk, Dewilde, & deVos, 2009; McKinnon,

2010). It is important that policies and procedures with regard to recruitment, retention, training and development, promotions and turnover are put in place to deal with these changing workforce demographics. There should also be policies in place that encourage and promote investment in older workers and ensure succession planning and the transfer of knowledge when these older workers retire (Hedge, Borman, & Lammelin, 2006; McKinnon, 2010).

The participants raised concerns about the difficulties of encouraging older staff who have not kept up-to-date with changes and are not prepared to move out of their comfort zone to update their skills or exit the profession. The financial uncertainty as a result of the earthquakes has impacted on delayed retirement intentions for some staff. However, it was also acknowledged that some of the most valuable and productive staff are longer serving staff and that it is important to ensure that this knowledge and expertise is retained and successfully transferred through succession planning.

## **2.2. Recruitment**

To obtain the skills needed to take the library forward it is important to ensure that any new staff recruited are flexible, adaptable and innovative enough to take up the challenges libraries are facing to retain their value in universities. This needs to be balanced against the fact that there is still a large contingent of older workers in the workforce who will be retiring at some point but this may not be soon enough to make the necessary transformation in the workforce (Lewis, 2010).

In most instances the libraries in New Zealand have very little capacity for creating new positions and recruiting additional staff so it is important that existing staff are prepared for change and upskilled accordingly and that very careful consideration is given to recruiting to vacancies when they do occur.

The interviewees talked of some of the barriers to attracting staff to jobs in university libraries, including the perception that it is not a very 'sexy' job, competition from other sectors such as information management, special and public libraries, a perceived lack of awareness of the career development opportunities available in university libraries and low salaries but most acknowledged that this is not necessarily a major barrier.

The need to recruit outside of New Zealand particularly for specialist skills in certain subject areas as well as leadership and management skills was raised and the brain drain of young people leaving New Zealand was also mentioned

## **2.3. Employer branding**

Traditionally branding has been used by commercial organisations as a marketing tool to sell their services or products in a competitive market, it is often linked to the business strategy and aims to identify the point of difference from other similar products in the marketplace (Phillips & Gully, 2009; Sutherland et al., 2002). Developing an employer brand to attract and retain talented staff is becoming increasingly important to identify what is unique and special about the organisation, what sets it apart from its competitors and emphasise why it is a good place to work (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Business and Economic Research (BERL), 2010; Phillips & Gully, 2009; Sutherland et al., 2002).

I feel that it is timely for university libraries to pay greater attention to employer branding as they compete for talented staff in an increasingly competitive and global market. Successful employer branding is integral to an organisation becoming an employer of choice attract, optimise and retain talented employees and gain the competitive edge in an aggressive market, however, not

all employers understand the concept (Business and Economic Research (BERL), 2010; Herman & Gioia, 2001).

#### **2.4. Employer of choice**

There was some uncertainty amongst the participants about what being an employer of choice really meant for libraries but it was acknowledged that it should be articulated in the workforce plan.

It was felt that offering staff a clearly defined career pathway supported by development opportunities was an important aspect. An employer of choice is one who develops innovative human resource programmes that benefit employees and add to the status and reputation of the organisation so that it becomes the first choice workplace of excellent candidates (Sutherland et al., 2002). To gain and maintain a reputation as an employer of choice the organisation needs to treat its employees well. Visionary and inspired leadership, meaningful and challenging work, career growth and development opportunities, work/life balance options, excellent communication, fair treatment and reasonable compensation and benefits are important characteristics of an employer of choice (Herman & Gioia, 2001; Sutherland et al., 2002).

Being an employer of choice and making the library an attractive place to work is important to attract staff to the profession in light of the generally “negative image of the profession”, the “less than competitive salaries” and “the increased competition from other sectors” (Li & Bryan, 2010; Stokker & Hallam, 2009, p. 562). I feel that this is an area that libraries really need to concentrate on to attract and retain the staff needed in the future, particularly as we look at ways of attracting new recruits to the library profession.

#### **2.5. Recruitment to the library profession**

This I feel is closely linked to being an employer of choice as libraries look to attracting talented staff to the profession. Research indicates that the younger generations X and Y are smaller cohorts than the ageing Baby Boomer generation (McKinnon, 2010). This and the fact that there are many more career options available means that there is already and will continue to be greater competition for talented staff. Thus it is imperative that library leaders give serious consideration to attracting our new generation learners to the profession. As university library leaders we are in the fortunate position of being closely connected to these people as student helpers in the library or more generally across campus. If we don't sow the seed nobody else will.

#### **2.6. Retention**

Once talented employees have been recruited it is important that they become fully engaged and productive and are retained as high turnover can be very costly to the organisation (Armstrong, 2011). However, staff retention is not an issue in libraries and in fact there is greater concern about staff staying too long. However this may change as the number of younger staff grows as they tend not to stay as long as the older cohort (Nixon, 2008).

Participants mentioned a number of reasons why staff tend to remain in their jobs for a long time. Firstly staff enjoy working in a university because they are good employers that are work/family oriented and provide opportunities to work in a stimulating environment. Some of the other benefits of working in university libraries include good professional development opportunities and generous annual leave provisions.

## **2.7. Motivation and engagement**

One of the challenges is to recognise what motivates and engages staff and to harness this to increase the productivity of both the individuals and the team as a whole (Patota, Scharwtz, & Schwartz, 2007). There are a number of factors involved but flexible work arrangements and a degree of autonomy which allow for some control of one's work arrangements have been shown to be very important (Williamson, 2008). Interesting and challenging work are very important motivators for younger staff and Munde (2010) points out that it will be difficult to retain talented younger librarians if they are not able to see a challenging career pathway ahead of them, with necessary training and development opportunities.

Retention of the knowledge and expertise of the ageing workforce is an important consideration as they begin to make retirement plans, but at the same time ensuring they are equipped with the necessary skills to provide the services in a 21<sup>st</sup> century library while still part of the workforce (Kealy, 2009).

## **2.8. Training and development**

The provision of training and development opportunities are an essential element in workforce planning and it is important that the training and development plan is linked to the organisation's strategic plan to ensure that it is relevant (Kealy, 2009; Zauha & Potter, 2009). It should be strategic and sustainable in the current environment of financial constraints and yet innovative enough to cater for the rapid technological developments and changes to service delivery models (Stokker & Hallam, 2009; Zauha & Potter, 2009)

It was generally agreed training and development opportunities available in NZ universities are very good and provide a suitable range of options to enable staff to keep their skills current. Staff are also strongly encouraged and supported to complete a professional library qualification, which is still essential for most professional positions.

Formal coaching and mentoring opportunities do not seem to be widely available but this may be due to the fact that there are no formal mentoring and coaching opportunities rather that it happens on a more informal basis.

## **2.9. Leadership and management development**

The need for support from the university and library management to progress their career by means of professional development opportunities was identified as important by the younger staff participants. Leadership and management opportunities such as leadership courses, practical experience, project management and a mentoring programme were also identified as important for career progression.

The slow turnover rate amongst staff in leadership roles as was seen as a frustrating barrier to career progression for the younger staff participants and there was some acknowledgement that this may necessitate a move either within New Zealand or further afield to achieve their career goals but personal circumstances may make this difficult. It was also acknowledged that moving into a knowledge management role would probably allow a more rapid career progression. Worryingly, other career options are under consideration for some, the options include knowledge or information management, a law library or a role in statistics and studying with the intention of moving into a career in a completely different field.



The success of any organisation is dependent on the quality of its leaders and managers thus leadership and management development is a vital element of workforce and succession planning (Dessler, 2012; Macky, 2008; Phillips & Gully, 2009). It is often necessary to 'shoulder tap' and encourage emerging leaders, as they do not always recognise their on potential or are not confident enough to step forward to attend a leadership programme. These programmes have been shown to have value in preparing staff for senior management positions (Arnold, Nickel, & Williams, 2008). These courses in isolation are not sufficient, they need to be followed up with ongoing mentorship, networking with colleagues and project and other leadership opportunities (Arnold et al., 2008; Fallon, Maxwell, McCaffrey, & McMahan, 2011).

Replacing older workers in leadership and management positions when they retire will increasingly present a challenge for organisations. Research shows that about 60% of library staff planning to retire in the next five years are in senior and middle management roles while only 10% of the younger staff indicate the desire to move into a senior management role within the next ten years. This raises concerns about whether there will be sufficient staff with the knowledge, skills, experience and interest to replace those in these leadership positions (Hallam, 2007; Munde, 2010). Thus it is essential to develop existing staff to ensure they are equipped with leadership skills to replace current leaders as they retire (Nixon, 2008; Zauha & Potter, 2009).

#### **2.10. Remuneration**

Remuneration for librarians has traditionally been adequate although not very competitive but research shows that in most cases this is not a major factor for those considering librarianship as a profession (Hardesty, 2002; Stokker & Hallam, 2009). Intrinsic rewards such as a good work environment, intellectual stimulation and work/life balance options have been cited as more important than high salaries, particularly for people who enter the profession as a second career (Hardesty, 2002). However, competitive remuneration is seen to be more of a concern for the younger generation librarians (Lewis, 2010; Sayers, 2007) and this was confirmed by the younger staff participants. This can be attributed to the fact that there is greater competition for their skills in the market place and also that libraries will need to employ staff with more specialist skills in the future (Lewis, 2010).

With the financial constraints in most universities there is no real prospect of significant increases in staff salaries in the foreseeable future. This could be an issue when trying to attract younger people to the profession especially when a recent study in New Zealand found that a fifth of new graduates with a bachelors degree expected to be earning a six figure salary by the time they turn thirty! We expect library professionals to hold a bachelors and masters degree and it is highly unlikely that this will be the case for them.

#### **2.11. Diversity**

Recruitment and retention strategies need to take the issue of diversity into account as the staff demographic should reflect the diversity of the clients served by the library. As the new generation learners become increasingly transnational, technologically savy, with a "diversity of opinion, perspectives, skills, knowledge and mindsets" (Li & Bryan, 2010, p. 265) so should the library staff.

### **3. Conclusion**

While the discussion in this paper has been based on the results of my research in New Zealand university libraries research indicates that most of the trends and issues raised are relevant internationally.

In the course of my research it has become evident that some libraries have developed workforce plans but many have not. I believe that workforce planning is essential to ensure that strategies are developed to prepare existing staff for the transformation of libraries going forward and that talented staff with the necessary skills and who are adaptable, flexible and innovative are attracted and recruited to and importantly retained in the profession.

Developing an employer brand and becoming an employer of choice are vital as part of the process as libraries increasingly compete in the global, highly competitive market for talented staff.

Are we there yet? Do we have the staff we need to meet the needs of new generation learners? I don't think the journey of change ever really ends, we need to be keeping up with new developments and challenges and be prepared to adapt to the changes in order to continually meet the needs of our new generation learners.

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