

## **PD or perish!**

### **Importance of professional development**

Library and information professionals are in the business of connecting their clients with the information they need and want, whether it is for work, for study or for leisure. In the last decades, technological change, workplace change, societal change – all these - have impacted on the environment in which library and information professionals work, transforming it into the dynamic sector we know today.

If you, as a library and information professional, are to survive and thrive in today's challenging environment, you must be prepared to develop and enhance your professional and personal expertise so that you can continue to provide the excellent service that clients demand. Further, by taking part in regular and ongoing learning activities not only will you increase your capacity to meet client expectations, at a personal level you will develop as a practitioner, thus laying the foundation for a successful and rewarding career.

### **Responsibility for professional development**

Regular involvement in professional development activities enables you to keep up-to-date with new developments in the information profession, new directions in which the profession is moving. Whether these are motivated by changing technology or improved methods for service provision or other reasons, you have the opportunity to learn about and reflect on innovations which may ultimately lead to changes in practice. By taking part in such activities you are demonstrating your willingness to enhance your skills in order to remain current in the profession. This can then help in furthering your career options as employers recognise your determination to grow and learn, to embrace new ideas and to strive for excellence.

But remember no-one will necessarily force you to take part in developmental activities. Essentially it is up to you to commit to involvement in professional developmental activities. Your employer, educators and your professional association can help you by offering the learning opportunities that will enable you to develop the knowledge and skills to maintain and extend your capability as a practitioner. However, until you decide that you will join in and make the most of the learning experiences you opt for, you will gain little from the activities in which you take part. The greatest benefits from undertaking professional development activities come from your whole-hearted commitment because you believe this is vital to improved practice.

### **Professional development activities**

What constitutes professional development? This is a question that is frequently asked but as is often the case with such questions, there is probably no absolute answer. Professional development, as most of us think of it, incorporates a number of elements. Professional development might be described as all of the following:

- keeping up-to-date in an area of expertise;
- formal or informal training to enhance ability to practise a profession;
- increasing knowledge and skill through workplace learning, courses, research, etc
- enhancing personal growth.

So as professional development is very broad in its scope, then you will find that there is a wide range of activities you can undertake to develop both your professional and personal skills.

Appropriate activities include but are not necessarily limited to:

- professional reading;
- formal staff training and development;
- attending professional association conferences; seminars, workshops;
- mentoring;
- attending formal and informal education courses;
- preparing articles for publication;
- participating in issues based discussion groups;
- making presentations in formal and informal situations outside your regular job responsibilities.

However, it is not sufficient to undertake an activity simply because it is available and it might be of some use to your career in the future. Participation in activities can certainly improve your skills and knowledge. However, there is also the danger that your development will be without clear direction and that, while you may develop a multiplicity of skills, these may not form the cohesive set that you need in order to progress your career along the particular track you may wish.

To obtain the greatest benefit from participating in development activities, it is important to set priorities for your professional and personal development so that you can seek out activities that will enable you to gain or enhance the skills and knowledge essential for the career path you are taking. Before you can do this, you will have had to establish a career plan setting out your objectives and analysing your developmental needs.

### **Assistance in professional development**

Employers, education and training providers and your professional association can all help you with your professional development. One of the most valuable ways in which you can develop your skills and knowledge is by making the most of the opportunities that arise in your workplace. Many organisations offer formal staff training and development programs that enable staff to acquire new skills and knowledge so that they can perform more effectively within the specific workplace. However, in many instances, the skill sets acquired through such programs are readily transferable to other organisational environments and thus offer participants a valuable professional development experience.

Education and training providers offer a large number of courses some leading to formal qualifications, for example Diploma, Graduate Certificate, through which you can broaden professional knowledge and gain new skills in areas such as management, interpersonal relations and so on, thus enabling your ongoing development both at a personal and professional level.

### **ALIA supports professional development**

The Association offers a number of professional development services through which you can further strengthen your professional and technical knowledge and skills,

remain up-to-date with new developments in the profession and which also offers opportunities for personal growth. These include:

**Conferences, symposia, workshops** organised on a national basis, such as the ALIA Biennial Conference and others including Information Online and Ondisc and the recent symposium *New directions in special librarianship*;

**Networking and information exchange**, both electronically through the various ALIA e-lists and face-to-face through the many ALIA group activities organised at a local level to cater to the interests of their members. Such activities may range from seminars updating skills, for example, in the provision of reference and information services to personal development opportunities such as workshops on how to improve presentation skills;

**Access to formal education** – short courses and course leading to further tertiary qualifications – through partnerships with registered education and training providers;

**Mentoring** programs in a number of areas. While these programs focus on the needs of newer members of the profession, longer standing professionals also report of the benefits they gain from their involvement in such schemes:

**ALIA Career Development Kit.** This tool has been produced for ALIA members to help them in systematically planning career development. Containing worksheets and other advice, it allows members to set down career goals, encourages them to identify the skills needed to achieve these goals and structure a career plan so that they can realise their goals.

**ALIA Professional Development Scheme.** A sub-category of membership, participation in the scheme enables ALIA associate and library technician members to formally record and obtain recognition for their participation in professional development activities. It offers a formal and structured approach to professional development that:

- provides a widely-accepted and endorsed record of learning for you and your employer;
- acknowledges your commitment to professional standards;
- allows members to use Certified Practitioner (CP) after your post-nominals;
- enables members to meet the criteria to become an Associate Fellow (AFALIA or AFALIATec).

The scheme operates on an opt-in basis, that is ALIA Associate and Library Technician members can choose to join the scheme but, having done so, must comply with a number of conditions in order to gain recognition for their professional development activities. More information about ALIA's Professional Development Scheme and how to join it are available on ALIA's website at <http://alia.org.au/education/pd/>

## **Conclusion**

As a library and information professional you have a responsibility to continue developing your knowledge and skills throughout your career. Only by keeping up-to-date with the rapid rate of change that characterises our profession and by continuing to develop at a personal level, will you be able to offer your clients the service they expect and demand. By availing yourself of the help you can obtain from your employer, education and training providers, your professional association, you can plan your development to ensure you flourish in the challenging and rewarding career that is library and information service.

## **References**

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