Beyond the library:
Library professionals working in diverse emerging roles

In 2019, after working as a librarian in a government library and as Library and Knowledge Manager in a law firm library, I moved into a role of knowledge manager, without a library, at Geoscape, a government owned but commercially run company specialising in Australian locational data.

It was a good experience for me. I learnt a lot about aligning my work with the priorities of an organisation and communicating effectively with colleagues who didn't have time for knowledge management or sometimes for knowledge managers! When I arrived, there was nowhere to store information so I spent most of my two years with Geoscape building their SharePoint based Intranet and creating interactive elements and workflows to enable the company to gather the information they needed.

A library professional is used to sitting between information sources and the people who need to use and understand it, doing whatever it takes to make that information accessible and user friendly. Which was exactly what I was doing at Geoscape. Yet it certainly felt well beyond "the library" and I wondered how many other people had taken their library qualifications and similarly moved beyond the library?

I also noticed that connecting with ALIA was more difficult when working in this role. But I also wondered, if there were a lot of library professionals working beyond the library, was there some extra role for ALIA in supporting and recognising these professionals?

This paper arose out of a desire to explore these issues and between proposing this paper to ALIA and this conference, I found myself back in what I regard as a more traditional librarian role, though many of you may beg to disagree! In January, I joined Atlassian, an Australian technology company, now global and listed on the NASDAQ. It has a rapidly growing staff of about 8000. It makes software to assist with collaboration and you may be familiar with its products, such as Jira and Confluence. I am first person to be employed at Atlassian as a professional librarian.

In my role of Senior Research Librarian, I am creating my third library or knowledge service from scratch. The Atlassian Research Library will collect all Atlassian's internal research and associated artefacts, along with external

resources pertinent to research. It will be a full-service library, with a reference service, information literacy training, collection management, acquisitions and vendor management.

In order to find out more about library professionals working beyond the library in non-traditional roles, I ran a survey, which received 67 responses. Additionally, I talked to a small group of respondents from the survey to find out more about their career journey.

I wanted to find out what kinds of roles library professionals were moving into beyond the library, to discover how they perceived their role related to their library qualifications, skills and experiences, how they perceived of themselves as library professionals and about their relationship with ALIA.

This is important because library professionals **are** moving into roles beyond the library which draw on their library skills and experience. Getting a firm handle on the numbers of library professionals working in roles beyond the library is difficult, mainly because someone's job title does not necessarily indicate their role. For example, some knowledge managers continue to manage a library.

That said, a quick search of LinkedIn for Australians who hold ALIA recognised library qualifications and who have held a knowledge manager role brings up 49 people. As well as being knowledge managers, these people now hold a diverse range of jobs, including a Strategic Designer, a Chief of Staff to a politician, an Executive Search researcher and a Board member.

Additionally, our chair for this session, Alissa Sputore, has worked in a diversity of roles, including in Human Centred Design, and is a fine example of someone who has taken her librarian skills way beyond the library.

So, library professionals are working in highly diverse roles.

Your librarianship qualifications. Are you...

Answered: 67   Skipped: 0

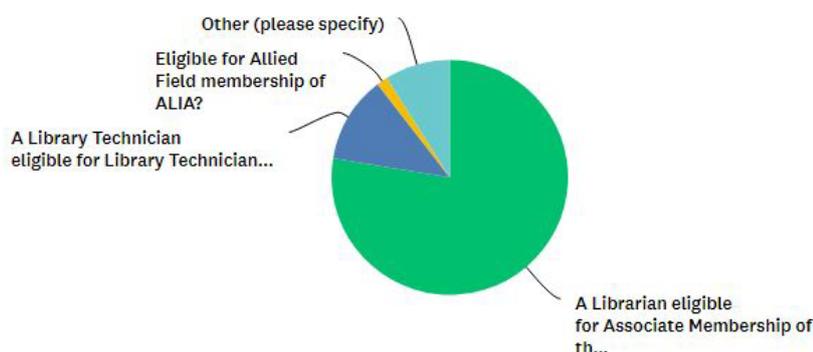| ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES	
▾ A Librarian eligible for Associate Membership of the Australian Library & Information Association (ALIA)?		77.61%	52
▾ A Library Technician eligible for Library Technician Membership of ALIA?		11.94%	8
▾ Eligible for Allied Field membership of ALIA?		1.49%	1
▾ Other (please specify)	Responses	8.96%	6
TOTAL			67

Figure 1 Qualifications of Respondents

Of the people who responded to my survey, the vast majority were librarians eligible for Associate membership of ALIA, making up almost 78% of respondents. This compares with the 57% of all ALIA members being Associate members.
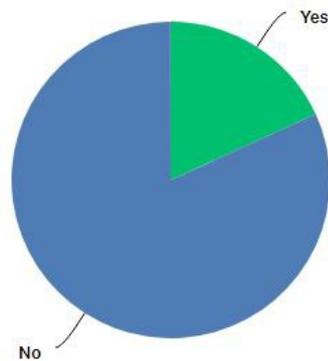
Around 12% were eligible for library technician membership, which is again higher than the overall library technician membership of ALIA, which is around 9% of total membership.

1% of respondents were eligible for Allied membership, exactly reflecting the 1% of total members.

Almost 9% of respondents were not eligible for any professional level of ALIA membership.

Do you consider your current role to be a traditional library role?

Answered: 66   Skipped: 1

ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES	
▼ Yes		18.18%	12
▼ No		81.82%	54
TOTAL			66

Comments (30)

Figure 2 Did respondents consider their role 'traditional'?

Things began to get interesting when I asked respondents whether their current role was a traditional library role.

The vast majority, 81.82%, answered that their role was not traditional. This was not surprising, seeing as I had asked for people who worked in non-traditional roles to respond to the survey. It was probably more surprising therefore that 18% of respondents thought their job was traditional, but still responded.

The interesting part was what types of roles were perceived as being "non-traditional".

Figure 3 Roles of respondents who were not librarians (where more than one respondent held that role)

When I put out the survey, I was expecting most respondents to be using their library skills to work well beyond the library.

I was expecting a lot of knowledge managers, UX designers, technologists and data analysts.

Instead, the roles in which people were working were much closer to a library than I had expected, making the title of this paper, "Beyond the library" perhaps something of a misnomer. Many of the respondents were working as a librarian by job title. Beyond that, there were five roles held by more than one respondent.

Researchers and research administrators covers a diversity of roles. Some were moving into data analysis but no one held a role with that title. Many were building directly on their skills in library research.

The consultants were consulting directly back into libraries on library issues, and the lecturers were teaching library and information studies.
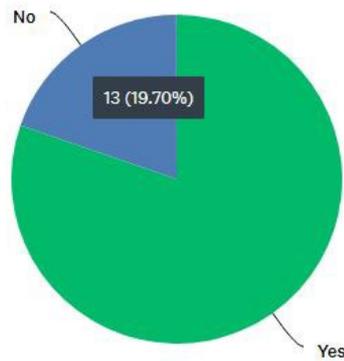
The two knowledge managers both also managed libraries.

And records managers are an allied profession with library professionals.

Of all respondents, only one described themselves as a technologist. There were no data analysts and no UX designers.

If asked, do you identify as a librarian, library technician or library professional?

Answered: 66   Skipped: 1

ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES	
▼ Yes		80.30%	53
▼ No		19.70%	13
TOTAL			66

Comments (32)

Figure 4 How did respondents identify?

Participants also strongly identified as library professionals, with 80.3% identifying as a library professional if asked.

Of the 13 people who did not identify as library professionals, 3 were not qualified as library professionals.

The other 10 were mostly librarians, with one library technician. Only one was working with any type of library. None had roles with "librarian" or similar in their title. Some specifically identified that they had changed career since qualifying as a library professional.

TOP 5 SKILLS

- Knowledge of information seeking behaviour, user experience & accessibility (71.64%)

- Retrieval, evaluation & synthesis of information (68.66%)

- Delivery of tailored resources to target client groups (68.66%)

- Information needs analysis (61.19%)

- Storage, curation, protection, preservation of collections, data records and knowledge (56.72%)

BOTTOM 5 SKILLS

- Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (10.45%)

- Running library platforms (14.93%)

- Assistive & related technologies (16.42%)

- Identity management & authentication systems (20.9%)

- Running web and network management services (22.39%)

Figure 5 Library & Information Skills utilised by respondents

Every survey participant used some of the skills identified by ALIA as core library and information skills in their role. There was no correlation between the range of skills someone claimed to use and the nature of their role. Some of the least traditional roles well beyond the library utilised a wide range of library and information skills.

As can be seen, the skills most often claimed are all central library skills, around:

- understanding information seeking and user experience,
- finding, evaluating and synthesising information and
- storing information.

I expected to see a much greater emphasis on skills around the use of newer technologies in this survey but artificial intelligence was the least common skill utilised by participants, along with identity management and running web and network management.

So, while my respondents thought they were mostly working in non-traditional jobs for a library professional, they were a lot closer to the realm of a library than I had expected.

One of the people with who I had a further discussion had a great term for this, which is the idea of working in "libraryland". This is where you no longer work within your traditional understanding of being a library professional, but you still work within the bounds of librarianship. For example, you may be a consultant, but you are consulting back to libraries. Or you may be a vendor, of library related products. Many library professionals who have moved somewhat beyond a traditional library role have only moved as far as "libraryland" and not completely beyond the library.

As someone who moved beyond libraryland for the past two years but who has now returned to being a librarian, I would be the last person to think there is anything wrong with library professionals working within the world of libraries.

But it is important to recognise that there is a demand out there for our skills well beyond libraryland. In the past year, I alone have been approached by three organisations, seeking advice on how to organise and make accessible the knowledge they hold within their organisation. They often approach me thinking they need a knowledge manager, yet what they have needed is someone to organise and describe the information they hold… in other words, a library professional.

Another respondent with who I had a conversation has moved well beyond libraries. She lamented that library professionals do not see their potential to fill roles such as data analysts or UX designers. She discerned that one of the issues for library professionals looking to expand their skills into less traditional areas, such as data analytics or becoming a technologist, necessitated moving outside libraries. This is because there are so few of these roles within even the largest libraries, which she felt had been slow to recognise the need for such roles within a library setting. Yet she perceives that those with library qualifications are well placed to fill such roles. I think the responses to this survey has borne out that library professionals don't yet perceive of themselves filling such diverse roles.

What might be holding us back from that?

One issue might be the extent to which we library professionals perceive we have valid skills which can be used beyond the library. One of the most interesting responses to the survey was the comments received on the question of whether respondents were working in a traditional library role. The most common reason participants gave for thinking that their role was not

traditional was because, to quote one, "I am no longer located in a library". This did not necessarily mean that the person no longer managed a library. It more commonly meant that they were no longer working for a library, but rather for another organisation or company, but as a library professional.

There were also many who were working in a library but not in a way that they regarded as traditional. Roles that were not regarded as traditional included:

- Having a management role in a library – for example "It's more of a finance role. Managing subscriptions, licences, budgets, staff and resource purchases."
- Roles where there were no physical resources – again this was quite common, with comments such as "I don't have a physical library space. All resources are online/digital. I'm the only librarian in the business" and, less commonly,
- Completely traditional roles which had evolved over time, but which resulted in the participant thinking of their role as non-traditional. For example, one participant said: "Many library roles are doing invisible work such as helping patrons to gain access to their Kindles and helping them download apps to access government services."

So the respondents' view of what it is to be working in a non-traditional role or beyond the library is often quite limited, and often still involves working in a library, including sometimes in a physical library.

Another issue might be around impetus to move beyond the library. Among those survey participants with who I had an in-depth conversation, there were commonalities in their career journeys. As library professionals, they all worked in a library at some point after qualifying and then moved beyond the library.

For about half the people to who I spoke, the impetus to move out of libraries and into an emerging role was as part of a planned career path. They could not develop their role any further in libraries and moved out into roles well beyond libraries, such as a technologist, or within the bounds of Libraryland, such as a library digital resource vendor.

The other half faced more of a push impetus. Redundancy, workplace issues, illness and caring responsibilities all featured in their stories. For some, this was a good move that opened new possibilities, while others sought to move back into a traditional librarian role.

But there definitely needed to be an impetus, positive or negative, to move out beyond libraries. It is not something that we yet see as a natural extension of our possible career path.
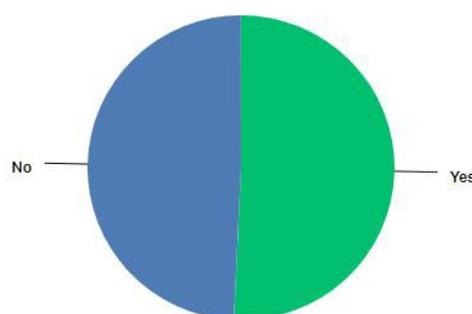
So what did those with who I had a conversation do to move beyond the library? One thing those seeking to take their skills beyond libraries did was to build up certain skills and experiences while working within a library. So they would work as far as they could within the library setting by, for example, moving to the IT section within a large library and building up skills there.

Others, like me, built up skills out of necessity. Working as a law librarian, I quickly realised that I was a nice luxury within the firm and needed to add value using my skills wherever possible. In addition to managing the library, I also ensured I was managing the firm's legal templates and their Intranet, and thus found myself moving into knowledge management.

Additionally though, and perhaps more importantly, we need to have the confidence that these skills are valid and that we have a place in the world as knowledge managers, data analysts, technologists or UX designers thanks to our library skills. I think there could be a role for ALIA in helping us with that.

Are you a member of the Australian Library and Information Association and why?

Answered: 67   Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	50.75%	34
No	49.25%	33
TOTAL		67

Comments (54)

Figure 6 ALIA membership among respondents

Throughout my career as a librarian and knowledge manager, I have always retained membership of ALIA because it is my professional association which recognises my qualifications and my professional development. I thought this was unusual for library professionals working in a non-traditional role.

It turned out just over 50% of survey respondents were members of ALIA. This may have been helped by the fact that ALIA kindly strongly promoted the survey.

Of those who were members, there were three key reasons for retaining their membership of ALIA. These were:

- The ability to have their professional development recognised through the ALIA Professional Development scheme.
- A sense of belonging to the profession. By being a member of ALIA, no matter how far they had moved from a traditional library professional role, they still felt connected to the wider library profession and the issues facing the profession; and
- Advocating for the profession – they supported ALIA because of ALIA's role in advocating for libraries and library professionals.

These reasons were evenly spread. What they all point to though is that library professionals are remaining in contact with ALIA, no matter where they are now working and in what role, and they look to the association to further develop themselves and the library and information sector.

By contrast, of those who were not members, there were two reasons which predominated, with the first one being especially common. Of the 33 respondents who were not ALIA members, 17, or over 50%, mentioned the lack of relevance of ALIA as a reason for not belonging, with the other major reason being cost.

It could certainly be said that, despite the change of name by the Association from the Library Association of Australia to the Australian Library and Information Association over 30 years ago, the Association is not yet fully engaging with library professionals who work beyond the library, let alone the wider information profession.

As an example, our National Conference program is dominated by presentations from public, school & university libraries. There is one other

presentation in the program from a special library and none from health, government or law libraries. There is no one who has the role of knowledge manager or UX designer or technologist presenting, though I am pleased to note that there was a workshop on Monday on Data Analytics.

What might the Association do to encourage us all to see and use our skills and experiences more broadly, beyond these three major sectors of public, school and university libraries, and then beyond the library?

Right now is probably a good time to be considering this question as I think that some of the answers may lie in our thinking around Professional Pathways.

There are four main areas which the Professional Pathways initiative is currently focussing upon, including developing new professional pathways. This area mainly addresses alternative pathways into the library profession for non-library professionals.

I wonder if though we might draw on the work of other library associations to consider how the Association can broaden out this area to emphatically include new pathways encouraging library professionals and others to move into diverse careers within the broader information sector?

I recently had a conversation with Paul Corney, the immediate past president of CILIP – The Library and Information Association in the UK. He is not a qualified librarian and comes from a banking background. But he was instrumental in developing the concept of Chartered Knowledge Managers with CILIP, which is agnostic as to whether you are a library professional or not prior to chartership. It is being widely taken up in the UK as the way to have your Knowledge Management skills and competencies formally recognised, including by people who would otherwise not be associated with CILIP.

A similar offering by ALIA would build on the work already done by ALIA in developing specialisations within our Professional Development program, where there are specialisations in data and in research. These enable library professionals wanting to build their skills in these areas to do so, even if they do not currently work in such a role.

Strengthening pathways into specialisations such as knowledge management, data management and research for library professionals and others would help

ALIA have a stronger and more diverse voice when it comes to advocating for our sector.

It could raise awareness among Australian librarians and library technicians of the diverse possibilities within our profession. That, while there is enormous value in the work librarians and library technicians do in public, school or university libraries, there are other library sectors out there that need our skills. And furthermore, there are companies and other organisations crying out right now for our skills, often without even being aware that it is a library professional whose skills they need.

Beyond the library? It is possible. There is a demand for our skills out there. By moving beyond libraries, you will be contributing to a much-needed reimagining of what it is to be a library professional, working in ways you never previously imagined possible. Especially with the help of ALIA recognising the full, glorious diversity of opportunities across all library sectors and beyond the library, there's a world of possibility for us all.