The professional divide: examining workplace relationships between librarians and library technicians

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Abstract

Anecdotally, the working relationships between librarians and technicians have often been fraught with tension and difficulty due to differing perspectives or role boundaries. If this divide results in a negative team dynamic in the workplace, it can have an impact on the service of the library or information agency and in some cases, its budget. This paper seeks to disseminate the results of a survey, conducted by the author in January 2013, of over two hundred library workers. This includes librarians, library technicians and other support staff, across all sectors, all of whom were surveyed on the subject of working relationships. The following topics will be discussed:

1) The tasks that librarians and library technicians often undertake

2) The differences between the two roles and any areas of role overlap

3) Areas of tension or difficulty in working relationships

This paper will also look at some of the reasons why library technicians upgrade their qualifications and will ask if holding dual (librarian and library technician) credentials has changed their relationships with other library technicians.

This paper will introduce and encourage ideas to improve rapport between the two groups, providing potential benefits to organisational culture and job satisfaction. Ideas to improve relationships will be discussed, including measures that the industry can take to forge a greater understanding between librarians and library technicians. Achieving these outcomes can ensure that libraries and information services are better able to retain staff.
Introduction

Workplace relationships have the ability to significantly enhance or diminish workplace morale and culture. Since the creation of the library technician role, there has been an interesting dynamic at play between librarians and library technicians. Library technicians become qualified through completing a TAFE diploma course; librarians undertake a university degree (as an undergraduate or postgraduate). This paper seeks to examine working relationships between the two groups, discussing the types of tasks each professional undertakes, areas of role overlap and other issues. The paper will discuss the reasons why some library technicians have chosen to upgrade their qualifications; and will examine potential barriers to library technicians becoming librarians. There are many things that individuals, workplaces and the industry can do to improve working relationships; some of these measures will be considered by this paper.

At the start of 2013, I created a survey on the subject of this paper, entitled Working Relationships between Library Technicians and Librarians. I asked library professionals (librarians, library technicians and others), across all sectors, to answer questions and provide information about their experiences. Over two hundred professionals responded and I received a number of meaningful comments and suggestions; many of which I have incorporated into this paper and my presentation. I provided an overview of this research at the New Librarians Symposium in February 2013, as the subject is of value to both groups.

Basic survey statistics

Information about each respondent’s qualification and position title was requested:

Eight percent of survey respondents held both library technician and librarian qualifications. Those surveyed were not asked to list the library sector they worked in; but judging from the comments left by respondents, many worked in academic, special or public libraries.
When asking about what capacity each professional works in, many people indicated that their official “position title” was not librarian or library technician. Other common position titles included:

- Library Officer/Assistant
- Archivist
- Lecturer in Library Studies
- Project Officer

A small number of individuals stated that they worked in the related field of information management (records), but still had some involvement with libraries. Others indicated that they were retired, a volunteer or looking for work in libraries.

Library technician tasks

As libraries are changing, the nature of the work that each professional undertakes is also changing. Marian Fragola states that “In today's libraries... paraprofessionals, library technicians, or support staff, perform tasks that were the sole purview of professional librarians in the not-so-distant past” (Fragola, 2009, p. 17). The number of professionals working in a library also makes a difference, as one survey respondent commented: "It depends on the size of the library, but in my case, my role overlaps quite significantly with that of the librarian as there are only two of us."

In the survey, a number of “typical” library technician tasks were listed and survey respondents were asked to comment on which tasks they most identified with the library technician role. The tasks listed were non sector specific.
Tasks most often completed by library technicians were:
- Document Delivery
- Serials Management
- AV Management

Tasks least often associated with library technicians were:
- Staff supervision
- Reference and current awareness

Comments made by survey respondents included suggestions of other tasks:
“Library system management, collecting stats from system, delivery of e-Services”

“Processing new resources; customer service; collection maintenance; acquisition suggestions”

Acquisitions were mentioned by a small number of people as being a task that library technicians could undertake:
“Acquisitions as well...if the LT has experience and knowledge of the library they work in and the services it provides, they should be able to take a share, if not responsibility, for acquisitions”

Others provided an overview of library technician tasks:
“All above are duties LT are trained to undertake, developing expertise in line with job experience. Supervision of trainees and clerical staff is often undertaken though is often not reflected in pay rates”

“All library duties not related to management”

Other comments from the survey on the role of library technicians in libraries:

“The role of library technicians are necessary. They are different from other library supporting and front-line staff because they have technical background and experience. They can also assist the system librarian to carry out the technical projects”.

“Library technicians are capable of all tasks in a library...though management is better left to those who have librarian qualifications and have covered that subject whilst studying”

“I believe there is a great role for lib techs to work at a higher technical/admin level. Unfortunately my limit(ed) experience of working with 4 individual lib techs during the last 10 years, 3 out of 4 had gone back to train in middle age and were not flexible thinkers. In this century flexible thinking is mandatory as we manage reduced staffing and rapid changes in technology.”

“I see the Technician role as operational and process based. That said, there should be opportunities for refining and improving on processes rather than "just following orders".”

**Librarian tasks**

If the role of library technicians is changing, what does that mean for librarians? One survey respondent stated: “In my experience, librarians are managers or specialists. Their roles are becoming more strategic and less hands on or face to face with customers”.

The survey asked respondents to identify which tasks they saw as being completed by librarians. Again these tasks were not sector specific:
Tasks most often completed by librarians were:
- Staff Management
- Collection Development
- Financial Management

Tasks least often associated with librarians were:
- Cataloguing
- Acquisitions

Other tasks for librarians were suggested:

“Creating content (e.g. social media updates, blog posts, updating library websites/libguides), assisting to deliver information literacy classes”

“Reader education, community consultation, performance measurement and benchmarking, dealing with the parent organisation”

There were mixed feelings about whether librarians should still undertake cataloguing:

“Acquisitions and Cataloguing are both roles which are undertaken by Library Technician and Librarians, depending on the needs of the libraries, but Library Technician’s spend more time during their study learning about cataloguing and classification compared to a librarian so my thought is cataloguing is more of a Library Tech’s role”.
“I don’t believe technicians should assist with reference questions or cataloguing, since their level of education and expertise may not provide the best level of assistance for patrons”

Comments about the role of librarians:

“The "professional" face of libraries although disturbingly few people realise how much study is involved and that the staff shelving the books are not employed as librarians. Facilitators and supporters for researchers in the broadest understanding of the term, not just restricted to academics and students but to the fact-seeking public. Librarians show you how to find something you didn’t even realise you were looking for”.

“Librarians understand the bigger global picture for information management within a company and should be educating staff (non library) in the value of information and the services available.”

“I believe also the librarian (our library is small and there are only two of us) should be aware of what all of their staff do and be willing to learn the basics in case they are called to assist or retrain staff.”

Role overlap (or “who does what”)

Task division in libraries is rarely clear cut and linear, due to a number of factors. Equitable task division ensures that both librarians and library technicians feel empowered in their positions; ideally each professional’s skills and abilities should fit the position. It is up to each employer, when recruiting, to analyse what their library service needs and which position(s) are required (do they need a library technician or a librarian, or both?). This would help them make an informed decision that will benefit their organisation. Unfortunately these decisions are often complicated by budgetary and other restrictions.

Many survey participants thought that task overlap was a reality of the industry:

“Many aspects overlap. Skills of each individual person should be utilised. Librarians often fill management jobs & it is the job description that differs rather than the skills obtained from the qualification”

“In many ways the roles can overlap due to the many routine tasks in running a library but librarians should have the decision making role with valuable input from all staff especially library techs”.

“The smaller the library, the bigger the overlap. Technicians are our valuable para professionals with frontline skills but less big picture knowledge. As technicians get more experienced their overlap also increases.”

“The role overlap experienced in our library service is between Library Officers and Technicians.”

“It depends on when they’ve graduated, industry experience and organisation as previously stated. Some organisations have very clear defined roles for LT and Librarians while other blur these roles due to lack of staffing...”.

Others believed that librarians have a bigger picture approach, whilst technicians are primarily concerned with the operational aspects of library work:

“Librarians are big different from library technicians. The former ones are professional rank, supervision and management work involved; while the later ones are supporting staff and responsible for front line work.”
“I would see Librarians as having an overall picture of the Library operations and be managing the big picture. I see Library technicians as being focused on aspects of the big picture and working within their area of responsibility to keep things running smoothly.”

“Librarians have the additional role of researching and implementing new ideas/initiative based on evidence. Library technicians are largely involved in the operational processes of the library, based on the decisions made by librarians (as managers).”

Qualification upgrade

Some library technicians choose to upgrade their technician qualifications to a librarian degree. A number of survey respondents gave varied reasons for why they upgraded their qualifications:

- Increased salary and responsibilities
- Opportunities to undertake more interesting work, including project work
- Opportunities for promotion
- Lack of library technician positions
- Greater job satisfaction

The survey also asked library technicians who had upgraded their qualifications if their working relationships with other library technicians had changed, and how they had changed.

“Have always appreciated the role of Library Technician. Sometimes I get a little frustrated that Technicians I see with a lot of potential, aren’t interested in furthering their skills or qualifications, but I guess I should accept that it is up to them!”

“Managing a library service and staff meant I had to deal with matters not previously my experience as a technician: e.g. hiring/firing, financials, legal contracts, high level networking, project management and reporting. I had to become at ease with delegating tasks so that priority work could be completed. This changed the way I communicated set tasks for staff. Overwhelmingly I think having been a techie made be mindful about how tasks were delegated and the need to give people credit and freedom within their jobs. Thus our library had very positive working relationships - different from the hierarchical experience I had in previous workplaces”.

As many library technicians already have a strong understanding of library operations, in most cases, it would be beneficial for the industry if interested technicians upgrade their skills by completing a degree. The process for upgrading from a library technician qualification to a degree in librarianship should be streamlined, and recognise the prior learning that library technicians already have.

What of the barriers to library technicians upgrading their qualifications? Course length and course costs seem to be the major barriers to undertaking a university degree. Course length could be mitigated by universities offering library technicians recognition of prior learning (RPL). Many universities are able to give library technicians RPL at varying levels “… it is clear to us that it is not possible to present an appropriate study program over one year to library technicians who have not been exposed to theoretical principles, to complex analytical and evaluation processes, and to the higher level thinking and writing skills that are required in degree level education. (Sanders, 2002, p 158-159).

Tension and difficulties in working relationships

In professional literature, there are varying opinions on how well relationships between librarians and library technicians function. In his book, “The library paraprofessional: notes from the underground”, Terry Rodgers states: “Tensions between non-professionals and professionals are a major source of stress in libraries” (1997, p. 34), whereas other research on in-group bias (the extent to which a group favours or does not favour its own members) has found that “based on professional librarians’ responses to the survey designed to test their level of in-group bias, it seems
that they do exhibit some in-group bias, but to a lesser degree than what has been commonly attributed to them in professional lore and in the professional literature." (Fragola, 2009, p 23).

About half of the survey respondents had experienced or heard of tension between librarians and library technicians.

“By having a degree many librarians can be more flexible in their thinking & problem solving skills. Again in my limited experience lib techs have tended to be rigid people who are hung up on procedures, if the procedure needs to change they often resist the change”

“Yes- lots of ‘that isn’t my job, that’s x’s job’. It would be great to see more flexibility built into people’s job descriptions so this becomes less of an issue”

“Librarians can have a more superior attitude to what they consider they can or cannot do. e.g. book covering or shelving could be seen as not “high profile enough”. Library technicians can do themselves a disfavour by “dumbing down” the work they do without taking an interest in what is happening in the Information Providing sector”

“Yes - I think that the opinions and ideas of library technicians (who are usually the first point of contact for library users) are often discounted or ignored by librarians and library management teams (comprising librarians). This can create tension, because while librarians often make the decisions about service, library technicians deal with the day to day effectiveness of such decisions”

“Yes depending on the work place. But where I worked in a larger academic library I saw the Library technicians resented the Librarians a little and thought they did not work as hard. This feeling I think arose because the management of the library was not as good as it could have been and there were no big group staff meetings or ways to make everyone feel equally valued etc.”

“I have observed/heard quite a bit. Unfortunately it has been from LTs who have not been happy having librarians as their supervisor, for the most part. Not with the actual person as much as with the title”.

“Yes - both are professional positions which include different skills. Technicians are now doing the practical tasks once done by libns, while libns do the managerial tasks and new service delivery. Both are essential to the smooth running of a library/information service. Tension has arisen between the two due to the failure of the professional association to recognise the professional status of the Lib Techs and the failure of Libns to move into new roles as dictated by developments in technology and information.”

Other survey respondents did not seem to think that working relationships were problematic:

“Having been employed in Libraries for over 35 years I have seen my share of tensions/difficulties and unprofessional behaviour. I would like to say though that most of these difficulties were years ago and now there is more respect shown to Technicians from Librarians (and vice versa)”

“No. I have always enjoyed working with technicians, and find them eager, helpful and knowledgeable.”

“It’s more of a personality thing than a role thing”

“Not generally, my experience is tension and difficulties arise when staff aren’t managed properly and individuals aren’t addressed - this usually occurs where people have been working in a workplace for a long period of time and new staff come in. Change is something that library staff don’t deal with well; this usually divides teams as their roles can be redefined and new processes initiated”
“I personally have not observed tension between technicians and librarians.”

“No, but this is possibly a function of my work environments rather than the profession”.

**Improvements to working relationships**

There are a number of things that individuals, employers and the industry can do to improve working relationships. The majority of survey respondents thought that relationships could be improved:

They provided a number of suggestions on the topic:

“I think good management of all staff and autonomy and responsibility in all work roles so that people feel job satisfaction and can make a valuable contribution.”

“I think librarians need to remember that library technicians do a lot of the same work for a lot less pay. This needs to be compensated for with respect and an acknowledgement of their value to the organisation.”

“Change the structure of the industry. The overlaps are more and more and the employers themselves are not differentiating as much. The roles in libraries are changing and it is skill in particular areas that is appreciated not necessarily the qualification.”

“Allow Library Technicians who undertake CPD to become full members of ALIA so their skills and expertise can be recognised officially. This would give credence to their abilities and attributes.”
“I am really not sure here but extra work I have done this year leads me to believe that there is some bias ingrained in LT training. This has been confirmed by LTs I have trained or had as placement students.”

“A clearer career path with greater scope for advancement for technicians perhaps. Or for management to be clearer about their roles/expectations when they are employed in a particular position.”

“More collaborative working styles. More in-house and external seminars and courses which are marketed to all diploma or degree library workers, rather than just one or the other, considering their duties often overlap. A top-down inclusive workplace culture.”

“Respect for the roles an individual plays within a team, don’t define someone by their qualifications. The industry also needs to support and mentor new staff, we generally are working towards a common goal - access to information and customer service.”

“More distinct lines need to be drawn between the role of librarians and technicians. Technicians need to respect more the fact that librarians are tertiary educated professionals.”

“Perhaps more joint PD activities and more joint social events.”

“Rotating people around to show them how the different job roles work and getting others to cover for someone when they are on leave. I think that the more understanding you have of what someone is doing the more you appreciate it. However this only works if you start with competent staff members :) And I think this applies to Techs needing to better understand the role of Librarians as well.”

“Maybe some kind of cross-team experience for both. Or, a means of developing techs into librarians (it is a good way to start in libraries - and some librarians who have never done tech tasks are not as well rounded as others).”

The validity of survey respondents’ suggestion about joint social events is confirmed by Fragola’s in-group bias research. “There was agreement among all the subjects that professional librarians and paraprofessionals had a high degree of interaction, both on the job, in social situations (either on the job in the form of parties), or outside of work hours…(which) has been shown to “reduce the negative bias toward the out-group that ordinarily characterizes intergroup relations.” (Fragola, 2009, p 24). It would be good to see ALIA foster more events for both groups, rather than just specific events for either librarians or library technicians.

The industry and/or individual workplaces could also put in place a program where librarians and library technicians could learn each other’s jobs for a day. This would be especially useful for technicians who are interested in upgrading their qualifications and would like to experience librarian level work to get an understanding of what the job entails. In order for this measure to be effective, librarians and library technicians need to be open, trusting, and enthusiastic about the idea.

Conclusion

There are many issues to consider when examining working relationships between library technicians and librarians. This paper has discussed subjects such as each professional’s role in the industry, qualification upgrade and its impact on relationships and how librarians and library technicians interact with each other. Both librarians and technicians need to work together to improve working relationships, with the support of their workplace, ALIA and the industry generally. The positive outcomes of making these changes will benefit not only the individuals involved, but their library services as well.
References

