

## BABY BOOMERS HELPING GENYS (GEN-YS, GENIES) OUT OF THEIR BOTTLES

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### ABSTRACT

We are two Librarians working at the University of Adelaide Library as Trainee Graduate Librarians. Over the last 2 years of our positions, we have been fortunate to work within what might appear to some as an “ageing workforce”, and have grown to love it. Our experienced colleagues have shared with us the tools we need to develop professionally. We can think of this as: Baby Boomers helping GenYs (gen-ys, genies) out of their bottles.

The Trainee Programme was established in 2008 to allow recently qualified librarians with limited professional experience to gain valuable skills in an academic library. We have learnt a huge amount in two years and feel that sharing some of our experiences will be valuable for other new librarians, and for Baby Boomers who have the opportunity to share their expertise and help shape the careers of new librarians within their workplace.

We have so much to learn about our chosen profession and the best way to learn is from people who have been there, done that and done it well. Yet as important as this collecting of knowledge from Baby Boomers is, we have had to do our own hard work! We’ve built upon the knowledge shared with us and given it our “Gen Y” stamp.

This paper traces our journey as new librarians and the three steps through which we progressed, with the help of Baby Boomers. We will discuss the importance of learning to negotiate the professional landscape, developing confidence and taking on challenges. This paper is not an exhaustive examination of the profession, nor is it a comprehensive review of scholarly literature. Rather, it aims to explain what we have experienced and to suggest things that Gen Y librarians should make sure they learn from their Baby Boomer colleagues.

We’re getting plenty out of our “ageing” colleagues and with their support, we GenY Genies are ready to tackle the library world head on.

## 1. GEN Y VS. BABY BOOMERS

Much has been written of late on the relationships and conflicts between Baby Boomers and Generation Y in the workplace and community generally. Skimming any newspaper on any given day will turn up a handful of examples of Gen Y causing trouble and Boomers struggling to cope. Conflict has been attributed to everything from the inability of Baby Boomers to let go and to Gen Y's generally shameless demeanour [1].

As two Gen Y librarians working in a long-established academic library where the average age of staff is 49, we are intrigued by the focus, and sometimes obsession, on the interaction of our generation with Boomers in the wider world. Far from finding such an environment stifling or difficult to work in, we find the expertise and knowledge shared with us is helping us to thrive in our profession.

More generations currently coexist in the workplace than ever before [2][3]. Builders (the pre-World War II generation), Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y and now Gen Z find themselves working together, and having to get along. Examining the population in terms of generations can be useful for understanding broad traits and characteristics and for understanding the defining events that shape certain groups of people.

Baby Boomers were born between 1945 and 1964. Landmark events that defined the Boomer generation include the introduction of decimal currency, first humans on the moon and the Vietnam War [3]. Boomers are known for their work ethic, their willingness to rearrange their lives to suit their work and the importance that status (employment, social, financial) has in their lives [3].

Generation Y is referred to by a number of names: Millennials, NetGen, Gen Y, Me Generation, Google Generation, etc. The term used seems to depend on what an author is saying about this generation and whether it is positive or otherwise. Generation Y were born between 1980 and 1994. Landmark events that defined Gen Y include Columbine High, Y2K, 9/11, Bali Bombings and the second Iraq war [3]. While Boomers are legendary for their strong commitment to work, Gen Y is often accused of letting the side down in this area. They organise their work to suit their lives, challenge authority and generally put enjoyment before commitment [3]. In their defence, they value friendship and diversity very highly, are values-driven and have embraced the concept of lifelong learning [3].

We have deliberately chosen not to discuss Generation X (currently aged 31-45). This is simply for the reason that we are not members of Generation X and those who we have found most influential within our organisation are Baby Boomers.

## 2. WHERE WE FIT IN

The University of Adelaide is a member of the Group of Eight universities, and its main campus is located in the heart of Adelaide's cultural precinct alongside the Art Gallery of South Australia, the South Australian Museum and the State Library of South Australia. More than 23,000 students from over 90 countries are enrolled at the University of Adelaide [4]. The result is a vibrant, exciting campus and library environment that presents many opportunities for enthusiastic new librarians. The University of Adelaide Library itself employs 131 staff (contract and permanent) at 5 library branches spread across 3 campuses [5]. The University of Adelaide Library has Builders, Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y on staff. This presents some unique challenges for everyone and some seriously good opportunities for early career librarians.

The chart below (figure 1) illustrates the demographic distribution of employees at the Library. As of March 2010, the average age of employees is 49 years old, with 58% born between 1945 and 1964. Only 12% of staff members are aged under 30. 1/3 are currently at or will reach the average retirement age of 65 within 10 years. As a point of comparison, the median age for librarians in Australia is 48.5, compared to 39 for all occupations [6].

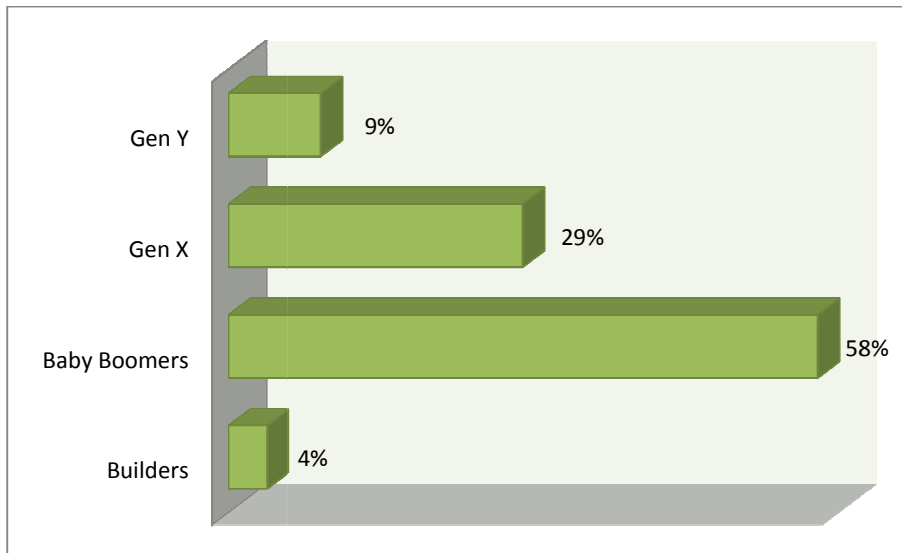


Figure 1. Generations: University of Adelaide Library, March 2010.

### 3. STEP ONE: NEGOTIATING THE PROFESSIONAL LANDSCAPE

Learning to negotiate the professional landscape has given us the foundation we need to tackle the library world head on. Our Baby Boomer colleagues have shown us how important it is to understand the organisational culture of one's workplace and chosen profession. Mentoring and networking particularly have assisted us in successfully negotiating the landscape of our workplace and provided the solid foundation we need to develop as new librarians.

#### 3.1. Mentoring

As Trainee Graduate Librarians we were paired with an assigned mentor during the first year of our employment. Our now former mentors and respected colleagues are two Baby Boomer Research Librarians, with a collective experience in libraries of 30 years. The wealth of knowledge and experience our mentors have shared with us has been invaluable. The success of a mentoring relationship depends very much on the personality match of the mentor and protégé. We were fortunate in that we immediately "clicked" with our mentors. This made the mentoring journey an exceptionally rewarding process.

Freedman suggests that 'a mentoring relationship effectively facilitates organizational learning' [7]. Understanding the organisational culture of a workplace is not something one is able to learn in library school. It is however something that we had to learn rapidly to work effectively. Our highly experienced mentors assisted us in negotiating the culture and politics of our organisation. Their knowledge of the library, including staff, policies and procedures, and even logistics of the building was invaluable.

We found that mentoring allowed us to reflect upon our learning as new graduates. Often when starting a new job, the amount of learning required can draw one's focus away from what is actually being achieved. Meeting with our mentors and sharing our progress provided a valuable opportunity for reflective learning and to examine what we were achieving. Their enthusiasm and encouragement put our progress in perspective and helped to stave off discouragement when learning felt difficult.

Our mentors also encouraged us to pursue self-directed projects which will be discussed further in Step Three. As well as providing support, they gave critical feedback and helped us to analyse the outcomes we sought. This forced us to think critically and clearly develop and articulate our ideas.

Despite the success of our relationship with formally assigned mentors, mentoring is not always a formal process. Through interaction with our peers we have found several individuals within our organisation who we value as "unofficial" or "informal" mentors. Receiving support and advice from one's peers is a valid and important part of growing as any kind of professional. 'An informal

mentoring relationship is one that happens spontaneously based on mutual respect, rapport, and relationship' [7].

Our mentoring journey also allowed us to develop a strong reverse mentoring relationship. Reverse mentoring changes the mentoring relationship and provides an opportunity for less experienced, less senior staff to mentor those more senior and more experienced [8]. Reverse mentoring allowed us to share our knowledge with our mentors, and we found this reciprocity very rewarding. Online technologies and social networking are areas in which we have been able to share our experience. In doing this we felt valued as professionals and our confidence in ourselves as librarians increased.

We strongly encourage other new librarians to actively seek out a mentor, whether formal or informal, inside or outside their libraries. Brine comments that 'with the right support the mentor will build up the confidence of the individual and help to develop their skills and potential' [9]. From our experience mentoring, was a key step in establishing ourselves within our new workplace.

### **3.2. Networking**

Our Baby Boomer colleagues are quite brilliant at networking, with one particular individual in our organisation known as the "Networking Queen". They have built successful relationships within the Library, the University and wider networks. Slagell & Howard state that 'each stage of our life and each person we meet (personally and professionally) increases our own personal network and the reward/results of networking accumulate over time' [10]. Observing our colleagues' networking activities showed us how important networking is to a successful librarian. These networks are essential in negotiating the professional landscape within our Library and gaining knowledge and experience from wider networks.

Networking can take many different forms. Ptolomey comments that 'you can gain a lot from connecting with people inside the organisation you are already in' [11]. We have found informal networking within our workplace valuable: we regularly attend Friday coffee catch-up with cataloguing colleagues, while Research and Reference staff prefer a Friday night glass of wine. These opportunities have allowed us to become more visible within our organisation. Although we are working in a fairly large organisation of 131 individuals, networking with other staff helped us to become more than "those two new young librarians". We have a chance to share our GenY thoughts on Library happenings and immerse ourselves in the knowledge and experience of others. Talking with staff from other departments within the Library helps us to better understand the intricacies of the professional landscape within our organisation. Seeking out an opportunity to network can be as straightforward as arranging to visit other library departments and asking a few questions. Ask colleagues from different library areas encountered on the information desk about their role within the Library.

Networking confidently comes with experience: experience as a Librarian and experience within the library in which you work. At first we felt very apprehensive about networking with people outside of the library. We wondered what they could possibly learn from us; after all we were just new librarians. Building confidence to willingly share information about oneself and work is very rewarding. Recently when attending a professional development course with participants from other institutions we found that people were interested in our thoughts. Being passionate when talking will appeal to others and encourage them to respond and interact. If unsure about networking, pick something interesting, think about an exciting project under way or a humorous story from the library Information Desk.

## **4. STEP TWO: DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE**

As alluded to above, developing confidence has been a very important skill we've learnt from our Baby Boomer colleagues. While this might sound like an odd thing to consider a skill, we see confidence, being yourself, and trying different things as abilities any new librarian should develop. Our relationship with our Baby Boomer colleagues has provided us with knowledge we were not able to develop at library school. Only real world experience with individuals passionate about their jobs could teach us how to help a student in tears about everything going wrong, how to stretch the "rules" to get a student something essential for their assignment, or how to ask to try something that will take

our organisation in an entirely novel direction. The confidence that emerges from realising that one can do those things is truly liberating and further boosts confidence and makes us better librarians.

When learning to work on the Research Help Desk in our library, we were paired with experienced librarians to help us develop the skills we would need. These pairings allowed us to work with staff from different areas within the Library, broadening our perspective and experience. We found that it was important to not be afraid to ask questions of our highly skilled colleagues. Over time as our knowledge and experience increased, so did our confidence.

Whether we like it or not, being a librarian often means standing up in front of a group of people and speaking. In an academic library setting this has translated to standing in front of 80 students during Orientation Week and trying to convince them that the Library is cool –particularly hard as far as public speaking goes. As new librarians, we had limited experience in public speaking and the thought of this was terrifying.

However, we can report, that two years later, we actually enjoy it. This in part is due to the support and advice we have received from our Baby Boomer colleagues. We have been given the opportunity to observe our colleagues speaking. We were also fortunate enough to have some of our colleagues observe, critique and offer advice on our public speaking.

We have also discovered that not everyone's public speaking style has to be the same. We often present library sessions together and have found that the session works best when we are using a style of presenting which suits us. Being ourselves also allows us to connect with the students more easily. We have found that by leaving out the Library jargon (the term Boolean doesn't appear in our training session on Library databases, for example) and using stories and anecdotes from our time studying, we have found that students are more receptive and responsive to what we share with them and seem more inclined to engage with us as presenters.

Developing confidence has been a vital step for us experimenting with new ideas. Our Baby Boomer colleagues assisted us in developing this confidence, particularly by encouraging us to try new, non-traditional approaches. One example was taking the initiative to develop an information literacy programme aimed at undergraduate students. From our interaction with students on the Research Help Desk we discovered there was a need for hands-on sessions where students get help from a librarian in a small group setting. Out of observing this came a series of sessions that we developed to meet this need. The most popular of our sessions is "So, you think you can Google?" where students are shown the good and bad things about the giant of search engines.

The session also provides us with a captive audience we can encourage to use library resources. Students find the fact that we don't simply tell them not to use Google refreshing, and we find they are more likely to consider trying other resources which provide them better results. The confidence we gained from approaching our managers with our idea, developing and delivering the programme and evaluating our performance has been invaluable.

## **5. STEP THREE: SEEKING OUT CHALLENGES**

Using the foundations discussed above, we've been brave and sought out challenges that will enhance our experience and further our development as new librarians. Byke suggests that early-career librarians need to 'identify areas in which you need growth and seek out experiences that will allow you to increase your skill set' [12]. Most of the challenges we've chosen to take up have boiled down to being confident enough to put ourselves "out there", whether it is in our teams, workplace or profession. We could not have reached this point in our professional development without the skills that we have been able to learn from our Baby Boomer colleagues.

Developing our hands on training session "So, you think you can Google?" was a step that required a lot of confidence, as well as foundation skills and knowledge. It required confidence to present to tough audiences in tricky situations, as well as seeking our managers' support to conduct training in a very non-traditional area. Never before has our Library offered training to anyone on how to avoid Google "overload". We've embraced Google rather than warning people off of it. Our mentors encouraged us and provided feedback on content. We've even had Boomer colleagues attend the

sessions as participants. The support and guidance from our colleagues was essential in taking on the challenge of developing and facilitating these sessions.

Writing articles for *inCite* also drew on our foundation skills and required a lot of confidence. Writing about something we enjoy or feel is important and then releasing it into the professional world to be read by anyone is a very challenging and confronting situation. Everything from grammar to the underlying thought processes informing the article is on display. Without a good knowledge of how to write and speak professionally, our articles would never have seen the light of day. Yet, for anyone who has ideas they would like to share, or who feels there is an issue that the profession should think about, just be brave and try it. When questioning if we know enough to share our experiences in print, Singer-Gordon suggests that we need to 'always keep in mind that you are qualified to write for the profession merely by being part of the profession' [13]. Make use of support networks. Discuss ideas with a colleague, ask someone more experienced to proof read before publishing or distributing the article. As the section above on mentoring suggests, find someone who has expertise and passion to offer useful advice.

Singer-Gordon suggests that writing for our profession 'allows us to gradually build the confidence and the writing experience needed to tackle larger projects' [13]. In our experience this is certainly true. Writing and presenting at a conference, like ALIA Access 2010, is a huge step that requires a sound knowledge of the professional landscape, as well as a great deal of confidence.

We encourage other new librarians to share their experiences with others. This may be sharing a project with peers or another professional organisation. It may be taking a bigger step and submitting a conference paper. Yet it is important not to become disillusioned by rejection. Like any aspect of life, what at the time looks like failure can turn out to be one of the most valuable learning experiences one can find. Rather than become disillusioned with rejection, be determined to do better next time.

Developing a perspective of the world beyond one's library is vital. Mixing with non-library people can be professionally challenging, particularly when it comes to the things we all hold dear. We are both studying in areas that are not directly related to libraries; yet the more we learn, the more applicable we find it. Also, simply being a student again and being frustrated by student worries gives one a perspective and rediscovered empathy that is invaluable.

It is possible to gain an outside perspective in other ways. Consider pursuing a mentoring relationship with someone who isn't a colleague, or even someone outside of the library world. Such a person may give a valuable insight that wouldn't otherwise be accessible. The experience may also broaden horizons and stimulate thinking outside the traditional library "square".

## **6. SUMMARY**

The three steps discussed above outline the path we have found our professional journey to have taken so far. While we have dealt with them as three separate steps, these facets of the development of new librarians are not at all separate. Nor do they form a linear progression that ends when one finally gets that "good" job. Gen Y has grown up with the concept of lifelong learning, and for us this series of steps is another stage in our lifelong education.

The importance of new librarians learning all they can from experienced librarians cannot be overstated. Network, get a mentor, be confident in what you know (work on this if needed – we did) and seek out challenges. The people resources of any library are an early career librarian's greatest asset. Spending five minutes on any information desk shows that finding information isn't innate. Neither is being a good librarian. New librarians have to learn it from somewhere. What better way to learn than tapping directly into so many years of collective knowledge embedded in people who love to share? The relationships we have developed with Baby Boomer colleagues within our organisation have been essential for releasing our potential as GenY Genies.

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