Using workforce structures to enable staff retention and development
An academic library case study
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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine the practical context and implications surrounding a workforce review undertaken by the University of Tasmania (UTAS) Library and the measures taken to address the key problems it identified, particularly those relating to the recruitment and retention of new and existing liaison librarians.

Design/methodology/approach – Workforce planning methodologies were used to identify the gaps in the Library’s projected staffing needs and current situation. Two of the major changes implemented to address these gaps were the restructuring of liaison librarian positions, and the implementation of a development and articulation structure for new librarians.

Findings – The workforce planning process identified a number of key gaps in capacity, particularly in terms of the ability to retain existing liaison librarians, and the recruitment of new librarians to anticipate the impending impact of a significantly aged workforce. After the restructuring and development framework were implemented UTAS Library found itself with an increase in new librarian staff, a structure that better reflected skills of staff, and enabled greater flexibility and movement across levels.

Originality/value – The paper provides a practical example of workforce planning, position restructuring and formal development structures for new librarians in an academic library.

Keywords New librarians, Academic libraries, Older workers, Retention, Recruitment, Australia

Paper type Case study

1. Succession planning and the ageing workforce: an overview

The “greying” of the library and information sector (LIS) has become an important area of attention over the last few decades as the retirement of large sections of the current workforce looms. Since the term first started appearing in the industry lexicon in the late 1980s the literature has increasingly begun to recognize the distinct shifts in workforce demographics, and the impacts these trends present (Berry, 1986; Wilder, 1995; St Lifer, 2000; Hutley and Solomons, 2004).

Certainly these trends are felt in Australia, with a comprehensive 2006 profile of the national LIS industry reporting that 49.9 per cent of librarians were over the age of 46,
and 16.1 per cent of that cohort over the age of 56, while 31.7 per cent – close to one third – reported plans to retire by 2015 (Hallam, 2007, pp. 25-9). While there is evidence to suggest that the global economic downturn has seen a delay in the retirement plans of older workers, the insulative effect is not likely to be long-lasting; rather, it simply delays the inevitable onset of retirement among a large and experienced segment of the library workforce (Mercer, 2009; O’Loughlin et al., 2010).

Despite a growing recognition of the impending impacts of the ageing workforce, there is a tendency in some of the literature to focus simply on the retention of older workers as a remedy to the loss of organizational knowledge (Arthur, 1998; Steffen and Lietzau, 2009); like a reliance on the Global Financial Crisis to ease retirement impacts, this is largely a delay tactic and one which has the potential to increase the retirement burden as new librarians leave the profession in disillusionment at the lack of opportunities for employment or development (Louis, 1980; Holt and Strock, 2005; Benn and Moore, 2009).

The last decade in particular has seen the emergence of a more comprehensive and sustainable shift towards succession planning, with workforce planning methodologies featuring as one of the key tools in ensuring continuity and regeneration in library workforces during this time of intense demographic change (Whitmell, 2004; McCarthy, 2005; Hallam, 2007; Knight, 2007; Topper, 2008; Potter, 2009). It is within this practical and theoretical framework that this case study is positioned.

Finally, it appears that there has been little examination of the structural enablers of new librarians’ skill development within LIS literature, which tends to focus instead on bridging the gap between library education and employer expectations (Del Bosque and Lampert, 2009), on professional socialization (Oud, 2008), or on targeting the individual behaviours of new librarians (Schachter, 2009). The practical experience of the development of an integrated program of structural development and support for new librarians will be explored here.

2. The University of Tasmania Library workforce planning project
The issue of workforce planning is becoming increasingly pertinent across the Australian library and information industry. This is particularly true in the state of Tasmania, which, with a small population and markedly ageing workforce, is likely to be especially impacted by the effects of generational change and staff retention and recruitment in the near future.

Recognising this problem, the University of Tasmania (UTAS) Library initiated a comprehensive workforce planning project over 2005-2006 to identify and address the key issues impacting on the effective retention and development of new and experienced staff. The process aimed to facilitate the smooth management of short and long term transitions as people enter and leave the workplace, and as the needs of the workplace change. To this end, the basic elements of the process were:

- stocktaking the current workforce;
- forecasting future needs;
- planning to meet these needs; and
- implementing measures to address these needs (Gorman and Cornish, 1995).

Structures to enable staff retention
“Stocktaking” the current workforce revealed, among other things, that:

- the overall age profile of the Library workforce was comparable with the national average for the sector, with 60 per cent of staff over 45 years of age;
- 34.3 per cent of professional staff were over 55 years of age – double the national average for librarians;
- staff turnover increased from 12.6 per cent to 19.1 per cent in 2005 and was likely to continue to increase;
- 70 per cent of terminations were among staff in positions classified as entry level; and
- 67-90 per cent of staff across all positions exceeded the minimum requirements for their classification level (University of Tasmania, 2006, pp. 11-25).

Having detailed the demographic profile of the current Library workforce, attention could then be turned to identifying and assessing the future needs of the Library, and of the capacity of the current workforce to meet them. This process of forecasting was initially carried out through extensive consultation with a variety of stakeholders, who articulated the future directions of the University of Tasmania generally and of the UTAS Library specifically. A gap analysis was then undertaken to identify those areas where needs were not currently able to be met, and to outline the agenda for addressing any such disparities.

The particular areas of forecasted need identified by the gap analysis were:

- the need for greater mobility across positions for professional development opportunities (moderate gap);
- the need to facilitate opportunities for career progression (moderate gap);
- the need to recognize the changed role and requirements of liaison (critical gap); and
- the need to recruit and train new staff to address projected losses through retirement (critical gap) (University of Tasmania, 2006, pp. 82-111).

With moderate and critical gaps identified between the Library’s current capacity to meet these needs and the capacity that would actually be required to do so, the structures and practices shaping the Library’s workforce needed to undergo significant transformation. This paper examines the structures and changes that specifically related to the Library’s liaison librarians.

It is worthwhile at this point defining what liaison librarian means at UTAS; some institutions may use the term to describe a significantly different role, while others may use the term subject, or reference librarian to describe some, or all, of the duties undertaken by liaison librarians at UTAS.

UTAS liaison librarians act as the link between Schools and the Library, consulting and communicating with staff and students to provide services and resources in:

- research support (e.g. personalized consultations, advanced database training and support for postgraduate students and staff);
- teaching and learning (namely undergraduate information literacy development); and
- collection development (e.g. recommending and prioritising resources, contributing to Library-wide collection development policy).
Also included among the liaison librarians’ responsibilities are the provision of reference services and involvement in strategic planning.

3. Restructuring liaison

Gap 1: the need for greater mobility across positions
Key to this gap was the development of unintentionally divergent, location-specific position descriptions. Spread over two campuses and six separate branches, liaison librarians worked in both local branch-based and cross-campus School-based liaison teams. In the absence of a centrally-defined position framework, the different branches of the Library had independently developed a range of position descriptions encompassing a variety of roles and activities that were then all grouped together under the title “liaison librarian”. This resulted not only in a fragmented and strategically scatter-brained liaison service, it also served to entrench a static liaison structure in which little movement or flexibility within teams and across branches was possible.

Gap 2: the need to facilitate opportunities for career progression and Gap 3: the need to recognize the changed role and requirements of liaison
This was compounded by the structure of these branch and School teams. The teams comprised team leaders, classified as experienced or senior librarians at Level B, and the remaining team members, all classified as entry-level, Level A. While there is, perhaps, nothing essentially wrong with this model of team leadership, it was the dichotomous classification of team members as either senior or entry-level that was problematic. As the demographic statistics outlined earlier showed, the vast majority of librarians classified at Level A exceeded the minimum requirements of this level, and indeed most were far more experienced than the entry-level classification would imply.

Interviews with staff at entry-level positions revealed that while they would like to progress their careers within UTAS, they could see few options for doing so (University of Tasmania, 2006, p. 41). This observation was reflected in the fact that 70 per cent of all terminating staff were from positions classified as entry-level (University of Tasmania, 2006, p. 18), while a later parity analysis with equivalent institutions revealed that liaison librarians at UTAS were classified one to two levels below the industry norm (University of Tasmania, 2006, p. 69). Furthermore, the existing classification structure was not only unrepresentative of the actual skills and experience of the Level A liaison librarians in their current roles, it was even less appropriate in the context of the ongoing strategic re-alignment of liaison away from a reference service based role and towards that of highly skilled co-educators and information specialists.

Clearly, the situation was unsustainable. The measures necessary for overcoming these gaps, while significant, were in fact fairly straightforward. Following a period of consultation with the different liaison teams, a shared vision of what liaison entailed was articulated, documented, and mapped over a progressive framework of generic position descriptions that then replaced the patchwork of location-based descriptions which had evolved in the different branches. Of course, the nature of liaison work is such that the specific needs of the different Schools and Faculties make different demands on their liaison librarians; this is part of the reason the location-based
position descriptions evolved in the first place. The new, generic position descriptions provided a common structure for the broad responsibilities and goals of the role; the necessary adaptations to the unique circumstances faced by each librarian would thus be wrought not through the definition of these responsibilities, but in how they were enacted. The implementation of the new position descriptions was also coupled with the restructuring of School-based teams into a Faculty team model. This shift was designed to enable greater cross-campus strategic planning, and mirrored a broader shift in organization by UTAS as an institution (Dearden, 2008).

The next step was the systematic upwards reclassification of all Level A liaison librarians into the more representative senior level, Level B. This flattening of the previously hierarchical branch and School teams led to further structural change; the newly equalized teams would now function as self-managed teams in which leadership was no longer based on classification level but enacted through the development of specialist skills and knowledge.

While these restructuring measures bridged several of the significant gaps, they actually had the potential to create an even larger problem for the fourth and final gap to be discussed: the critical need to recruit and train new staff.

4. The liaison librarian: a developmental framework

The wholesale Level B re-classification of the “entry-level” librarians was an important and necessary step in redefining the UTAS Library workforce. It did, however, produce the unwanted side-effect of effectively locking new librarians out of opportunities to gain experience in liaison by removing the traditional entry-level pathway. Addressing this problem was fairly simple; as liaison librarians left or retired from their positions the openings would once again be advertised at Level A. However, without a system in place to formally recognize skill development at Level A there was the very real potential that this practice would eventually lead to experienced librarians facing a structural plateau in entry-level positions once again.

Over the course of 2006-2007 the Liaison Librarian: A Developmental Framework (for the sake of clarity to be hereafter referred to as the Development Framework, or simply the Framework) was developed and implemented to provide new librarians with a detailed structure for skill and knowledge development; defining a set of core capabilities and performance criteria, the Framework provided a pathway for professional recognition and promotion from Level A to B. Born of the very real practical needs of the Library, the Development Framework was also developed within the wider context of UTAS Library’s long-term aim to orient itself better as a learning organisation. Senge (1990, p. 14), one of the early proponents of this field, defines the learning organisation as “continually expanding its capacity to create its future”; Pedler et al. (1997, p. 3) expand upon this slightly to “an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and consciously transforms itself and its workers”. Taking these definitions, workforce planning can be understood as an integral process of organisational learning, facilitating the conscious transformation of the workforce at both macro and micro levels by allowing the organisation to plan for change, rather than simply reacting to it.

Designing the Framework, it was Pedler et al.’s (1997 p. 16) seventh characteristic of the learning organisation, “Enabling structures”, that provided the conceptual model for facilitating workplace learning. Enabling structures are defined as any physical,
cultural, procedural or structural feature of an organisation that provides opportunities for development both on an individual and organisational level (Pedler et al., 1997, pp. 122-4). Of Pedler et al.’s (1997, pp. 122-4) discussion of enabling structures it is the concept of scaffolding that is particularly being applied here. As the analogy implies, scaffolded enabling structures act as temporary supports for the development of permanent skills; once these skills are stable and free-standing, the temporary support can be removed. The Development Framework was designed to act as one such support.

Table I shows a segment of the Framework itself.

The first level of the Framework, Capability, outlines the broad requirements of liaison librarians; the second, Performance criteria, delineates the levels of accountability and complexity within these capabilities at levels A and B. These were extrapolated from the new generic position descriptions, and further refined as the Framework was explored in practice. It was agreed that the Framework must function as a working document, in order to accommodate the evolving context of the liaison environment.

The Learning activities column provides space for structured and non-structured activities to facilitate learning; it can be seen, however, that in the segment above, the column is nearly empty. The intention here was to allow for the necessary flexibility and open-ended learning required by the fluid nature of the liaison role, rather than prescribing a list of rigid requirements. The same approach was taken in the Types of evidence column, where suggestions for potential means of demonstrating developing knowledge, skills and capabilities can be made within each librarian’s unique liaison context.

As skills and knowledge developed, progress was charted against each capability (as shown in Table II).

Progress in each capability area was discussed and reviewed in regular meetings between the liaison librarian and his/her supervisor. In some cases documentary evidence was provided (e.g. learning plans, written feedback and other records), while in others evidence was assessed in terms of conceptual understanding, or practical demonstration of proficiency. Once development in each capability area had been discussed, documented and signed off, the librarian’s increased capacity would be reflected through a change in classification, moving from Level A to the experienced Level B.

5. Results
While the Liaison Librarian: A Developmental Framework was not intended as a strategy to exclusively attract Generation Y librarians (i.e. those born between 1978 and 1994 (Sheahan, 2005)), since the introduction of the Framework took place four out of 17 liaison positions – nearly one quarter – are now filled by new librarians of the Generation Y cohort. This is quite significant, considering that the cohort only makes up about 3 per cent of all librarians nationally (Hallam, 2007), and that at the time of the workforce plan no librarians at UTAS belonged to this age group at all (University of Tasmania, 2006, p. 14).

Feedback from these new librarians indicates that while the Framework document is initially daunting (spanning 20+ pages), once under way the process of development, description and discussion does facilitate a richer and more rapid growth.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>Performance criteria (add additional criteria as required)</th>
<th>Learning activities (add appropriate learning activities as required)</th>
<th>Types of evidence (add types of evidence as appropriate)</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Reviewing and improving information literacy programs and developing new programs to meet changing client needs</em></td>
<td><em>Liaison Librarian A</em> Investigates effectiveness of teaching practice through mechanisms such as peer, student and lecturer feedback. Adapts approaches and recommends changes according to experience, participant feedback and in consultation with supervisor/mentor/peers*</td>
<td><em>Gather feedback and reflect on practice</em></td>
<td><em>E.g. Teaching portfolio showing evidence of improvement and effectiveness</em></td>
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<td><em>Liaison Librarian B</em> Researches effectiveness of programs Implements changes according to theory and review of practice*</td>
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**Source:** University of Tasmania (2007)
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<th>Capability</th>
<th>Performance criteria (add additional criteria as required)</th>
<th>Learning activities (add appropriate learning activities as required)</th>
<th>Types of evidence (add types of evidence as appropriate)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reviewing and improving information literacy programs and developing new programs to meet changing client needs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Liaison Librarian A</strong> Investigates effectiveness of teaching practice through mechanisms such as peer, student and lecturer feedback Adapts approaches and recommends changes according to experience, participant feedback and in consultation with supervisor/mentor/peers</td>
<td><strong>Gather feedback and reflect on practice</strong> E.g. Teaching portfolio showing evidence of improvement and effectiveness</td>
<td><strong>Log of all classes kept, including details of successful/unsuccessful strategies. Feedback and learning plans also provided (see Appendix)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Yes</strong> Emphasizes librarian’s strengths in the area of Information Literacy</td>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Liaison Librarian B</strong> Researches effectiveness of programs Implements changes according to theory and review of practice</td>
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**Source:** University of Tasmania (2007)
in liaison skills. Interestingly, the scaffolded structure and comprehensive definition of core capabilities and performance criteria have also positioned the Framework as an extremely valuable document across the organisation, not just for entry-level librarians.

While they do not undertake the formal guided learning process, the Framework has proven useful in assisting new liaison librarians at Level B become better oriented with the scope and responsibilities of liaison at UTAS Library. Similarly, experienced liaison librarians who have been at UTAS for a number of years have found value in the document as a means of re-energizing engagement with areas of liaison services that have “slipped under the radar” due to other demands. In a more direct translation of the document, the Framework has also been successfully adapted for use in facilitating the learning and articulation of Level A librarians in UTAS Library’s Resources and Access department (perhaps also called Collection Management, or Technical Services elsewhere), where two newly appointed librarians have undertaken the process.

The restructure of liaison librarian positions has allowed for an increased degree of movement between positions and responsibilities, and has also served as a jumping-off point for the development of a purpose statement and strategic development of value-added services for liaison services overall. UTAS Library is currently in the preliminary stages of revisiting the workforce planning process to understand its current position and future capabilities; a deeper understanding of the impact of these structural changes on retention patterns, staff demographics, and other factors since the first process was initiated will emerge to inform further change.

6. Conclusion
While the processes of planning and change were by no means difficulty-free, the process has increased the capacity of UTAS Library to meet its oncoming demographic challenges as a responsive, reflective, learning organization.

Through the systematic investigation of its current situation and the assessment of where its future was leading, UTAS Library was able to move from a fragmented, static structure in which career progression for librarians was virtually non-existent, to a system in which staff are able to move across and within teams uninhibited by an artificially isolating position structure, and where skills and knowledge are recognized, valued and developed across all levels of experience.

References


**About the author**
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