

Bridging the gap: supporting clients with disabilities at State Library of Queensland

ABSTRACT

State Library of Queensland (SLQ) is 'all yours', an inclusive and welcoming place where everyone can connect with ideas and creatively engage with each other. SLQ has a responsibility under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) to ensure people with a disability are not discriminated against in the provision of services and programs to ensure we provide equitable access to our facilities, services and programs for people with a disability. SLQ's *Disability Action Plan 2017* (DAP) demonstrates our proactive and public commitment to taking a lead role in providing accessible and inclusive library and information services for all Queenslanders with disability. Within SLQ's Visitor Experience team, library technicians are key staff in the day-to-day implementation of the DAP. Disability may be hidden or evident from birth, episodic or stable. It may be physical, sensory, intellectual, neurological, mental health, psychosocial or a learning disability. Disability may be temporary or permanent, total or partial, lifelong or acquired. In Queensland, it is estimated that 17.7% of the population (822,800 people) have a disability, and about 10.2% of the population (474,300 people) are carers. This paper will discuss how library technicians take a leading role in enhancing our relationships with people with a disability and their carers by:

- Training front of house staff in the use of assistive and adaptive technologies
- Advocating on behalf of clients with a disability
- Meeting with internal and external stakeholders

- Offering a one-on-one appointment service
- Testing compatible assistive technology hardware and software products (such as screen readers and voice recognition products) that provide essential accessibility to computers

At SLQ, library technicians play a critical role in supporting accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities in the digital world.

Introduction

State Library of Queensland is an inclusive and welcoming place where everyone can connect with ideas and creatively engage with each other. State Library has a responsibility under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)* to ensure that people with a disability are not discriminated against in the provision of services and programs, and to ensure that we provide equitable access to our facilities, services and programs for people with a disability. State Library's *Disability Action Plan 2017* demonstrates our proactive and public commitment to taking a lead role in providing accessible and inclusive library and information services for all Queenslanders with a disability. Library technicians within State Library of Queensland's Visitor Experience Team play a leading role in implementing the *Disability Action Plan* on a day to day basis. They play a critical role in supporting accessibility and inclusion of people with a disability in the digital world.

This paper will discuss how library technicians enhance our relationships with people with a disability and their carers. Library Technicians' roles include training front of house staff in the use of assistive and adaptive technologies and testing compatible assistive technology hardware and software products that provide essential accessibility to computers. Library technicians also advocate on behalf of clients with a disability, meet with internal and external stakeholders to improve services and offer a one-on-one appointment service.

About State Library of Queensland

State Library of Queensland provides information services to all Queenslanders, including more than 80,000 registered members, and via partnerships with public libraries and Indigenous Knowledge Centres across the State. As a physical and virtual space for sharing, learning, collaborating and creating, State Library meets the Library Board of Queensland's legislative responsibilities to contribute to the cultural, social and intellectual development of all Queenslanders (Library Board of Queensland 2015), regardless of ability. As a state library, we provide a blend of both public library and research library experiences for visitors. "Public library" type experiences include children's activities in The Corner, makerspaces and learning programs in The Edge, lending from our Information Collections, and spaces for social interaction, relaxation and serendipitous discovery. Research offerings include the John Oxley Library, the Australian Library of Art, the Australian Pacific Design Library, family history services, and support for entrepreneurship and small business in The Business Studio.

The Visitor Experience Team have the responsibility of welcoming and serving our visitors and members at the South Bank building, leading the library in creating an inclusive place for all. The team of thirty staff, who are a mix of librarians, library technicians and visitor services officers, provide concierge, information and expert reference services via face-to-face, telephone and online channels. Our goal is to provide outstanding visitor

experiences and interactions, with the aim of encouraging repeat visitation and engagement. (Heron & Altman 2015). Within the Visitor Experience Team, it is the library technicians, led by the Manager Visitor Services, who have primary responsibility for providing services to clients with disabilities.

Disability support services in libraries

Approximately one in six Queenslanders report living with a disability and one in ten are carers (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). Disability may be hidden or evident from birth, episodic or stable. It may be physical, sensory, intellectual, neurological, mental health, psychosocial or a learning disability. Disability may be temporary or permanent, total or partial, lifelong or acquired. The Australian Library and Information Association (1998) first adopted a policy statement on library services to disabled people in 1979, and now provides benchmarks for the acceptable minimal level of service in libraries. The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA 2017) also provides a range of guidelines through its Library Services to People with Special Needs section.

State Library of Queensland has a responsibility under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)* to ensure that we provide equitable access to our facilities, services and programs for people with a disability. Additionally, the Queensland Public Library Disability Services standards and guidelines outlines best practice for the provision of public library services (State Library of Queensland 2009). The guidelines are designed to assist Queensland public library staff and local governments achieve best practice in the planning

and development of their library services. These service standards ensure that people with varying levels of disabilities have equitable access to information services, are acknowledged, and are not discriminated against (State Library of Queensland 2009).

Since 2014, State Library of Queensland has developed and implemented Disability Action Plans. Reviewed every one to two years, these plans acknowledge that people with a disability must be the focus when planning how to facilitate full inclusion and participation of people with a disability in the services that State Library of Queensland provides. The 2017 *Disability Action Plan* is a commitment by the whole organisation to improve access and participation for people with a disability. It is in line with our strategic direction to ensure that we effectively address barriers to access. Additionally, it describes State Library's engagement and employment for people with a disability, and demonstrates our commitment to ensure that our services and programs are accessible and inclusive. The *Disability Action Plan* is developed in association with an external community group and an internal group. The external community group is made up of people with a disability, carers and service provider representatives who have expertise and knowledge of people with a disability. This group provides advice and feedback on the compilation of the plan.

The *Disability Action Plan* working group is an internal group of representatives from across the organisation who have a primary role in supporting the inclusion of people with a disability at State Library of

Queensland. The group guides the development, delivery, implementation and reporting of the plan. Members consult and coordinate feedback from their program or work unit, ensuring the needs of people with a disability are considered across all levels of State Library. Library technicians are at the forefront of implementing this action plan, which focuses on enabling access, engaging the community and building capability. As a member of the *Disability Action Plan* working group and a library technician at State Library of Queensland, this forms an integral part of my role and responsibilities.

Building capability through staff training

Library technicians regularly train staff including all front-of-house team members in the use of adaptive and assistive technologies in order to support people with a disability in accessing collections and services. Adaptive devices are designed or modified to meet the needs of people with disabilities, and to maintain, increase or improve the functional capabilities of people with disabilities (IFLA 2009). Training focuses on communication, attitudes, barriers, both physical and attitudinal, cultural differences and relevant government legislation (ALIA 1998). Practical training on “how to use” the adaptive technology is also provided. Adaptive assistive technology training is completed at least twice a year, or when the software or equipment is upgraded.

Training is conducted in small groups, allowing each staff member to become familiar with the software and equipment, gain confidence in its usage, and ask questions. Hand-outs are provided for each staff member for later referral

and familiarisation. Staff are taken on a tour of the South Bank building to familiarise them with where equipment is positioned, and the location of aids such as signage, wayfinding, disabled toilets and hearing loops. Staff attend separate emergency evacuation procedure training that also addresses the needs of persons with a disability. Library technicians strive to build staff confidence to assist people with disabilities and their carers. They help break down reservations and insecurities that library staff might have in dealing with people with a disability. This professional development is key to helping frontline staff gain confidence and keep abreast of current changes.

Engaging with community through advocacy

Library technicians advocate on behalf of clients with a disability. This includes advocating to other teams within the library. For example, as I demonstrated available adaptive assistive equipment to a colleague in our web support team, showing how the technology reads aloud the internet and magnifies the screen, I was able to “open his eyes” to how his work impacts on clients with vision impairment. Using the equipment, and hearing and seeing how it translates HTML code into spoken word, has enabled the web analyst to re-evaluate how he will write web pages in the future, and how he can improve our website for persons with a disability.

Since 2015, State Library of Queensland has been working towards outlining a commitment to enabling access to not only visitors, but to staff with a disability. The *Disability Workforce Strategy* works in conjunction with the *Disability Action Plan*. It provides a framework for State Library to work

towards a more welcoming workplace for people with a disability. The State Library has a commitment to support staff, potential staff, volunteers and clients with a disability, and to reduce barriers to access.

As part of the Disability Action team, and as an adaptive assistive specialist, I was asked to show and explain our services, facilities and equipment for people with a disability to the Manager Human Resources, who would look to promoting State Library of Queensland as an employer of choice for people with disabilities, and to give other organisations ideas on how they can promote disability awareness in their workplaces. State Library is an inclusive and welcoming workplace and has also become an affiliate organisation of the National Disability Recruitment Coordinator (NDRC). Highlighting our services for staff and people with a disability has enabled Management to better understand and promote our services not only for State Library of Queensland, but for the good of other organisations and workplaces.

Engaging with community through stakeholder participation

In 2016 State Library of Queensland made it a priority to build stronger connections with people with a disability, as well as stakeholders, service providers, carers and other groups that support people and have specialised knowledge that would assist us to address the needs of people with a disability. The Manager Visitor Services and I invited stakeholders from a broad range of services, such as Vision Australia, Deaf Services, CPL Choice, Passion, Life (formerly Cerebral Palsy League), Multicap, Carers Queensland, Uniting Care Community and Life Tech, to visit and view the disability services we offer. Effective community engagement and consultation on the needs of

people with disabilities can provide valuable input into the planning of services and programs (State Library of Queensland 2009). We were interested in gaining feedback from a variety of community groups on how we could improve our services. It has been a positive move in the right direction. Working with these groups, who have a greater understanding of the needs of people with disability, has been very beneficial.

A number of suggestions from these stakeholders were incorporated into the 2017 *Disability Action Plan*, including a commitment to trial Auslan interpreters at four Business Studio forums, and to develop new pages for the State Library website detailing all assistive adaptive devices and services provided. Feedback from stakeholders has also informed a proposed acquisition list for new adaptive assistive technologies for senior management consideration. Who better to advise us than the people who have a disability, and or work with people with a disability? We look forward to continuing to work together with the people and organisations to develop and deliver programs and services by, for, and with people with a disability.

Enabling access through appointment services

The Visitor Experience Team is committed to enriching people's lives by connecting them to ideas and information. We do this by helping people to find the information they need to achieve their goals. As a library technician who specialises in adaptive assistive technology, I contribute to the one-on-one appointment service for patrons with a disability. Appointments for clients with vision impairment normally take longer than for other clients. Subsequent

visits can be organised for further assistance. If I am assisting a vision-impaired client, I have learnt to use a splitter so that both the patron and I can listen to what is being read aloud. The splitter enables two headphones to be connected into the one jack. I can stop and start the adaptive software while the client is asking questions, so both of us can hear what is being read. Similarly, while conducting familiarisation sessions, I always ensure the screen and magnification are set to the client's level of vision, enabling each user to choose the appropriate settings each time. While assisting people with disabilities each patron's disability must be taken into account. As a State Library of Queensland library technician who trains staff in using adaptive assistive equipment for persons with a disability, it is rewarding to see patrons coming back to use our services independently, or with carers and staff assistance.

Enabling access through adaptive technologies

State Library is committed to implementing identified compatible assistive technology hardware and software products for those with significant vision, hearing, dexterity, mobility, language and communication disabilities (State Library of Queensland 2017). One of my roles as a library technician specialising in disability services, is to test compatible assistive technology hardware and software products, such as screen readers and voice recognition products that provide accessibility to computers.

Working with the Manager Visitor Services, I conducted an analysis of existing assistive adaptive technologies provided by State Library of Queensland, and

consulted with the community on their needs. The report, which identified technology gaps, was developed for the Executive Management Team. It incorporated feedback from the community consultation visits, and resulted in the approval and purchase of new equipment for client use. State Library is working to promote available technologies by developing new web pages detailing devices and services available, and working with community stakeholders to increase awareness of our available technology. We are also working towards partnering and support services for children with Autism Queensland. This is in line with the *Disability Action Plan 2017*, and demonstrates our commitment to people with a disability.

Items approved for purchase were a desktop text magnifier with speech; high definition portable hand-held electronic magnifier; MAGic large print keyboards; hearing loop signage; Auslan Connections video remote interpreting (VRI) for hearing impaired; and iPads for display of Reader Apps that convert print to speech. We plan to advise availability of these aids, and communicate through promotions, signage and more engagement with the disability community. We will continue to keep abreast of new equipment and technology, continue to engage with stakeholders, and seek additional funding to improve access to library services.

State Library supports the professional learning and development of Queensland public library and Indigenous Knowledge Centres workforce. Queensland public library staff and local governments have standards and guidelines for developing library services and resources, which offer barrier-

free access and encourage inclusiveness and participation for people with disabilities (State Library of Queensland 2009). These include staff management, community profiling, library facilities, collections and resources, adaptive technology, community engagement and consultation, programs, services and more.

State Library hosts an annual cross-sector literacy forum for public library staff, Indigenous Knowledge Centres and other key service providers. In 2017 this forum focuses on the theme of digital inclusion. It is targeted at local government senior executives and community development managers, public library staff, adult literacy providers, social service providers and others working to support digital inclusion. The 2017 forum will include a hands-on digital technology program that will showcase adaptive and assistive technologies (such as screen readers and voice recognition products) at our South Bank building. The program will include a tour of the State Library building, and will highlight the disability facilities and services available, such as improvements to signage, wayfinding and new equipment. This program will allow the library staff to try first-hand the different types of technology, facilities and services for people with a disability. Working alongside me during the Digital Inclusion forum will be a service provider and distributor of equipment for people with low vision. The adaptive assistive technology service provider will showcase new technology, such as the Or-Cam My Eye (a wearable device with a smart camera that clips onto a pair of spectacle frames and recognises faces or objects), electronic magnifiers and screen readers.

Conclusion

State Library of Queensland is committed to working to improve the lives of people with a disability, their families and carers. Our 2017 *Disability Action Plan* supports the Queensland Government's objectives, and ensures State Library is proactive in taking a lead role in providing an accessible and inclusive library for all Queenslanders with a disability. As a library technician specialising in disability services, I know that people with a long-term disability are amongst the most disadvantaged and invisible groups in our community (Wong 2015). This drives me harder to ensure that services for people with a disability continually improve, and that we continue to enrich the lives of people with disabilities, their families and their carers. It is rewarding to see a proactive library, such as State Library moving towards improving services for people with disabilities. At State Library, library technicians will continue to play a critical role in supporting accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities in the digital world. We will continue to strive to improve our services for people with disabilities, their carers and communities and, to bridge the gap between information and access, regardless of our clients' abilities.

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