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Differently Abled Staff Welcomed by Library Recruiters

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DIFFERENTLY ABLED STAFF WELCOMED BY LIBRARY RECRUITERS

Academics from CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY looked at job advertisements for library staff and how the terms used could be inclusive or exclusive of differently abled people.

In the 2015 Australian Census, 18.3% of Australians reported having a disability. While disability can occur at any stage of the lifespan, the Australian Network on Disability notes that this ratio may increase with population ageing, and more than 50% of Australians over 65 live with a disability. As a result, some may be at higher risk of poverty, under-employment or unemployment than people without disabilities. In addition, some people living with a disability may have limited access to educational outcomes or may not have access to information in an appropriate format to meet their needs.

Libraries are social spaces that are typically designed to be inclusive and relevant. They provide a range of programs and services across the lifespan that are tailored to the needs of users, as well as resources and information in a variety of formats. Library spaces and services are also often designed to be inclusive of people living with disabilities, whether those disabilities are visible – for example, individuals in walkers, wheelchairs, or using walking sticks – or invisible, such as people with PTSD, dyslexia, low hearing, chronic fatigue, or brain injury.

Yet pre-service and practicing librarians can sometimes feel unaware of the different types of disabilities. Staff may also feel that they do not have the knowledge or skills to provide services or resources to people living with a disability. While initiatives such as the 'Resource

for Equitable Access to Libraries' training in Victoria can increase knowledge and confidence in this area, it is important also to look at library hiring practices.

In January and February 2018, we examined job advertisements for library positions open across Australia. Of the 96 job advertisements collected over the fortnight, less than half (41%) had any wording about hiring diverse populations. The majority of the advertisements were relatively neutral, containing open and generic wording, such as 'strong communication skills', and/or focusing on the skills or qualifications needed to perform the role, such as 'experience in document delivery' or 'a health science degree required'. The majority of advertisements did not contain any wording either inviting or discouraging differently abled individuals.

Three of 96 job ads (about 3%) described the organisation's commitment to providing reasonable accommodation for the interview if needed. Two of the three ads identified that this may include the option to participate in an additional assessment activity for the vacancy if the jobseeker declared that they had a disability and met the minimum requirements for the job.

Twenty-three of the 96 job ads (24%) described the employer as being dedicated to diversity. Seventeen of these 23 ads described the community they served as diverse or vibrant; seven connected a statement of the diversity of their community to a statement of the diversity in their workplace, such as 'providing an inclusive workplace that respected the values of a diverse workplace', and/or 'encouraging a diverse workforce that was reflective of the community'.

These diversity statements could be interpreted as including the flexibility to provide disability accommodation in the workplace. However, eight of these 23 ads suggested that by 'diversity' the advert was primarily targeting female applicants and/or culturally and linguistically diverse applicants.

Only one advert out of the 96 directly stated that a medical examination may be required before hire to ensure the candidate was able to perform the required duties of the position. However, none of the skills and attributes listed as required for the position seemed to relate to medical fitness or a specific physical ability. The requirements of the position included items such as leadership, the ability to work in a busy organisation, strong previous experience, communication and problem solving skills, and research skills – all criteria related to the applicant demonstrating experience and skills rather than related to medical fitness.

On the whole, the results of our exploration of disability content in library job advertisements were encouraging. We were glad to see that institutions in NSW,

VIC, ACT and WA were writing library job descriptions that specifically invited applications from people with disabilities, and that NSW, VIC, ACT, WA, QLD and NT all encouraged diverse populations to apply. We were also encouraged to see that several job advertisements clearly linked the diversity or vibrancy of their communities with the positions on offer. It is important to note that SA and TAS had only posted a few job advertisements each and so it is possible that their commitment to diversity was not well represented in the small data set.

Based on this research, we encourage library employers to form their next job advert with diversity and disability in mind. Through doing so, library services can continue to demonstrate the profession's ongoing commitment to an inclusive and welcoming service for all. ♿

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