

## NEW GRADS CHECKLIST: MEETING CHALLENGES, BEING INVOLVED

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### ABSTRACT

Many graduates exit TAFE or University studies with a casual or volunteer position and a promising future. However, many more have no idea how to get that elusive dream job or to further the position they already have. As a new graduate of the TAFE Diploma of Library and Information Services, I have been a volunteer, a casual employee at four jobs (at the same time), and now aim to become an active member of the library community. This paper will present the New Graduate Professional Involvement Checklist, which aims to assist new graduates in becoming active in the library industry. Actively participating in the industry assists new graduates to learn, communicate their ideas, rejuvenate the industry and network to create new communities. The New Graduate Professional Involvement Checklist looks particularly at conference and industry event participation, volunteering, committee engagement, library camps, unconferences and online resources. New graduates are encouraged to use the New Graduate Professional Involvement Checklist in a way that suits their needs and assists them to meet their goals.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

As new graduates enter the library workforce they face many challenges. This paper will demonstrate that many new graduates are not confident in their skills and knowledge on graduation. This lack of confidence is caused by new graduates' belief in their lack of industry skills and experience. Compounding this is an aging workforce, which threatens to leave the library industry under-skilled as a significant sector of the library industry workforce prepares to retire over the coming ten years [1]. New graduates must work with these experienced colleagues in order to lessen the impact of their loss. Professional involvement is accepted as one of the fastest and most enjoyable ways to learn industry skills, build networks, gain confidence and enhance employability. New graduates must use professional involvement in combating the challenges ahead of them as they enter the library industry.

The New Graduate Professional Involvement Survey aims to understand the new graduate perspective on exiting study. The results of this survey show that almost half of the respondents do not feel that their library studies adequately prepared them for employment in the industry. On top of this a large number of respondents don't consider professional involvement to entail much more than attending events and conferences – while these activities are a foundation of professional involvement, there is so much more to being active in the industry than attendance. This paper will demonstrate that professional involvement is key to becoming a satisfied, skilled and confident professional; ignorance of professional involvement activities thus impedes growth and development in new graduates. Through analysis of the survey results, I created an activity-based checklist that demonstrates the many professional involvement opportunities. It

is vital that new graduates entering the library workforce meet the challenge of professional engagement to support both their growth as industry professionals and the industry as it faces a time of large-scale loss of skills, experience and knowledge.

## **2. CHALLENGES FACING NEW GRADUATES AS THEY ENTER THE WORKFORCE**

In 2004, having freshly completed a Bachelor of Arts in Editing and Publishing, I embarked on the process of searching for employment in my chosen industry. I quickly found that although I was in possession of a shiny parchment my university education had armed me with very few practical industry skills. Editors and publishing executives did not appreciate the small book I had proofread as part of an editing team, which had earned the team a distinction. I had very little industry knowledge on exiting my studies: I did not know which were the employers of choice, where they advertised vacant positions, or how to get my foot in the door. My unemployability eventually sent me to further study with TAFE. I had observed that TAFE studies were practical, industry-based and encouraged part-time study and part-time work as symbiotic learning practice.

In sharp contrast to my university studies, prior to my graduation from TAFE I had created industry networks in three different public libraries; volunteered regularly at a public library; applied for several positions and been accepted for five interviews; and was employed in three separate libraries concurrently. Having been lucky to gain so many opportunities it concerned me that many fellow graduates had not found industry employment. Informal discussion and observation revealed that volunteering and networking had prepared my path into the library industry: through my voluntary work I had gained valuable industry skills, created networks, gained confidence and applied myself to learning about the industry rather than about a mere job. Other graduates having difficulty gaining employment had, for the most part, not dedicated time to professional involvement outside study; they just wanted a job.

Anecdotal evidence gathered informally from fellow students convinced me that unconfident and inexperienced graduates were more common than I had first thought. Over the past year, as I personally became more active in the industry, I began to form the impression that many new graduates feel unprepared for the workforce on exiting their studies. While study necessarily requires dedication and large time commitments, many graduates feel unable to gain practical experience throughout their studies. They see this weakness as harmful to their employment prospects. Sanders supports this observation with his 2008 survey of industry employers and Library and Information Studies (LIS) providers [2]. His discussion states 'graduates are not necessarily leaving programs with attributes which allow them to apply their knowledge in practice ... achievement of these attributes really depends on the individual ... work and life experience are where these are gained' [2]. The New Graduate Professional Involvement Survey tests the currency of this observation. As analysis of the survey shows (see Figure 1 and subsequent discussion), the observation that new graduates do not feel prepared for the workforce is substantiated.

New graduates also face an aging industry. The upcoming retirement of over a quarter of the library workforce [3] will have a substantial impact on industry dynamics. As the baby boomer generation prepares for retirement, with them will go much of the industry's accumulated knowledge, skill-base and experience. The escalating rate of retirement has become a point of discussion over the last decade (McCarthy [4], Hallam [1]). Analysis of Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) [3] figures collected in 2009 reveals that approximately 27% of the library workforce is over 55 years (compared to 11.1% in 2006, and 20% in 2004). Given that the current retirement age is 65 years, it

is reasonable to assume that just over a quarter of the library industry may leave the workforce in the coming ten years.

Professional involvement is vital in facing the twin challenges of lack of experience and the imminent loss of many experienced colleagues. It is richly rewarding not only for the direct participant but also for colleagues, mentors and mentees, future participants and the industry at large. Dalby [5] defines professional involvement as 'having an impact on your profession... contributing your knowledge and your perspective to the wider profession', while Hills [6] notes that professional involvement has the ability to 'build your skills and knowledge to become a more satisfied and employable professional'. For new graduates in particular, professional involvement is to network, foster knowledge, learn, grow and generate interest in the industry and libraries as a profession.

### **3. NEW GRADUATE PROFESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT SURVEY ANALYSIS**

In April 2010 I created the New Graduate Professional Involvement Survey. The aim of the survey was three-fold:

- Establish what 'professional involvement' means to new graduates
- Determine the extent to which new graduates are currently professionally active
- Create a checklist of professional involvement activities and events that interest new graduates.

A call for respondents was placed on the ALIA New Graduates e-list. This was a deliberate strategy, as the e-list is a service dedicated to new graduates. However, this has almost certainly introduced some bias in the responses toward professional involvement. Subscribers to this e-list are already active through their interest in the e-list itself, and are likely to have a more developed knowledge of professional involvement activities than the non-involved new graduate. The survey received thirty-eight valid responses. Some bias may be evident in the responses due to this very small sample of new graduates.

The survey first established respondent demographics, including which course they completed and when, and the time between graduation and employment. Of the respondents, sixteen completed a Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Studies; eight TAFE's Diploma in Library and Information Studies; six a Bachelor of Arts in Library and Information Science; five a Masters in Library and Information Management; and three non-library related university courses. Of the respondents who stated their year of completion (eight did not) seventy percent graduated within the last three years. Fifty-one percent of respondents gained employment before completion of their course, while a further thirty-one within one year of completion. Four respondents (10%) were employed between one and two years from completion. Three respondents completed their courses at the end of 2009 and were not yet employed.

The survey then sought responses regarding course satisfaction. Respondents were asked if they felt that their course adequately prepared them for industry employment, and if industry involvement was encouraged through their studies.

As Figure 1 shows, respondents had mixed feelings about their courses. As I exited my studies, through discussion with other graduates I observed that many were not confident in the skills gained during study. Even so, it alarmed me to discover that half of TAFE respondents and almost half of university respondents felt that their study did not adequately prepare them for the workforce. The 'further comments' field responses give the responses some basis. The majority of responses state that their courses were more 'conceptually based' than practical and most felt that they required more practical studies and preferred the training they received on the job.

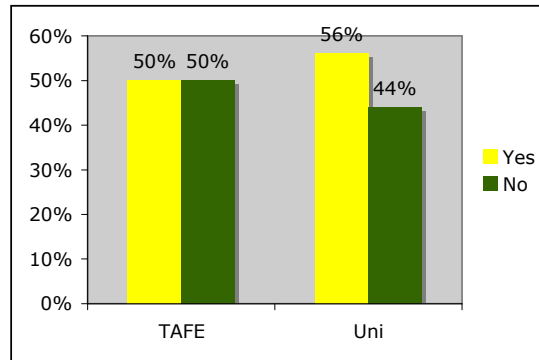


Figure 1: Did respondents feel that their course prepared them for work?

TAFE respondents almost universally agreed that their course had encouraged industry involvement (only one TAFE graduate disagreed). On the other hand, 41% of university respondents felt that their course did not encourage industry involvement, although most conceded that a compulsory placement was included. Of the thirteen respondents who felt that their university course did not encourage industry involvement, four stated that they pursued industry involvement on their own.

The final survey questions sought to understand how new graduates define professional involvement; their current levels of professional engagement; the considerations they take into account when approaching professional involvement; and to gauge which activities new graduates would be prepared to undertake. Three of the respondents did not answer the following questions, thus leaving thirty-five valid responses for the remainder of the survey.

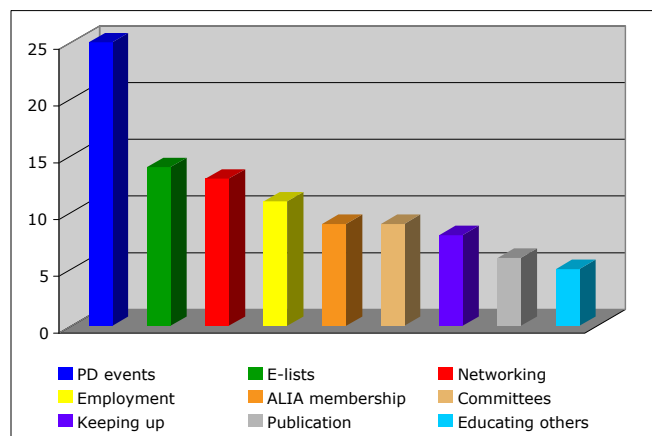


Figure 2: New graduates definition of professional involvement

While overall new graduates appear to have a good understanding of what it means to be professionally engaged figure 2 demonstrates that less than half of respondents define 'professional involvement' as anything more than attending ALIA and PD events. While attendance at events rated highly, less than half expand that definition to using e-lists, industry membership, networking, publication, educating others and committee involvement.

Forty-one percent of respondents cited lack of time was stated as the main reason for not participating in the industry. A further 17% of respondents stated that the cost of events is often prohibitive. Eleven percent agreed that they would not undertake activities that do not interest them personally or professionally. Other considerations include family and work commitments, professional support and location.

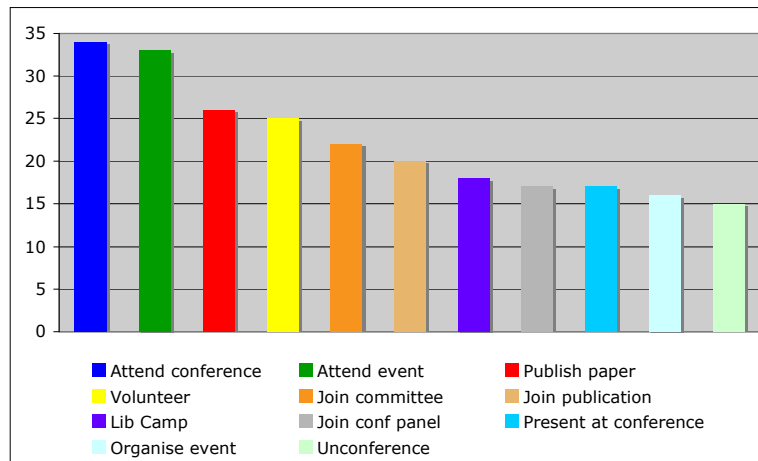


Figure 3: Activities that interest new graduates

When asked which activities they would undertake, respondents demonstrated that while most would readily attend activities, a significantly smaller portion would be willing to organise these activities. While attending conferences and events were highly popular, serving on conference panels or industry committees, organising events and presenting at conferences are significantly lower on the new graduate agenda. Publication was well received, yet serving on a publication (ie joining an editing team) was less appealing.

The results of this survey confirm my informal observations as a new graduate. The divergence in new graduates in relation to industry preparation is most prominent. It is also apparent that most new graduates do not see professional involvement as anything more than attending events. In order to be professionally engaged, it is necessary to understand what professional involvement is, how it can benefit new graduates and what opportunities exist. This is imperative if new graduates are to face the challenges discussed in this paper.

#### 4. NEW GRADUATE PROFESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT CHECKLIST

Checklists have long been used as career planning tools. Previous library industry checklists are value-based, encouraging and provide implicit direction (Cox [7] and Collingwood [8]). While these checklists can be useful in motivating knowledgeable professionals the New Graduate Professional Involvement Survey analysis clearly demonstrates that many new graduates are not aware of the full range of professional involvement opportunities. I believe that an activity- rather than value-based checklist will prove useful to those still familiarising themselves with the industry.

The aim of the New Graduate Professional Involvement Survey was to create a checklist that will assist new graduates to become professionally involved in the library industry. The survey reveals new graduate preferences in industry involvement. As discussed in the above analysis many new graduates are not

aware of all that professional involvement implies. Professional involvement can assist new graduates to learn skills and fill gaps they feel that their courses omitted. In developing an activity-based checklist these new graduates can construct a personal career plan that fits into their individual situation.

#### **4.1. Conference participation**

Conference engagement exists on three levels: attendance, planning and presenting. Conference attendance provides a renewal of inspiration and energy. Serving on a planning committee involves going one step further. Goodson's discussion of the benefits of conference planning [9] suggests that conference planning committees often seek new volunteers to improve diversity. New graduates should note that they allow people to 'network with professionals working in similar settings, utilise and enhance project management skills, develop new skills in communicating with external agencies, learn more about trends, and finally, enjoy a sense of satisfaction when the event finally takes place...' [9]. Conference committees are often formed far in advance of the conference itself, allowing new graduates to get up to speed and gain valuable skills and contacts along the way. Presenting at a conference allows new graduates to become visible in the industry, gives them a reason to attend conferences and opens networking opportunities (Bradley et al. [10]).

#### **4.2. ALIA and industry events**

ALIA and industry events include, but are not restricted to professional development (PD) events, and are the basis of professional involvement. Events such as social dinners, quiz nights, PD sessions, speaker events, tours, and presentations are the backbone of professional involvement. Similar to conference participation, involvement in these extends to two levels: attendance and organisation. Attending or organising industry events allows participants to update their skills and knowledge, and maintain employability (Pamment [11]). These events are generally organised through committees, organisations, the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and other industry bodies. These opportunities are often well publicised through online networks such as e-lists, websites and blogs.

#### **4.3. Publication**

Publishing a paper or an article in an industry journal, magazine or newsletter is a highly rewarding and challenging experience. Writing for industry publications provides new graduates with an opportunity to publicise local or important events, trends or projects as well as open a dialogue with the industry (Bradley [12]).

#### **4.4. Volunteering**

Volunteering is often the first step in becoming active in the industry; it is the easiest, least expensive activity, with the greatest benefits. Volunteering can be used to fill identified skill gaps, network, build confidence, enhance employability and provide opportunities for students to practice skills [6]. Donating time is also useful as an opportunity to gain experience in the various sectors of the library industry as public, special, private, school and small libraries often rely on the expertise of volunteers in various roles. Further abroad, higher level skills and unforgettable experiences can be gained through volunteering in developing nations. The Youth Ambassadors for Development send volunteers to developing nations who require assistance in establishing and managing small libraries ([www.ayad.com.au](http://www.ayad.com.au)).

#### **4.5. Committees**

Committee participation is an extremely valuable and rewarding experience for new graduates. Committee work forms part of the backbone of the library industry, organising events, conferences and networking and PD activities as well as administering many e-lists. Through committee involvement new graduates can gain highly regarded time management, project management, team management and communication skills as well as develop friendships and community networks [9]. Organisational committees form a safe,

supportive environment in which inexperienced graduates can familiarise themselves with committee work before progressing to industry committees.

#### **4.6. Unconferences and library camps**

New generation library events such as unconferences and library camps are beginning to gain ground in Australia. The unconference is a concept borrowed from the technology industry and is the informal equivalent of a conference: it is held in a specified location at a specified time and a theme is set, but no formal program is established prior to the event [13]. Kajewski says of the unconference it 'is similar to a conference with all the networking and discussion among colleagues but with very little of the formal presentation' [14]. Library camps are similar events, but are usually spread over several days to enhance networking opportunities and attract smaller audiences than conferences [10]. According to Kroski, one advantage of a library camp is that 'a themed camp will keep participants talking about issues around a single agreed-upon topic, offering participants a more focused experience' [15], while discussion at an unconference varies according to the interests and expertise of its attendees.

#### **4.7. Online involvement**

It is evident from the items on this checklist that online involvement is crucial to successful industry involvement. E-lists are the principle method of communication in publicising events, opportunities and other industry information. They are also used to disseminate position vacancies and to invite participation the industry itself. Gruber states that e-lists are 'an easy way to connect in the profession' [16]. Networks cater to specific locations, occupations, library types, and interest groups, while general networks also exist. Reading in the library sphere should also be extended to blogs such as those listed on Libraries Interact: Blog central for Australasian libraries (<http://librariesinteract.info/australian-library-blogs/>) as well as wikis and keeping up-to-date with online databases.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

New graduates face surmountable challenges as they exit their studies and embark on real-world employment. Often they must overcome inexperience, lack of confidence in their abilities, a shortage in skill-sets, and a belief that they are not prepared for industry employment. Further to these barriers they face an aging workforce and are under pressure to learn from the experienced baby boomer generation. Through professional involvement new graduates can learn new skills, build networks, enhance confidence, harness professional support and work to support the growth of the library industry.

The New Graduate Professional Involvement Checklist developed in this paper is a pathway for new graduates aiming to bridge skill gaps. It is important that new graduates engage in activities in this checklist that suit them. The checklist can be used as a career plan to be completed sequentially over time. It is more realistic, however, to use this checklist flexibly: to complete the items that apply to each person, to fit these professional involvement activities into personal and professional situations. The important thing is not how many hours per week or how much money is devoted to professional involvement; the most important and rewarding experience is simply to be involved.

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