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Generational Change in Australian Librarianship: viewpoints from Generation X

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Abstract

Australian librarianship faces the same age demographic and generational changes that other western countries and some other professions will soon encounter. As Baby Boomers retire there will be job opportunities and gaps in the profession. Who will take up higher level positions? Will there be enough qualified library staff to fill vacant positions? How should the library industry attract and retain young people? What will be the effect of the "brain drain" on the profession of librarianship resulting from mass retirements where people will take their knowledge, history and experiences with them? Questions such as these will be addressed in this paper, which will focus on Australian library demographic statistics and generational research from Australia and other countries.

Introduction

In late 2001 the authors were involved in the background research to propose the first ALIA New Librarian's Symposium Conference which was held the following year. The aim of the event was to provide professional development for the targeted group of young and new librarians in Australia and New Zealand. In the United States, First Lady Laura Bush had just announced a US\$10 million program to recruit more librarians to overcome the potential shortage. Demographics and the changing nature of the workplace was being seriously discussed by HR professionals, governments and large companies. Since 2001 the authors have convened two New Librarians Symposia (<http://www.alia.org.au/conferences/newlibrarian2002>) and have monitored the library literature on the topic, which has mostly originated from the United States. A literature survey of Australian material found only one article on succession planning (Bridgland 1999) and only a handful of presentations relating to age demographic and generational change in Australian librarianship. In April 2004 the United States Institute of Museum and Library Studies, as a part of their *Librarians for the 21st Century* Program issued a US\$1 Million grant to conduct a library workforce study. This study will include an analysis of current and projected U.S. library workforce data by state and region, by types of employers, and by functional specialisations. Should a similar study be conducted in Australia to give a clearer indication of the future profile of the Australian library profession?

Age Demographics, Librarians and Generations

"I have been trying hard to find a gentle way of saying this, and here goes ... As a group, librarians are exceptionally old – and we are not just old but we are aging at an alarming rate. There's nothing really personal about this – it isn't about individuals." (Wilder – Video at <http://www.arl.org/stats/salary/demo.html>)

Wilder, one of a few researchers to have completed extensive research and data analysis of the demographics of a specific group of librarians, describes a situation where soon there will

be significant changes in the number of and skill set of academic librarians in the United States. (Wilder 1995, 2003) Within the Association of Research Libraries staffing, Wilder's surveys predicted that 24% of the ARL population will retire between 2005 and 2010 and that a further 27% will retire between 2010 and 2020.

Definitions of Generations

"Generational commonalities cut across racial, ethnic and economic (and social) differences." (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak 2000, p. 17).

A 'generation' is defined in the literature as a group of people born within an age range, usually of a period of around 20 years. What sets each generation apart is the experiences the group as a whole encounters throughout their lives, and how they interact with the generations they come in contact with, for example parents, children, work colleagues. Hugh Mackay, one of the few Australian author to have written on Australian generations, also believes that "the early years of living in a family run by parents with a particular way of looking at the world inevitably affects the way we, too look at the world" (Mackay 1997, p. 2). "Coming of age during key socio-historical events still influences how each cohort reacts and responds in the workplace – and subsequently, why they collide with each other" (Martin & Tulgan 2002). Generational differences can be location specific – that is a teenager in Portugal may have a very different life than a teenager in Australia. It should be recognised that most of the literature and theories relating to generational differences relate to experiences in the western and developed world. While recognising this, the globalisation of culture also sees common experiences in the western world – for example, what movie do you most remember from your teenage years? Saturday Night Fever, Star Wars or Shrek?

The literature is not consistent with agreeing on specific date ranges to categorise or describe the four generations currently in the workplace. For the purpose of this paper, Zemke's date ranges have been selected for describing the four generations:

- Veterans 1922–1943

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Those born prior to World War II and whose earliest memories and influences are associated with that world-engulfing event.

- **Baby Boomers 1943–1960**

Those born during or after World War II and raised in the era of extreme optimism, opportunity and progress.

- **Generation X 1961–1980**

Those born after the blush of the Baby Boom and came of age deep in the shadow of the Boomers in a time of relentless social, cultural, economic and technological change.

- **Generation Y 1980–2000**

Those born of the Baby Boomers and early Xers into our current high-tech, neo-optimistic time.

(Zemke, Raines & Filipczak 2000)

A generation is defined not only by age, but by the common attitudes, experiences and events that take place during key times in their formative years or during their lives. It is important

to note that general comments are made about each group, and that like personality profiles are not indicative of all individuals in the group. It is also important that people don't personalise these comments and develop a 'them and us' mentality. Learning about each generational background, what has shaped their lives, and how they might view the world differently can assist with understanding differences. Each generation looks at workplace issues slightly differently – from rewards, etiquette, flexible working conditions and human resource decisions – and this needs to be taken into consideration when managing the library workforce of the 21st Century.

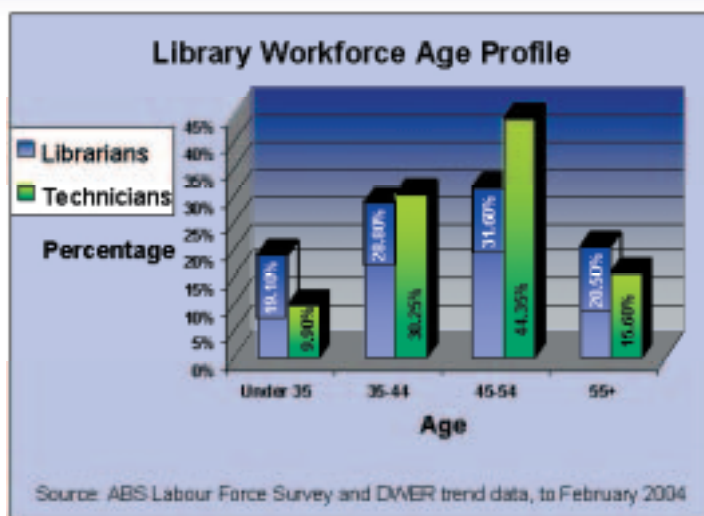
To provide an 'at a glance' summary of generational characteristics we have adapted Zemke's Table of Generations and included Australian examples of our own.

Adapted from Zemke, "Generations at Work" (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak 2000)

Generation title	Veterans	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
Also known as	Traditionalists Seniors Silent Generation	Boomers Me Generation	X-ers Baby Busters Slackers Post-boomers	Nexters Millennials Nintendo/Internet generation
Date range & Current Ages	1922–1943 ages 61– 74	1943–1960 ages 44 – 61	1961–1980 ages 24–44	1980–2000 ages 4–24
Defining Events and trends	Depression WW2 Radio Appliances Food Rationing during WW2 No TV	Vietnam Cold War JFK Assassination Landing on the moon Television	Gulf War Fall of the Berlin Wall Latchkey kids Single-parent homes AIDS Computers	Multiculturalism Bali Bombing & 911 Internet & Wireless The War on Terrorism
Music	Swing Big Band Bing Crosby Frank Sinatra Nelson Eddy Jeanette McDonald	Rock 'n Roll Beatles Elvis Beach Boys Woodstock	Disco / Pop INXS Midnight Oil Wham U2 Abba Countdown	Alternative Rap Eminem Powderfinger Silverchair Britney Spears Spice Girls
Movies & Popular culture	Gone with the Wind Clark Gable Dad & Dave Saturday Matinee Balls and Dances Singsong around the piano	Clint Eastwood Pinball First TV series	Brad Pitt Meg Ryan The Simpsons Dilbert comics Videos & Computer Games	Drew Barrymore Playstation Cable
Visible members	Curtin	Menzies Whitlam	Hawke / Keating	Howard / Bush
Messages that Motivate them to stay at a workplace	"Your experience is respected here" "It's valuable to the rest of us to hear what has – and hasn't – worked in the past"	"You're important to our success" "Your contribution is unique and important"	"Work to live, not live to work" "We've got the newest gadgets and computers"	"You'll be working with other bright, creative people"
Summary of characteristics	Attracted to security and stability, civic minded, respect for authority, Adherence to rules, duty before pleasure	Service oriented Future oriented	Technologically savvy, flexible, resourceful, adaptable to change, self-reliant	Over-planned lives, optimistic, confident, street smart
Education	A Privilege	Free	Free + Heccs Debt	Heccs Debt + increasing costs
Other Comments	Directive leadership style	Collegial and consensual leadership style "to boldly go where no man has gone..."	Grew up in the information age. Value fun and balance in life.	The most 'connected' generation e.g. wireless and mobile technology

Australian Librarianship Demographics

“Generational change happens almost imperceptibly, but it does happen; it comes up behind you and bites you in the ego.” (Abram 2003, p46)



Based on the figures above 52% of Australian librarians are currently over the age of 45 (ABS 2003 & DWER 2004). If the retirement age is 60 (based on the fact that 60 is the available retirement age for those born prior to 1964) then somewhere between 40 and 60 percent of the population of Australian librarians are expected to retire within the next 10 to 15 years.

But will they – or should they – retire at age 60? More detailed gathering of data is needed to effectively calculate the number of graduates coming out of Australian library schools each year. Corresponding research into whether there will be enough newly trained qualified librarians to even maintain the status quo is also required. Recruitment also comes from library technicians upgrading their qualifications, but these and other new entrants to the profession, will again often be over the age of 40.

A number of repercussions will begin to occur (some are already occurring) :

- Some positions will simply not be re-filled – meaning library closures especially in special libraries
- positions will be filled at a paraprofessional level or by unqualified staff
- positions will be downgraded to part-time
- other professionals such as IT and business graduates will take up library positions

When large numbers of retirements occur, the ‘brain drain’ or ‘experience deficit’ on the Australian library profession as a whole will be significant. Will the knowledge and experience of our older librarians be passed down to their successors? While some might argue that in such a rapidly changing environment you may not need ‘history’, however many libraries working within complex and large organisations will continue to benefit from long-term corporate memory. Mentoring, succession planning, knowledge (and history) transfer will be important components of the future of librarianship if we are to be successful. In a 2002 Bulletin article recognising that the Gen X pool may be too shallow, Mark Holden recommends that organisations consider a number of strategies including :

- Replace ‘development by accident’ of high potential managers

with a structured and strategic approach

- Increase the levels of loyalty, commitment and enthusiasm of your best people
- Capitalise on senior managers as coaches/mentors, sharing skills, knowledge and experience

(Holden 2002, p. 53)

Management of mature age workers will also be critical. The Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing has conducted a number of Symposia and published research papers on the role that older Australians will need to take in the workforce of the future see <http://www.ageing.health.gov.au/reports/research.htm>

Other situations could also be initiated in the library workforce :

- Older workers to be partnered with younger workers to combat organisational knowledge loss and encourage mentoring and transfer of corporate knowledge and history e.g in areas such as cataloguing and Library Management System maintenance.
- Greater use of job-sharing as older workers move to part-time arrangements to ease into retirement. This could also assist in achieving work/life balance (remembering that this is a goal of Generation X) and an encouragement of younger generations to take time off to fulfil family commitments (and to contribute to the birth rate).
- Those organisations that recognise that each generation has different motivations will create cultures that will attract and retain employees.

The Clashes of Generations

Each generation then has experienced life differently. These different views can lead to general differences in workstyles. Writers on the topic sometimes give common statements that each group might say about each other (see table below). While this is not indicative of all individuals, again it is interesting to take these statements in the context of how each group may view each other.

From Zemke, “Generations at Work” (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak 2000)

<i>What Veterans say about...</i>	<i>What Boomers say about...</i>	<i>What Gen Xers say about</i>	<i>What Gen Y say about</i>
Boomers 'They are self-absorbed' 'They talk about things they ought to keep private... like the intimate details of their personal lives'	Veterans 'They're dictatorial' 'They're rigid. They need to learn flexibility and adapt better to change' 'They're technological dinosaurs'	Veterans 'They're too set in their ways' 'Jeez learn how to use your e-mail' 'They've got all the money' 'They too shall pass'	Veterans 'They're trustworthy' 'They are good leaders' 'They are brave'
Gen X "They're not educated" "They don't respect experience" "They don't follow procedures"	Gen X "They're slackers" "They are always doing things their way – not our way" "They won't wait their turn" "They spend too much time on the Internet and e-mail"	Boomers 'They're self-righteous' 'They're workaholics' 'Lighten up it's only a job' 'What's the management fad this week'	Boomers 'They're cool' 'They're up to date on the music we like' 'They work too much'
Gen Y "They have good manners" 'They're smart little critters' 'They watch too much TV' 'They need to toughen up'	Gen Y 'They're cute' 'They can set the time on the VCR' 'They need to learn to entertain themselves' 'They need more discipline from their parents'	Gen Y 'Neo boomers' 'Here we go again ... another self absorbed generation of spoiled brats'	Gen X 'Cheer up'

As Hugh Mackay writes "However we choose to interpret it, the rising generation are sending us a message from our future. If we are to bridge those infamous generation gaps, we shall have to find the courage to listen to what they are saying. That doesn't mean that we will enjoy or accept, let alone agree with, everything we hear. But if we are to coexist harmoniously with each other in a shifting culture, we need to have some idea of the nature and direction of the shift." (Mackay 1997, p. 180)

How different people view their work can often relate to the wider socio-economic realities of current life. In November 2003 the release of the AMP *Income and Wealth of Generation X* report brought Australia-wide media coverage on the financial generational differences between Australian Baby Boomers and Generation X. This report noted that a recent Sydney Morning Herald newspaper article highlighted that the baby boomers enjoyed cheap housing, free education, the benefits of a welfare state and abundant jobs – while the Gen Xers have had to survive housing that costs a fortune, a university education that results in a large debt, ever tightening social security and far more labour force insecurity. The report also notes that "once children arrive, everything changes for the married Generation X woman. Their likelihood of holding down a full-time job plummets from 67% to only 16%. These figures seem to suggest that many Generation X women prefer to defer having children, rather than take on the arduous task of becoming a 'working supermum' ". (*Generation Xcluded: Income and Wealth of Generation X* 2003, p. 6)

Generation X and Australian Librarianship

"So who are Generations Xers? They are the innovative, information savvy new professionals who will come to manage the library and information centres of the next century. They are a small group with a global reach and the first generation to exploit truly borderless opportunities." (Urigo 2000, p. 15)

As a group with the characteristics described in the previous sections, Generation X (those currently aged in their mid-twenties to early forties) will need mentoring, encouragement to see the long term and not give in to their impatience to move on quickly to other organisations or other careers. Generation X are often referred to as the "options" generation as this word is often mentioned in their viewpoint – "I want to know my options" or "I want to keep my options open". Also, the profession will need to encourage this group to stay within the profession, rather than be enticed away with money and flexible workplaces into other professional sectors. "Many Generation Xers often express dread at the idea of taking a job that offers little change or challenge. They want to be engaged in their work, and they want to be constantly stimulated..... It takes a serious commitment on the part of managers to convince them that they value their Generation X employees" (Urigo 2000, p. 39)

Generation X could also hold the key to the survival of our profession as this group may have the insights into Generation Y to recruit enough new librarians from this age range to fill the void created by the Boomers retirements. As Stanley Wilder notes "If we're too focused on retirements, we risk losing sight of trends that may be crucial to understanding why the population is aging and may hold important clues as to what the future population of librarianship will look like. The management issue resulting from the aging of librarianship is not retirements ; it is how to obtain new entrants in sufficient numbers, quality and expertise to replace retirees and keep the cycle turning." (Wilder 2003, p. 14) How in Australia can we pro-actively recruit the best and brightest from this Generation Y? How will we make librarianship an attractive profession to join? While the acknowledgement by ALIA and the establishment of the New Generation Policy and Advisory Group is a very small start, what concrete research and programs do we see being initiated in Australia to make it happen? It is encouraging to see the Victorian State Library encouraging media attention on how to become a librarian in its 2004 campaign, following on from the South Australian '@ Your

Library' campaign. Should ALIA fund a well managed marketing campaign aimed at school leavers and a slick and appropriate presence at all the Career Expos in every state ?

The United States Institute of Museum and Library Studies initiated their *Librarians for the 21st Century* program to study and analyse the current and projected United States library workforce across the country. It will also assess the likely demand and opportunities for librarians over the next decade, the skills that librarians will need, the capacity of graduate schools of library and information science to meet projected needs, and incentives for attracting highly-qualified individuals to the field. The final report (due in 2006) will recommend strategies for the recruitment, education, and retention of future librarians. While Australia can wait for the findings of this report and make comparisons, can we wait that long to make some collective judgements and decisions on our local demographic future? Canada has been conducting similar surveys and research during 2003/2004 (Ingles 2003) and the final report will be released mid-2004. How is Australia ensuring it really knows what the future of Australian librarianship and librarianship education will look like – from an age and demographic point of view ?

Conclusion

The paper has provided a basic overview of the age demographic statistics of Australian librarianship and an overview of the different generations that make up the profession. As Stanley Wilder points out in the conclusions to his latest research, "The kids will be alright, provided there are enough of them. The profession's most important task is to bring fresh ideas to bear on the questions of professional education, recruitment and compensation to make librarianship a more attractive choice for young people. For those kids smart enough to make this choice, it only remains for veteran librarians to prepare them for success" (Wilder 2003)

Lets hope that a significant number of Australian kids, choose to become librarians.

Keywords:

Demographics
Librarians
Generational change
Ageing
Generations

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