

THE EXPERIENCED NEWCOMER: USING ESTABLISHED SKILLS IN A NEW INDUSTRY

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1. ABSTRACT

After nearly three years learning to be Special Collections Librarian at Alice Springs Public Library, my first job in a library, I increasingly use skills I thought I'd left behind in other employment lives. These skills have very little to do with the requirements of my substantive position but they contribute to the viability of the Library. Entering the industry at 47 had its challenges but I employ skills learned in other industries, notably fundraising and the public service, nearly as often as those acquired during study for a Graduate Diploma of information Management and then on the job. This paper will demonstrate the value an older experienced new starter brings to the industry through applying skills learnt in other industries.

2. INTRODUCTION

This paper demonstrates why experienced newcomers are important for the library industry, using myself as an example. I have been a librarian for nearly three years; and I spent twenty years in other industries, learning non-library skills which are of real value in my current employment. These pre-library skills have contributed significantly, for example, to the development of Alice Springs Public Library (ASPL)'s strategy for diversifying our income base. In demonstrating the value of experienced newcomers I hope to show why older newcomers should be supported in their new employment; and to encourage these employees.

2.1. Why are older experienced newcomers important?

Today, school leavers are told to expect to work in up to six industries during their employment life. Six industries, that is; not six jobs. That is, workers, young or old, may not stay in any one industry longer than eight years. Therefore young people entering the library workforce should be mentored and encouraged, to maximise retention; and so should older people, to retain them for as long as possible and to gain the benefit of their experience. The historically proportionately few young people entering the Australian workforce now as the population ages, means that retention strategies should target older workers as

well as younger ones. Also, the environment in which libraries now operate may make the non-library skills older new starters bring, very useful to their employers.

3. FIONA BLACKBURN, 50 YEARS OLD: PERFECT FOR THE INDUSTRY

3.1. Fiona Blackburn's employment history

At eighteen I started work in a hospital, first as a ward clerk and then as a trainee nurse. It was awful. Six months before the end of training, I failed an exam. I thought about what resitting that the exam and passing the final exam in six months' time would require; and decided this was an opportunity to get out of an industry that was not my bag. I resigned. I worked in the health industry in a couple of capacities on and off for the next twenty years, and I do not regret not finishing training.

I started nursing because I had had enough of school and didn't want to study any more; so when I left nursing, I went to university after all. I completed a Bachelor of Arts with Honours in History, while working casually in hospitality and health.

I then worked as a Housing Officer for a Rental Housing Cooperative. I had a great time in this job, community development being so new an industry that I and my fellow workers could pretty much make a lot of it up as we went along.

Next, I began as the book-keeper with a non-government development aid organisation (NGO) and moved into the fundraising team, looking after the supporter database and liaising with supporters. As the organisation relied on the public for up to 50% of its income, this was a crucial role. This organisation is a high point in my employment.

During this period I also spent a year as Assistant Editor at a private Catholic boys' school, producing quarterly information brochures and the Annual.

After an industrial war at the NGO, which the workers both won and lost, I took a low-level job in the public service, in the most uncongenial department, thinking it would enable me to concentrate on the Graduate Diploma in Information Management. I didn't realise how demoralising this would be; nor was I aware of the competition for information jobs in a capital city. Fortunately I moved from that job to a number of others, finishing with a secondment as Environment Manager for another department.

3.2. Fiona Blackburn's skills portfolio

Looking at that collection of industries – health, hospitality, community development, education, fundraising, public service – and remembering the author blurbs on some dust jackets, one might think I am a world famous best

selling writer. Instead I'm a librarian. So how is all that relevant to libraries? What did I learn?

Nursing taught me to work hard, completing many distinct, often complex tasks in an eight hour shift. I also learnt to come to work each day and do something completely different though probably equally complex, as the day before, sometimes in another part of the hospital. So I learned application, organisation and flexibility.

At university I learned that I am more interested in people, i.e., History than in English or Music, the other subjects I could have studied for Honours. Also, how to construct an argument in writing; and, of course, research.

Hospitality taught me the basics of customer service.

Working in the community sector, I learned the tenets of community development, financial management, governance from both sides: as a worker and as a member of committees of management, and the basics of fundraising. I discovered that I'm good at talking to people; can see the beauty of systems; and that I have a reasonable capacity for networking.

I also formed a political commitment to the empowerment of communities through knowledge and self-help.

The position of Assistant Editor honed my communication skills, written particularly but oral as well, and an eye for detail.

Thanks to the public sector, I learnt to *avoid* jobs for which I'm over-skilled and likely to be undervalued. Combating demoralisation and deriving something positive from such an experience requires enormous energy. I am more resilient for having endured that first public sector job but it was hard-gained. Fortunately I also learnt: how bureaucracy works; the importance of working it; project management; writing for government; policy development and accountability.

And I also learnt that there are good people everywhere, even in uncongenial workplaces.

4. APPLYING THOSE NON-LIBRARY SKILLS AT ALICE SPRINGS PUBLIC LIBRARY

First, to describe an aspect of ASPL and revert briefly to the point about older new starters. Of ASPL's 13 permanent staff, five are new starters, ie, have entered the industry in the last five years. Of six casuals, four are new to the industry and three of those are undertaking library studies. Of the new starters (including the casuals) four are baby boomers; three are in their thirties; and two are in their twenties. So at ASPL, not only are most of the staff grey haired, most

of the new starters are too. Nevertheless the baby boomer new starters, including me, obviously, may contribute 15 years each to libraries; and each of us bring at least 20 years' experience in other industries.

An incomplete overview of how I've used non-library skills at ASPL follows:

4.1. Flexibility and resilience

I moved to a new town to take up a new job in a new industry. Aspects of that were hard and there is ongoing challenge but I am happy to be working in the community again; I'm thinking and learning, doing new things *and* using the skills I already have.

4.2. Community development

The Indigenous Services Officer and I are working to establish "active Indigenous engagement" as the basis for Indigenous services at ASPL. This means getting more Indigenous groups into the library; and developing programming in which Indigenous people are both consumers and providers.

4.3 Promotion and communication

ASPL is now often profiled in industry publications such as InCite and the ATSILIRN Newsletter, either because I have written the article or encouraged another staff member to do so.

I have written two big submissions for a new library building. They were unsuccessful but a secondary but positive result was Council acknowledging the need for a new library building and the twenty-first century service it would make possible. Identifying the reasons for their failure has been important learning although I cannot detail those reasons here.

5. APPLYING MORE NON-LIBRARY SKILLS: ASPL'S DIVERSIFIED INCOME STRATEGY

The objective of this strategy is to expand ASPL's income sources to ensure comprehensive access to the range of funding opportunities.

5.1. Why develop such a strategy?

Alice Springs Town Council obtained Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status for the library last year. While partly motivated by a concern to limit rates rises, Council has nevertheless given us quite a gift. DGR status means an organisation can receive donations for which the donor can claim a tax benefit. It makes possible two potential income sources in addition to government funding: private support; and some philanthropic trusts.

Having given us this opportunity Council expects it will be used. To make best use of it, a strategy is necessary for these reasons:

- public libraries are such excellent organisations that everyone can come up with good ideas for raising money; a strategy helps focus activity
- pursuing diversified income sources might be an unfamiliar activity; a strategy guides its introduction and helps people adjust to the concept
- finally, this activity may have to be incorporated into existing staff capacity; a strategy enables that to happen effectively, avoiding a burden on staff already pretty fully occupied or a diminution in the organisation's core functioning

5.2. What does the strategy look like?

A credible strategy introducing a new activity builds on the status quo. A new initiative built on an organisation's existing strengths or its fundamental principles is likely to succeed because current stakeholders, internal and external, ie, staff and customers or patrons, are able to see where it fits and where *they* fit, and be more likely to 'buy-in'.

Therefore this strategy is built on these elements: ASPL's mission; consistently good customer service; best possible collection management and programs; consistent allocation of benefit across all library activities; and communication with the Library's community, in this instance about fundraising activities and expenditure.

It is also built on the funding status quo. Government funding, from all levels, will remain the most significant source of ASPL income; corporate sponsorship, currently a very small proportion of income, will be more actively sought. Philanthropic grants and private support, new sources made possible through having DGR status, will be a minor but expanding proportion of ASPL's budget. In developing this strategy we have honed our approach to the range of income sources, not only new ones.

A return on pursuing these sources, with the exception of government funding, is likely to be slow. However if you spend money, you make money. Initially ASPL will spend money, primarily, through the time that all staff find to devote to the elements of this strategy with which they are comfortable. While dedicating a position to this strategy would be optimal, spreading implementation across the whole staff improves the likelihood of success through increased 'buy-in'.

6. HOW THE STRATEGY WAS DEVELOPED

Because I have fundraising experience and have been a bureaucrat, I knew the potential value of DGR status and knew how to develop a strategy to exploit it. So I researched and I networked and I wrote.

The purpose of networking in my view is not to get to know as many people as possible but to establish connections, optimally mutually beneficial ones, so that you can get things done. I rang up people in fundraising; I spoke to people at the

State Libraries of Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales and at a couple of public libraries with DGR status; and I contacted the South Australia and Northern Territory branch of the Australia Business Arts Foundation (AbaF).

I didn't know most of these people before I started; I found them and then rang them or emailed them about their fundraising activities; and I noted everything they had to say. Every tip eventually has a use.

Staff 'buy-in' is essential to developing an organisationally relevant strategy and to its eventual success. The elements to achieving 'buy-in' are:

- talking through the concept and activities thoroughly, acknowledging any culture shift
- incorporating people's ideas
- expecting people to accept the culture shift and allowing them to participate as they choose
- training for those who are interested – not everyone is going to 'get' fundraising or corporate sponsorship
- making use of opportunities that don't require buy-in, eg, through modifying position descriptions where appropriate as vacancies occur
- incorporating the new activity in all planning as a matter of course, ie, *making* it part of the status quo

6.1 Some resources for working in fundraising

The Australian Taxation Office endorses organisations which are eligible to receive tax deductible donations. Public libraries, galleries and museums fit in a general category of eligibility. This link on the Tax Office's website provides comprehensive information about DGR and how to apply for endorsement. <http://www.ato.gov.au/nonprofit/content.asp?doc=/content/13268.htm>

AbaF (www.AbaF.org.au) provides support for the arts through, for example, providing training; advice and feedback about strategies like this one; and will provide the same for individual fundraising activities. ASPL is not an arts organisation but it is a cultural one so we still fit AbaF's remit.

Similarly, Our Community (www.ourcommunity.com.au) is a social enterprise organisation that provides advice and training for community groups and not-for-profits, including in the area of fundraising.

The Fundraising Institute of Australia (www.fia.org.au) is a peak body for people and organisations involved in fundraising. If your organisation is able to dedicate time money and a position to fundraising, then membership of the FIA will provide training, professional development and networking opportunities. People with and without fundraising experience will benefit from what the FIA offers.

7. CONCLUSION

Why are older experienced new starters perfect for the industry? If I hadn't worked in fundraising for eight years, and the public service for five, ASPL may not have developed a strategy for broadening its income base as quickly, or at all.

I am not unusual. Every older worker will have established skills that, if nurtured will provide a valuable and quick return, different to the contribution younger people will make.

There are four reasons why experienced newcomers have value: We are necessary to addressing the looming need to maintain workforce numbers. We are likely to spend as long in the industry as younger people are. We're experienced and flexible; and our established skills may enable libraries to make use of opportunities currently external to the 'conventional' library arena. I hope I've promoted a sense of that value; and encouraged older new starters to persevere.