

New roles for library teams

This article describes some of the key changes that are being introduced to the various roles in public libraries around the world. With the advent of simple retail innovations and self-service technologies, much of the intensive book handling and check out work (up to 90%) is disappearing from our work. So what will we be doing? Fi suggests that librarians will be able to concentrate on more development of the team, *strategic* stock management and partnership while library assistants will have more opportunity to merchandise and manage the stock and assist the library visitor much more

The article provides key strategies to move towards this more user, service and product focussed library service

Library transformation is an opportunity to re-assess roles, especially in the light of the changing needs of the community. For too long our work in public libraries has become one long session of signing people onto the internet pcs (instead of helping people with the technology) and spending time moving books around rather than having time to help customers.

Our Lending Services Role – helping people through the bewildering range

Taking the stress out of our customers' lives is a key way to increase our loans and membership numbers. Nowadays people are overwhelmed by too much choice (just think of shampoo on the supermarket shelves) and retailers are now trying to help their customers by highlighting products, personal help, web-shopping, recommendations, specials and so forth.

Libraries are moving away from simply keeping the books in the correct place on the shelf, to providing wonderful displays of Quick Picks, Staff Recommendations, Top Ten and recent returns. Most libraries have started this, and it will be an increased part of your role.

Information – what you cannot Google!

People are finding much of their information through Google, digital TV and the internet. There is an increasing need for quality information and of a good research standard. There will be more need for 'deep' information work.

Community Space – the library as the place to be

Governments and libraries are now seeing libraries as a key way to provide a centre for the community and a 'sense of place'.

The team will be involved in making the library welcoming. This will involve not only their inter-personal and floor walking skills but also in managing the different zones. An explanatory document that articulates exactly what is expected in the floorwalking role each day.

The new Information Role –the choice - self-service and in depth

In a nutshell, the customer enters the library (or access you through the Web or by telephone) and has two access points at this stage; the hunter will prefer self-service and the gatherer may want personal attention.

Floor plans, department signs, open display of high use brochures and clear sightlines help the hunter self-serve. Availability of floorwalkers and hosts will help the browser. It will be important to minimise non-customer work performed on any counter to ensure browsers feel comfortable in approaching. In fact, most counters can be taken away completely.

The host performs the role of filter, offering instant access to simple information, or referral to another person. The host will look after the front of the library but will not 'jump' people as they enter, rather have their customer radar on.

The floorwalkers will provide reading help and showing people how to place reservations on the OPACS.

The main information counter will provide information that requires access to databases and the Web and is aimed at Council/College enquiries and more in-depth inquiries about reading or borrower services. At the end of this desk the floorwalkers will be able to sit down next to the customer to help them register and deal with any changes to their membership.

The new Lending role – you wont be doing much re-shelving!

The major change to people's role will be in stock handling. It is estimated that in the old system of check-in/out that there on average 9-12 tasks involved for each book and this is multiplied by over 20,000-40,000 pa (90,000 in Caloundra, Queensland!) loans each team member performs.

The RFID system will remove much of this and therefore the lending processes will change in terms of team roles. A recent project I was involved in, introducing self service technology, most of the re-shelving role disappeared in addition to 80-90% of the check-ins and check outs. We had designed the library and the check-in process in such as way that most books were borrowed almost immediately on return.

In many libraries, books can be checked in by the customer and placed directly on open trolleys for the host and/or floorwalkers to display or remove filled trolleys to a browsing zone further in to the express zone. Captured books to go to other libraries are placed into locked boxes at the terminals and alarm sounds when they are filled.

Impulse material ("books you don't have to think twice about borrowing"¹) good enough to display face out will be placed on display shelves nearest the door. Purpose books (manuals, books on narrow subjects) will be the first to be shelved so that the hunters can locate them easily.

¹ Coined by Essex Libraries 2005

In this way, most of your lending can happen in the first part of the library acting as an Express Zone.

Up to 70% of lending has been reported from these well-designed areas.

This method does not bring the reading experience down to the lowest common denominator. We purchase a wider range than most book shops. It is important not to 'turn off' potential readers at this entry zone of the library, especially when lending levels are lower than they have been in years. In many libraries I work with in Australia and New Zealand, active borrowers make up 50-80% of the community as opposed to the average in the UK of 25%. At the recent Reading Agency seminar in London on "Love Libraries", a main theme was our role as a public library service is to grow a community of readers – this was re-interated by publishers and library professionals alike. So as Roger McGough said years ago, "Bait the Book Hook!". Create your own luscious quick choice zone, whether you have self checkout or not.

Weeding is not a librarian role

A major part of the lending role has not been given adequate provision for many years; and that is stock management (my passion). It is recommended that all assistants are aware of what weeding is appropriate, what should be displayed and what should be re-shelved. The stock should become the responsibility of the shop floor team. The managers can oversee the weeding and display, leaving them to look at strategic development of the collection based on usage data and future needs.

Community Space Role

All team members will be responsible for creating and maintaining the different zones. They will need to be briefed on how to manage the noisier zones where there is music, discussion and group study. Also where the quieter zones will be located and how to maintain them.

The team members will be expected to maintain the integrity of your brand by following a set of Quality Standards and having an audit in place.

The following suggestion may cause a bit of discussion. Too often I see highly paid team members sticking themselves on loans counters and non-trained staff on reference desks struggling with databases. People should be working within their role. The good retail manager knows their stock strategy; how the stock is performing, what areas of stock will need to grow, what to shrink. They have time to work with the team, leading and developing them through coaching, performance management and walking the floor. Shop assistants are responsible for the stock.

The table below is a suggested clarification of roles.

Library Assistant Role	Librarian/ supervisor Role	Library manager
Registration information and joining new customers	User education/tours Community outreach	An understanding of processes in library (joining) and ability to step in. Partnership working
	Communication conduit between team and senior managers	Managing the team and leading by example
Weeding, merchandising, Reshelving, keeping displays topped up	Supervises weeding, knows stock use figures	Strategic guidance on stock issues
Ready reference skills (using interview basics)	Complex information skills (requires more than one source)	Understanding of what information is required and what sources are available
Basic searching of electronic resources	Professional knowledge of information and its use	Knowledge of information strategies and use

Attitudes and Behaviours required

Assistant	Librarian/supervisor	Manager
Attention to detail	Non-discriminatory	Non-discriminatory
Love of reading	Good interpersonal skills	Target driven
Non-discriminatory	Firm and fair	Good interpersonal skills
Good interpersonal skills	Leading the team	Firm and fair
Flexibility		Strategic thinker
		Politically astute

Skills change for library assistants

Current training	Additional training required
Manual handling	Interpersonal skills
Reading knowledge	Quality Information Skills – the standard reference interview
	Product knowledge – what databases you have, internet basics
	Stock management

Role descriptions

The following changes are recommended for the role descriptions:

1. Simplify the system to a role description for an assistant, one for a supervisor and one for a librarian. Then add additional covering letter if someone has special duties.
2. Clarify who the person is responsible to

3. Add the expected attitudes and behaviours. You will need to work out how to do this within your Corporate Guidelines.
4. Simplify the key tasks to allow clarity around the intent of the role and to maintain flexibility.

The following sample role description has been adjusted as an example of what you may write in the future.

LIBRARYSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL JOB DESCRIPTION

DEPARTMENT:	Library Services	DESIGNATION OF POST:	Library Assistant (Supervised library)
SECTION:	Libraries & Heritage	POST NO:	1111111
DATE:	February 2008	GRADE:	Sc 2

Job Purpose

The postholder helps to provide library services at the City Library and at other service points.

Responsible to

Library Supervisor

Key Behaviour and Attitudes expected (your current role description template may not cover these aspects. You will need to discuss this with your HR specialists)

1. Positive and constructive communication
2. Flexibility
3. Respectful and friendly
4. Can work to targets and deadlines

Key Tasks

General;

- To maintain good customer relations with the community
- To provide assistance in book selection and basic information queries

- Re-shelving lending material and stock management
 - Maintaining high presentation standards in the library
1. Enrols new members, ensuring their first visit meets their expectations.
 2. Assists in the promotion of stock and services to all sections of the community through participation in activities, good presentation of stock and general order on the shelves within the context of a tidy library environment.
 3. Promotes and assists members of the public to use the technology including Checkout and the Web catalogue pcs. Also performs circulation duties including cash handling.
 4. Assists library users in finding the basic information in a form that suits their needs and ensuring that a reference library or senior staff are consulted if appropriate.
 5. Develops the practical skills needed to make effective use of electronic information. This will include:
 - Obtaining the underpinning knowledge to the Computer Driving Licence standard.
 - Use ICT and communication skills to assist members of the public use electronic information within the library environment.
 - Adhering to the policy regarding passwords and system security.
 - Ability to cope with everyday problems and undertaking simple, routine maintenance with due consideration to health and safety.
 6. Assists the Supervisor in the collection of usage figures
 7. Maintains an awareness of health, safety and welfare and equal opportunities in the workplace. When necessary acts to ensure a safe and fair workplace.
 8. Undertakes work at other service points if required (very important this one!)
 9. Undertakes other duties appropriate to the grade and nature of the post.

Special Conditions

The postholder is required to work flexible hours throughout the working week including evening and weekends.

Rostering

In retail, the busy times are often lunchtimes. In libraries you may have a 9am flurry, another at lunchtime and another as school comes out. An aspect some library teams are considering is that of the wider lunch hour range. In retail it is not uncommon to begin lunches at 11.30 and finish at 2.30. By splitting the lunches into three sessions, you are minimising the impact at busy times. The team may not be used to this routine but some will appreciate the potential to get to shops and offices at quieter times.

In addition, it is very noticeable how much chopping and changing goes on in current hour-long rotas. This changing is disruptive for team members and for the customer and does not allow adequate time to concentrate on the task in hand. When the manual handling of books has been reduced, staff will be given the opportunity to work in longer shifts on information work and floor walking. In much of retail, team members perform their whole day in one place. Self-service technology will free the team from work involving key strokes (typical Checkout operator work).

Summing Up

Some opportunities to prepare for the library of the future;

1. Draft up a Vision for what your library service is going to look like in 18 months and some strategies to get you there.
2. Clarify the roles and responsibilities each staff member has.
3. Add attitude and behaviours into the essential criteria for any role
4. Update the role descriptions
5. Those with supervisory responsibility need to manage and lead their team, inspire and motivate – and deal with problem behaviour.
6. Maximise your building, reduce counter space, increase display of recently returned material and create good sanctuary spaces away from the bustle of the main library.

7. Look at your processes to minimise unnecessary book handling and maximise time with the customer. Look at simpler rosters and more customer-friendly breaktimes.

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