

me, my future and my technology

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Presenters

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Abstract

This paper presents a range of flexible and personalised strategies for professional learning that use the power of online technology, and can help library staff develop and promote their professional knowledge, skills and attributes. It challenges library technicians to consider how services such as myfuture, ePortfolios and Professional Learning Networks can integrate with employer and association-based professional development programmes such as ALIA's Continuing Professional Development (CPD) scheme.

Keywords: career development, professional development, ePortfolios, online networking, library technicians

Introduction

What makes a successful library technician in today's world? In 2008 the Australian Library and Information Association gave the answer as follows: "professional development is your strategy for success ... lifelong learning that is unique to you." This advice about the importance of lifelong learning and uniqueness reflects the thinking of the Career Industry Council of Australia (2007, p. 32) who define a career as:

a lifestyle concept that involves the sequence of work, learning and leisure activities in which one engages throughout a lifetime. Careers are unique to each person and are dynamic.

If careers are highly personal and dynamic then it stands to reason that the processes for career development and professional development also need to be personalised and dynamic. While face to face conferences or seminars can be great sources of professional development and networking, they are not always a particularly personalised experience, and increasingly they represent a luxury item unaffordable by many.

This paper identifies ways in which library staff can access personalised and dynamic career information and professional development. It demonstrates how online technology can empower library staff to develop and promote their knowledge, skills and attributes and to take responsibility for their own learning. By showcasing a range of free online tools and services funded by the Australian Government, and showing how these can be used to support library staff career development, the paper assists readers to identify ongoing, sustainable strategies for lifelong learning that meet their unique situation. The authors also challenge library staff to consider how such personalised, online services can be integrated with employer and association-based professional development programmes such as ALIA's Professional Development scheme (2009).

myfuture

A highly recommended service for those seeking quality and current online career information is myfuture.edu.au. *myfuture* (2009) is Australia's national online career information and exploration service, helping people to make career decisions, providing tools and resources to support and plan career pathways and manage work transitions. There are three main parts to the *myfuture* service: *My Guide*, *The Facts* and *Assist Others*.

My Guide provides resources and tools to explore career options through a variety of activities. *My Guide* helps identify career pathways through related topics such as interests, skills and knowledge. *My Guide* generates a range of occupations for further exploration with an inbuilt mechanism that assists in comparing the chosen occupations against the personal preferences listed. Once a *My Guide* account has been created, sessions will be saved for ongoing reference and can be accessed online from anywhere in the world. The importance of this identification and exploration stage of career development is highlighted by Tatham and McMahon (2008, p.7) who advise that "all Australians need to have a very clear understanding of the skills they have, their value, potential clients of their skills and how they might be applied to particular issues and problems."

My Guide also helps to define and set personal, study and work related goals and plan pathways to achieve them. In *My Guide*, you are able to answer questionnaires, explore career suggestions generated from the responses to the questionnaires, select career favourites, clarify your career direction and create an action plan that can be followed to help reach your career targets. You will also discover related occupations that share the same skill set, experience and/or knowledge requirements as your preferred occupation choices.

My Guide allows access to specific questionnaires, relevant to each user's individual life stage. There are five separate life stages: younger secondary student, older secondary student, recent school leaver (last 2-3 years), further education and training student, and adult. *My Guide* includes several planning stages; Preparing/Reviewing, Identifying, Exploring, Deciding, Summarizing, Planning, and Doing. Each stage guides the user through a defining and selection process relating to their personal career preferences. While many secondary school students

are encouraged and supported with career development pathways, there appears to be a gap in the wider community with post secondary career support. This is raised as a weakness by the OECD review of career guidance in Australia (2002, p.25) which found that “the focus on supporting initial transitions from school is at the expense of attending to the need to support subsequent transitions across the lifespan.”

The *ALIA Career Development Kit* (2005, p.5) which is used as a model by many library staff also recommends extensive self-assessment and ranking of goals as the first stage in its professional development planning process. As *My Guide* provides an online, personalised tool for this, it is easy for individuals to undertake this important activity on an ongoing basis. The second stage of the ALIA model (2005, p. 8) is referred to as the development strategy and involves identifying priority areas, gaps and targets. *The Facts* section of myfuture contains detailed information articles and profiles for such career related exploration. Specific information areas, such as occupations, courses and programs can be selected and searched within. The user is also able to read articles or browse further information resources and related associations. *The Facts* is full of current information about occupations, industries, awards, scholarships, courses and programs. It also includes useful information relating to Australian apprenticeships, Education and training providers, job vacancies and Australian employment trends.

A popular area within *The Facts* is the Occupation section. This area provides a search function and includes over 600 occupation profiles by keyword, alphabetically, by Industry or by Occupational Group. An example of an occupation profile is the *Library Technician* (2009). This occupational profile contains information relating to the duties and tasks, work conditions, personal requirements, related industries, labour market information, job and volunteer vacancies, related job profiles, ABS earnings data, related courses listed by state plus any individual state specific information and/or requirements for the role.

ePortfolios

Recording and reflecting upon career goals and professional development activity is another valuable activity, and the *ALIA career development kit* (2005, p.12) advocates the use of portfolios as a tool for this activity. There is increasing interest in ways of recording and storing portfolio information in digital form using electronic portfolios. The Australian University sector and the Vocational Education and Training sector both have major national projects underway researching, trialing and publishing about ePortfolios. (Australian ePortfolio Project, 2009; Australian Flexible Learning Framework, 2009) An ePortfolio is “a collection of artefacts assembled and managed by a user usually on the Internet. It provides an avenue for people to record, reflect and present information about themselves, their education, training, employment, academic achievements and life experiences. (Education.au, 2008, p.2)

By documenting their skills and professional development, library staff facilitate ongoing performance review, professional accreditation, job seeking, definition of learning needs and recognition of prior learning. ePortfolios may contain works in progress, reflection on professional reading, or a work-related favourite links area. A major advantage of ePortfolios is their ability to accommodate material in multimedia formats as well as text, and to enable connections between formal and informal learning activities. While an ePortfolio can take many forms including a stand-alone document, a folder, a blog or a video, there are a number of online tools that provide an integrated platform for collecting the resources for an ePortfolio. ALIA is undertaking an ePortfolio trial using a commercial ePortfolio platform (Hallam, 2009). *Elgg* and *Mahara* are two examples of open source applications that can be installed locally to an institution or used as a hosted service (*Eduspaces*, 2009; *Mahara*, 2009). Features include blogs, feeds, tags and file space plus a social component. Of particular value with *Mahara* is its ability for users to create different ‘views’ of their ePortfolio for different audiences, and its commitment to standards for importing and exporting ePortfolio data (*Mahara wiki*, 2009).

Although some organisations provide ePortfolios for their staff, Siemens (2004) stresses the importance of ePortfolios being developed and owned by the individual not an institution or workplace, stating that “ultimately, to ensure life-long use of ePortfolios, the learner needs to be

in control.” There are obvious issues with portability of ePortfolios when individuals move between organisations, so choosing an independent, self-managed ePortfolio option is recommended. This theme of staff being in charge of their learning is endorsed by ALIA (2008) when asked who has responsibility for professional development.

You have an obligation to yourself to keep up-to-date, develop new skills, knowledge and confidence to ensure you have a successful and rewarding career; demonstrate your commitment to being the best you can be; provide professional service to your clients and employer and enhance the profession's image.

For those starting out with an ePortfolio, it is usual to begin by collecting and organising some digital material in chronological order, and to establish a rudimentary profile or CV online. The power of an ePortfolio is realised when you record *why* you have collected something, and thus indicate the importance of both the activity and the importance of reflecting on professional learning. It may be helpful to note various stages of ePortfolio maturity as described by Love et al (2004). They observe that at first an ePortfolio tends to look like a scrapbook, and then more like a CV, and eventually it may be shared with others and used in mentoring. Reaching the stage where an ePortfolio contains “authentic evidence as authoritative evidence for assessment, evaluation and reporting” is an ambitious undertaking, but descriptions of developmental stages can offer guidance about the process and how to move to the next level.

There are obvious ICT and digital literacy skills implied in the development of an ePortfolio. There are also concepts and practices from collection management that are relevant, which means that for library staff ePortfolios can be used to demonstrate information management and technical expertise. Will you collect everything you produce, or is there a place for an ePortfolio collection policy; no doubt influenced by how much storage you have available? ePortfolio owners need to be cataloguers also, applying subject headings (tags) to their work so they can retrieve it easily at the selecting and presenting stages. Skills in subject analysis are helpful; perhaps even a personal ePortfolio taxonomy (or list of headings) so that all evidence related to a particular category comes up under the same category heading. It is important to recognise that one item might fulfill requirements for more than one criterion in a professional development review, in the same way that in a library database one resource may have multiple subject headings.

Online professional learning networks

While ePortfolios are one quite formal approach to documenting, organising and reflecting on professional development, many library staff are now investigating another strategy that delivers dynamic, personalised professional development. Nielsen (2008) describes a Personal or Professional Learning Network (PLN) as “a collection of people and resources that guide your learning, point you to learning opportunities, answer your questions, and give you the benefit of their own knowledge and experience.” The PLN has evolved within the Web 2.0 environment, and picks up on the concepts of collaboration inherent in many definitions of Web 2.0, such as ‘we are smarter than me’ (Libert & Spector, 2007), ‘harnessing collective intelligence’ and ‘network effect’. A PLN represents the power of learning from others, as summed up by Stephenson’s line: “I store my knowledge in my friends.”

me.edu.au is one example of an online professional networking service. It is a government funded service that provides all Australian education and training professionals with an online networking and profile space. me.edu.au was developed by Education Network Australia (edna) to help educators move into professional learning networks within a supportive environment. me.edu.au provides an online profile, a blog and an activity feed that aggregates content from other Web 2.0 services such as social bookmarking sites, blogs, twitter and video sharing sites. Educators and library staff are encouraged to use me.edu.au to establish their ‘digital footprint’ (Madden et al, 2007), connect with others who have similar interests, share resources and publish ideas and opinions. me.edu.au is an example of lifestreaming (Wordspy, 2008) and provides a single personalised url where library staff can collect their activity from numerous

online places in a form aptly described by Weinberger (2008) as 'small pieces loosely joined'.

Just like we have nametags at face to face conferences, we need to announce our identity in online networks. Many employers admit that they now check out an applicant online before interviewing them (Van Grove, 2009), and there are now some employers who request a link to an ePortfolio or online profile from applicants. Professional development is also undergoing transformation as people change the way they communicate and learn. In the light of rapid technological developments, the lead time on identifying your learning needs and finding a relevant and available commercial, offsite training provider is often too slow. Library staff looking for quicker, more personalised ways of building their knowledge and skills find this through their Personal Learning Network. Professional networking services such as me.edu.au provide powerful examples of how library staff are developing lifelong learning skills within online social networks - all within the comfort of their preferred environment.

Collaborative learning and online publishing and community building require new skills and plenty of practice. It is sensible for adults to be public, professional, relaxed but careful online; to make contributions open by default but with a view to the longevity and searchability of digital content.

Assisting Others

All library staff have responsibility for their own career development. Many staff in public and education libraries have a further level of responsibility when assisting members of the public and students who may be seeking career information either for themselves or others. The *Assist Others* area of myfuture provides a range of information, resources and activities to assist information professionals, parents, career practitioners and teachers. The *myfuture* resources, and resources provided through the *Australian Blueprint for Career Development* (MCEETYA, 2009) are also invaluable for library managers, human resources personnel and professional development coordinators involved in supporting others in their study and career pathways. This section of *myfuture* also offers different avenues to improve or begin a professional development pathway.

Conclusion

The importance of lifelong learning forms a consistent theme through the career development literature discussed earlier. If you accept ALIA's statement that your strategy for success is "lifelong learning that is unique to you" how can you use tools like *myfuture*, ePortfolios and me.edu.au to make this a reality? Tatham & McMahon (2008, p.7) are clear that the world of work is dynamic and change is constant, and that "new work opportunities will evolve from new combinations of multi-disciplinary skills, knowledge, understandings and technologies." How will you keep pace with changing technology and knowledge in the dynamic environment of the library and information sector? What will give you a competitive edge? How will you ensure your professional development improves your ability to undertake your job? Online professional development that is responsive, inspired by your professional learning network and documented publicly has the potential to build your self esteem, provide assurance to your employer and the community that you are keeping yourself up-to-date and enhance your career opportunities.

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