Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Conference Paper

Our Future, Our Skills: Using Evidence to Drive Practice in Public Libraries

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Abstract

Objective – The public library sector's future prosperity is contingent upon a well-trained, experienced, and valued workforce. In a collaborative initiative, State Library Victoria (SLV) and the Public Libraries Victoria Network (PLVN) commissioned an in-depth research study to examine the skills requirements of staff across the State. The *Our Future, Our Skills* project sought to identify the range of skills used by public library staff today, to anticipate the range of skills that would be needed in five years' time, and to present a skills gap analysis to inform future training and development strategies.

Methods – The project encompassed qualitative and quantitative research activities: literature review and environmental scan, stakeholder interviews, focus groups and a workforce skills audit. The research populations were staff (Individual survey) and managers (Management survey) employed in 47 library services, including metropolitan, outer metropolitan and regional library services in Victoria.

Results – The high response rate (45%) reflected the relevance of the study, with 1,334 individual and 77 management respondents. The data captured their views related to the value of their skillsets, both now and in five years' time, and the perceived levels of confidence using their skills. The sector now has a bank of baseline evidence which has contributed to a meaningful analysis of the anticipated skills gaps.

Conclusions – This paper focuses on the critical importance of implementing evidence-based practice in public libraries. In an interactive workshop, managers determined the skills priorities at both the local and sectoral levels to inform staff development programs and recruitment activities. A collaborative SLV/PLVN project workgroup will implement the report's recommendations with a state-wide workforce development plan rolled out during 2015-17. This plan will include a training matrix designed to bridge the skills gap, with a focus on evaluation strategies to monitor progress towards objectives. The paper provides insights into the different ways in which the project workgroup is using research evidence to drive practice.

The world of public libraries is highly dynamic, with staff being challenged to provide customers with a broad and diverse array of services and programs in an environment characterised by tight public sector budgets, ever-evolving technologies, a changing customer base and an ageing workforce. In Australia, the State Library Victoria (SLV) has collaborated with Public Libraries Victoria Network (PLVN), the peak body for Victoria's 47 public library services, to address the challenges. Over the past decade a number of initiatives have been undertaken to envision the public library service of the future: *Libraries Building Communities* (State Library Victoria (SLV), 2005); *Workforce Sustainability and Leadership* (van Wanrooy, 2006; Considine, Jakubauskas & Oliver, 2008); *Connecting with the Community* (SLV, 2008); *Tomorrow's Library* (Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC), 2012); and *Victorian Public Libraries 2030* (also referred to as *VPL 2030*) (SLV, 2013a).

Specifically, the *VPL 2030* study (SLV, 2013a) sought to establish a strategic vision for public library services in Victoria. Following extensive consultation and a series of workshops to explore community attitudes and needs, two scenarios for the future were developed: the Community Library and the Creative Library. The final report introduced a strategic framework which serves as a planning tool to ensure the sector's ability to meet the

community's expectations for the two scenarios. It was emphasised that "a workforce of well-trained, experienced and valued public library staff will be at the heart of our success" (SLV, 2013a, p.1).

This statement provided the impetus for a further state-wide study into the knowledge, skills and attributes which staff would need to deliver future-focused library services and programs in the Community Library and the Creative Library. The research activities in the *Victorian Public Libraries: Our Future, Our Skills* project (SLV, 2014) focused on the workforce planning issues which would underpin the successful achievement of the *VPL 2030* goals.

Objectives

The *Our Future, Our Skills* project sought to identify the range of skills currently used by public library staff in their work, to anticipate the skills which would be needed in five years' time, and to present a skills gap analysis to inform future training and development strategies. The overarching objectives of the *Our Future, Our Skills* project were to develop a framework to articulate the core competencies required by the public library workforce for the 21st century, to conduct a skills audit of Victorian public library staff in order to collect data about the current skills and to anticipate

future requirements, and to deliver a report which analysed the audit findings and made recommendations on training needs and strategies to support the future delivery of public library programs and services in Victoria.

Based on the skills presented in the framework, three key questions were posed:

- How important is each skill to your current role?
- How important do you think each skill will be to the same role in five years' time?
- How confident do you feel in your ability to apply this skill in the work that you do?

Managers of library services were asked to consider the skills within the context of the library service:

- How important is each skill to the library service at the current time?
- How important do you think each skill will be to the library service in five years' time?

The rich research data collected in the project will enable future recruitment and staff development practice to be guided by meaningful evidence. One of the biggest challenges faced by practitioners, however, is to understand how to translate this evidence into practice.

Methodologies

The *Our Future, Our Skills* project involved a number of qualitative and quantitative research activities, including stakeholder interviews, a literature review and environmental scan, the development of a skills framework to guide the design of the survey instruments, a series of focus groups, and a skills audit of the public library workforce in Victoria. In the earlier research project, Considine, Jakubauskas and

Oliver (2008) delineated three areas of workplace skills (cited in Mounier, 2001):

1. Cognitive skills – foundation or general skills obtained on the basis of general citizenship (for example, literacy, numeracy, general education competence)
2. Technical skills – the skills associated with the purchase of labour on the open market to perform particular tasks (for example, the ability to operate machinery/technology, recognised trade or professional skills)
3. Behavioural skills – personal skills associated with labour's ability to deal with interpersonal relationships and to perform in the context of authority relations on the job (for example, communication, empathy, reliability, punctuality).

This overarching model was adopted for the literature review and environmental scan (SLV, 2014, Appendix 2) with the structure of the discussion built around these three skills areas. The changing world is driving the need for an increased focus on contemporary cognitive skills, or Foundation skills (Mounier, 2001) which are also described as 21st-century skills (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008; Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2009). In order for citizens to successfully participate in and contribute to a dynamic society, a new range of literacies is required (UNESCO & IFLA, 2012; UNESCO, 2013; Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2015a; Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2015b). The combination of information literacy, media literacy, digital literacy and technological literacy form a new metaliteracy (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011; O'Connell, 2012; Jacobson & Mackey, 2013; Mackey & Jacobson, 2014). In order for public libraries to remain relevant and meaningful in the future, staff will need to demonstrate these 21st-century skills.

Technical skills – or Professional skills, as they are termed in this study – may be more familiar to library workers. Traditionally, education and training in the library and information science (LIS) field has led to proficiency in the relevant Professional skills (Hirsch, 2012). Professional associations and other bodies have developed their own LIS frameworks to define the typical areas of professional practice (SLA, 2003; ALA, 2009; Lifelong Learning UK, 2011; ALIA, 2012; LIANZA, 2013; CILIP, 2013; Gutsche & Hough, 2014). The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) core knowledge, skills and attributes policy document (ALIA, 2012) guides the curricula of accredited library and information science (LIS) education programs in Australia. Some critics argue, however, that LIS education practice fails to meet the workforce requirements of the contemporary public library sector (Partridge et al., 2011; Pateman & Willimen, 2013; Bertot, Sarin & Percell, 2015).

Information and communications technology (ICT) skills, especially the competencies required for the application of Web 2.0 technologies in libraries to facilitate participation, interaction and co-creation of content are becoming increasingly important (King, 2007; Cullen, 2008; Harvey, 2009; Peltier-Davis, 2009; Partridge, Menzies, Lee & Munro, 2010). Mobile literacy is required by library staff in order to broaden access to library resources and services and to link emerging technologies with new opportunities to engage library users (Murphy, 2011; Saravani & Haddow, 2011).

The final skills area, Behavioural skills, has been widely discussed in the professional literature (Partridge & Hallam, 2004; Chan, 2005; Precision Consulting, 2006; Barrie, Hughes & Smith, 2009; Oliver, 2011; ALIA, 2012). It is argued that the profession requires a richness and diversity of Behavioural skills, with many employers stating that they wish to appoint staff who have the 'soft skills', i.e. the personal and interpersonal skills, that are pertinent both to the LIS profession and to the wider employment environment (Kennan, Cole, Willard, Wilson &

Marion, 2006; Ralph & Sibthorpe, 2010; Reeves & Hahn, 2010; Howard, 2010; Partridge, Menzies, Lee & Munro, 2010; Partridge et al., 2011; Haddow, 2012). Communication skills (Wilson & Birdi, 2008; Working Together Project, 2008; Abram, 2009; Saunders & Jordan; 2013), teamwork and collaboration skills (Bagshaw, 2013), adaptability, and flexibility (Chawner & Oliver, 2013) are viewed as particularly important.

After the draft skills framework was reviewed by the project reference group, it was examined and discussed by library staff in a series of 15 focus groups held across Victoria. The focus group activities involved a total of 133 participants, representing all levels of the workforce in small, medium, and large library services and corporations, as well as library educators from the higher education and the vocational education and training (VET) sectors. The framework was subsequently affirmed by the project reference group as the foundation for the *Our Future, Our Skills* survey activities. The final version of the framework includes 10 Foundation skills, 30 Professional skills and 19 Behavioural skills (SLV, 2014, Appendix 3).

Research subjects for the study were all staff and managers employed in public libraries in Victoria. All 47 library services, including metropolitan, outer metropolitan, and regional library services, were invited to participate in the project. The total number of potential respondents was 2,975.

Two survey instruments were developed for the skills audit: the Individual survey (SLV, 2014, Appendix 6), which was completed by individual staff in different library services, and the Management survey (SLV, 2014, Appendix 7), which was open to selected senior staff with managerial responsibilities and an understanding of the strategic direction of their library service.

The questions in the Individual survey focused on the individual staff member's own skill sets

and confidence levels, while the questions in the Management survey examined the relevance of various skills to the library service as a whole. The Individual surveys were made available to all staff employed in Victorian public libraries, as prospective respondents, through an online platform. Given the length of the questionnaires, the survey tool was designed to allow respondents to answer the questions progressively, rather than all in one session.

The Individual survey comprised four sections:

- Demographics
- Foundation skills
- Professional skills
- Behavioural skills.

An explanation of the scope of each skill area was provided, as well as descriptors which typically represent the area of practice. There were two open-ended questions at the end of each section to offer respondents the opportunity to provide an indication of where they might benefit from support and training, and to comment further on the skills area. At the conclusion of the survey, respondents were invited to indicate how they believed their role might change over the coming five years, and to outline any 'hidden talents' they had that might be of value to the library service.

The Management survey was more condensed than the Individual survey and asked only two questions for each of the skill areas: the importance of the skill set to the library service today, and the anticipated importance of that skill to the library service in five years' time. Descriptors were again provided for each skill. Library managers had the opportunity, through open-ended questions, to give their views on why there might, or might not, be any change over the coming five-year period. They could also offer general comments about the three skills areas.

The draft survey instruments were made available for pilot testing. This study was underpinned by the principles of research quality to ensure that the overall study design and the research questions resulted in reliable and valid research findings. The reliability of the research design was considered in the development and testing of the survey instrument. The vocabulary used throughout the survey was kept consistent and descriptors were provided for each competency area to assist the respondent in relating the skills to their work role. For the pilot, the online questionnaires were reviewed by a small representative sample of library staff, drawn from different employment band levels and working with different library services in Victoria. Some of the pilot testers had participated in the focus groups, while others had not. Some minor adjustments to the questionnaires were made in response to feedback from the pilot group.

The survey was open from 13 November 2013 to 20 December 2013. To verify the integrity of respondents, library staff members were required to register for the survey using their work email addresses and were then sent a system-generated password that enabled them to access the questionnaire. The research team worked closely with the project team to respond to any technical issues encountered. The stability and technical performance of the online platform were monitored closely throughout the survey period. The systems developer was able to monitor the registrations received to ensure there were no duplicate registrations. Incomplete surveys were excluded from the analysis.

Respondents were advised that their involvement in the survey was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. The research data collected remained anonymous and confidential; email addresses were replaced with sequential numbers to ensure respondents' complete anonymity in the data analysis. The margin of error for the Individual survey was calculated to be 3.7%; it was higher for the Management survey, given a smaller sample size, at 8.9%.

Results

The high response rate (45%) reflected the relevance of the *Our Future, Our Skills* study, with 1,334 valid responses to the Individual survey and 77 valid responses to the Management survey. Responses to the Individual survey were received from 45 library services, with response rates ranging from 7% to 100%. Managers from 37 library services contributed to the research through the Management survey. Single responses were received from 19 libraries, while the remaining 18 library services provided between two and six management responses.

The *VPL 2030* report invites those involved in the public library sector in Victoria to begin to think strategically about ways in which "public library staff, programs and facilities can be better equipped to adapt and innovate to meet changing community needs towards 2030 and beyond" (SLV, 2013b, p.2). The data collected in the individual and management surveys in the *Our Future, Our Skills* project represent a bank of baseline evidence which can contribute to a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges.

The picture of the current workforce presents confident and competent staff who deliver the library services that have long been valued by users. The respondents' strengths tend to reflect the core knowledge and skills presented in ALIA's policy document (ALIA, 2012) which is used to guide the professional and vocational education programs in Australia. The *VPL 2030* report stresses, however, that the status quo cannot continue; changing community attitudes and behaviours will have a significant impact on the role libraries play and on the programs and services they deliver. Inevitably, the ability to successfully enable the current public library model to move to an alternative paradigm that is relevant to the evolving information and learning needs of different communities will depend on the competence and confidence of those working in the sector. Public libraries will

face the critical challenge of transitioning effectively and smoothly from a passive, product-based model to one which can deliver dynamic, service-based experiences (SLV, 2013a, p.17). Public library staff will need to become actively engaged with the evolving social trends of creativity, collaboration, mental engagement, learning and community connection.

One of the primary drivers for societal change will inevitably be the continuing influence of technology, as acknowledged in the *VPL 2030* report: "technological advancements and improved access to technology continue to enable scientific breakthroughs and new social behaviours to emerge" (SLV, 2013a, p.11). The Creative Library scenario is underpinned by developments in information and communications technologies (ICT), while the push towards globalisation, which is directly linked to the adoption of new technologies, influences the Community Library scenario. As the *VPL 2030* report presents only limited commentary about the skills requirements for these future public library scenarios, the research data has been examined to consider how the findings relate to three strategic perspectives: the technology environment, the Creative Library and the Community Library.

Skills for the technology environment

The data collected through the *Our Future, Our Skills* surveys and the focus group discussions revealed that there was a very keen awareness amongst public library managers and staff about the challenges of the fast changing technology environment. Without a doubt, digital literacy represents a fundamental Foundation skill needed by library staff. Staff in all roles and at all levels will increasingly need to demonstrate high levels of digital literacy as they apply their information and media skills in a dynamic online world. In the context of public libraries today, digital literacy skills were ranked as the fourth most important Foundation skill by library managers (69% 'extremely important'). Literacy, cultural literacy and local awareness

skills were identified as the three principal Foundation skills for contemporary library staff, with literacy viewed as the paramount skill. It was overwhelmingly apparent, however, that in five years' time, digital literacy skills would be just as important as traditional literacy skills, with 94% of managers rating this skillset as 'extremely important' and the remaining 6% stating it would be 'important'. An enormous increase in significance was also anticipated by individual library staff, with those rating it as 'extremely important', jumping from 58% to 84% in the five year timeframe. It was recognised that all library staff would quickly need to become fluent in the area of digital literacy and that operational ICT skills would become mainstream:

- ICT policy and planning
- Development and management of ICT systems in the library
- Integration of social media and mobile applications into library operations
- Provision of ICT support to customers

- Management of digital resources
- Creation and maintenance of metadata schema.

Behavioural skills also came under scrutiny: the dynamic and ever-evolving technology environment demands flexibility, with staff encouraged to respond positively and confidently to constant change and to willingly accept new work assignments and job responsibilities. Creative thinking and problem solving were likely to become essential skills in a less predictable world: public library staff would need to be able to seek out and promote new ideas and to test novel approaches to resolving operational issues. A commitment to lifelong learning would be an imperative, with staff prepared to take responsibility for their ongoing learning and professional development through avenues of both informal and formal learning.

While technological developments were clearly going to make a significant impact on library operations in the coming years, one major area
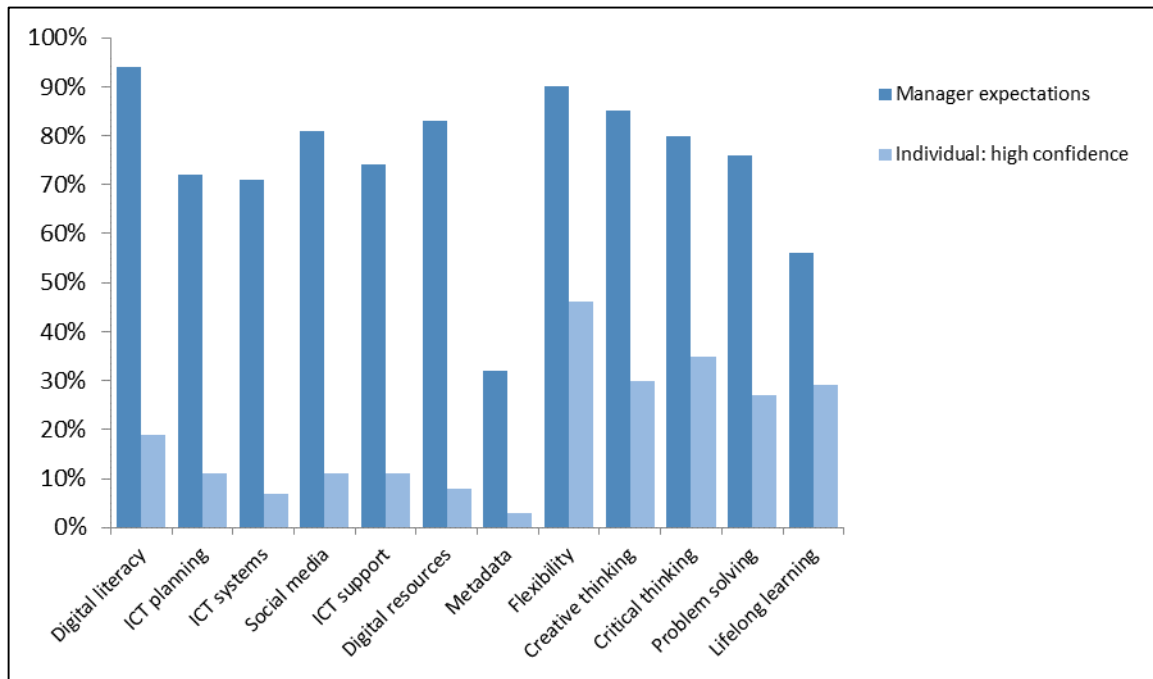

Figure 1: Gap analysis: skills required in the technology environment.*
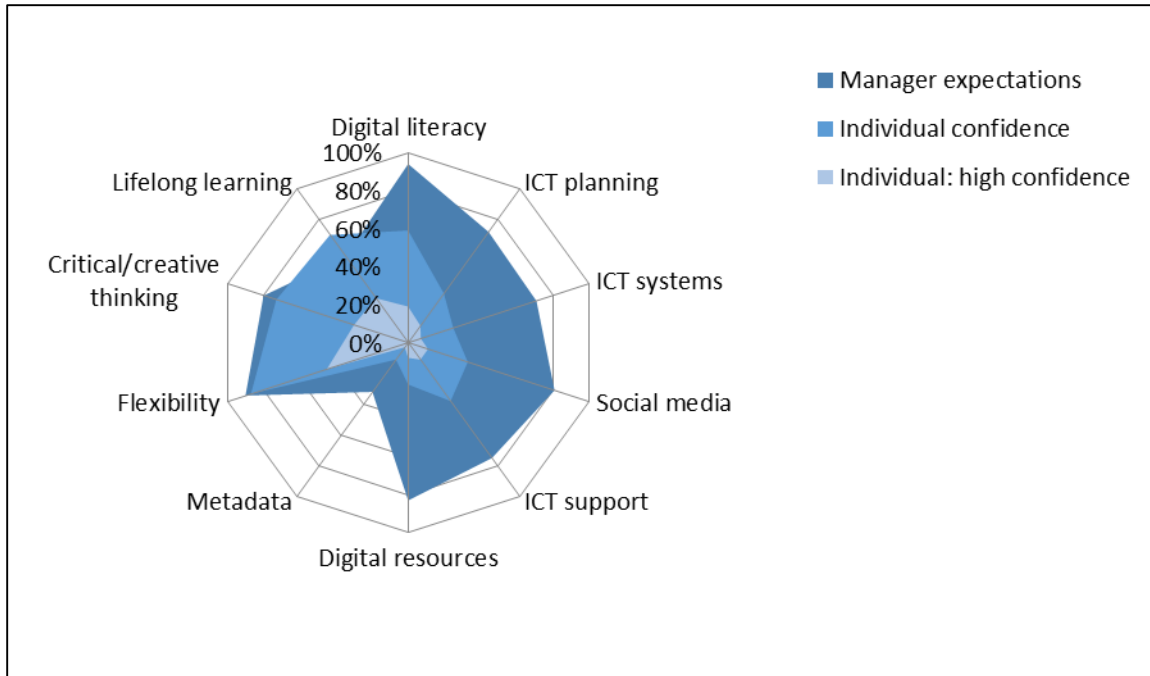*Managers' expectations ('extremely important') and Individual confidence ('very confident').

Figure 2: Gap analysis: skills required in the technology environment.*
*Managers' expectations ('extremely important') and Individual confidence ('very confident')

of concern for public libraries was the staff members' present levels of confidence in utilising the various skillsets. The gap between managers' expectations for the importance of the different skill areas and the number of staff who stated that they felt 'very confident' (Likert scale 5) about utilising the skill in their current role is depicted in Figure 1. Relatively strong levels of confidence were recorded for the Behavioural skills, but in the area of the Professional skills relating to ICT in libraries, the confidence levels were extremely low.

Figure 2 presents the Foundation skills and Professional skills data as a spidergram; the managers' expectations for future skills requirements for the library (dark blue) are contrasted with the individuals' current levels of confidence. The graph shows both medium and high levels of confidence by presenting the aggregated responses for 'confident' (Likert scale 4) and 'very confident' (Likert scale 5) (mid blue), as well as the specific data for 'very confident' (Likert scale 5) (light blue).

As the graph illustrates, while the current skill level appears to be low – especially in relation to the Professional skills – there is a small kernel of staff who have the appropriate skill sets and a further group of staff who feel their skills are developing well. Importantly, opportunities may exist within the workforce to draw on the skills of these people to contribute to informal staff development activities, e.g. through work shadowing and mentoring.

It is essential that public library staff commit to the process of skills development to be able to perform at a high level in this dynamic technology environment. As few areas of the public library of the future were likely to remain untouched by ICT developments, there was a clear sense that the entire workforce would need to up-skill if staff were to operate productively in the world of electronic information and to help members of the community develop their own digital literacy skills. Training and development activities to address the current low levels of digital literacy and ICT skills

should be regarded as a high priority for the Victorian public library sector.

Skills for the Creative Library

The depiction of a future Creative Library, as outlined in the *VPL 2030* report, is heavily influenced by technology, particularly through the application of participative and collaborative tools to create and share digital resources in a range of media formats. The creative public library has been described as an active learning centre; community arts studio; and collaborative work space. As staff of the Creative Library become "facilitators of creative development, expression and collaboration" (SLV, 2013a, p.21), they will need the skills and abilities to run a broad selection of creative and learning programs which contribute to building the inventive capacity of the community. In this environment, public library staff will be required to use a variety of skills to manage and coordinate both internal and external resources:

- To facilitate content sharing
- To connect people
- To teach new skills
- To nurture untapped talent

- To produce, record and edit creative content
- To host business collaboration
- To manage people
- To coordinate multiple diverse activities within the library and across different stakeholder groups.

The skills relevant to the Creative Library can be mapped to all three fields of the skills framework: digital literacy and cultural literacy as key Foundation skills; cultural programming, creative making, and literacies and learning as Professional skills; creative thinking, problem solving, customer engagement, building partnerships and alliances, and lifelong learning as important Behavioural skills. At the same time, a wider range of Professional skills should not be ignored, as staff in the Creative Library will need to draw on their understanding of the ICT environment and their skills in information seeking, eResource management, information services, project management, marketing and promotion.

Figure 3 correlates staff confidence levels with the managers' expectations about the future importance of the specific areas of competency
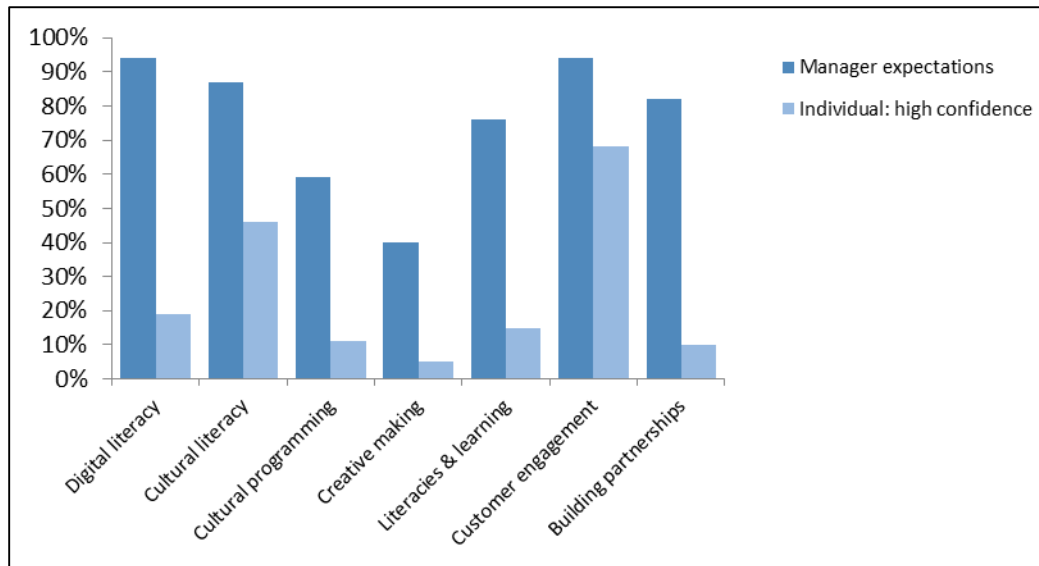

 Figure 3: Gap analysis: skills required for the creative library scenario.*
*Managers' expectations ('extremely important') and Individual confidence ('very confident')

required for the Creative Library. High levels of confidence recorded for customer service and cultural literacy contrasted strongly with low levels of confidence recorded for the areas of literacies and learning, cultural programming, creative making and building relationships and alliances.

In Figure 4, the spidergram presents the comparison between the managers' expectations for future skillsets and the individual respondents' data: high levels of confidence (Likert scale 5) and the combined levels of 'confident' (Likert scale 4) and 'very confident' (Likert scale 5).

The graphs highlight the areas where skills development is essential if Victorian public libraries are to achieve the aspiration of meeting the expectations of a creative community.

Skills for the Community Library

The second scenario discussed in the *VPL 2030* report was the Community Library. In this scenario the library plays the role of "a learning village" (SLV, 2013a, p.25), with the potential to

play a central role as community learning centre; gathering place; brain gymnasium; repository, documenter and disseminator of local knowledge; and local business hub. The responsibilities of public library staff in this environment are broad ranging: to develop community capacity by connecting people who have either similar interests or complementary skills. The effective management and coordination of internal and external resources would again be integral to the success of the library.

The essential competencies for staff of the Community Library can be drawn from all three fields of the *Our Future, Our Skills* framework. Significant Foundation skills would include local awareness to comprehend the socio-demographic and cultural characteristics of the different populations who use library services, as well as those of non-users. While the staff who deliver programs and services in the Community Library would continue to draw on some of their more traditional skillsets (e.g. information seeking, resource management, people management, project management, and marketing and promotion), the most critical
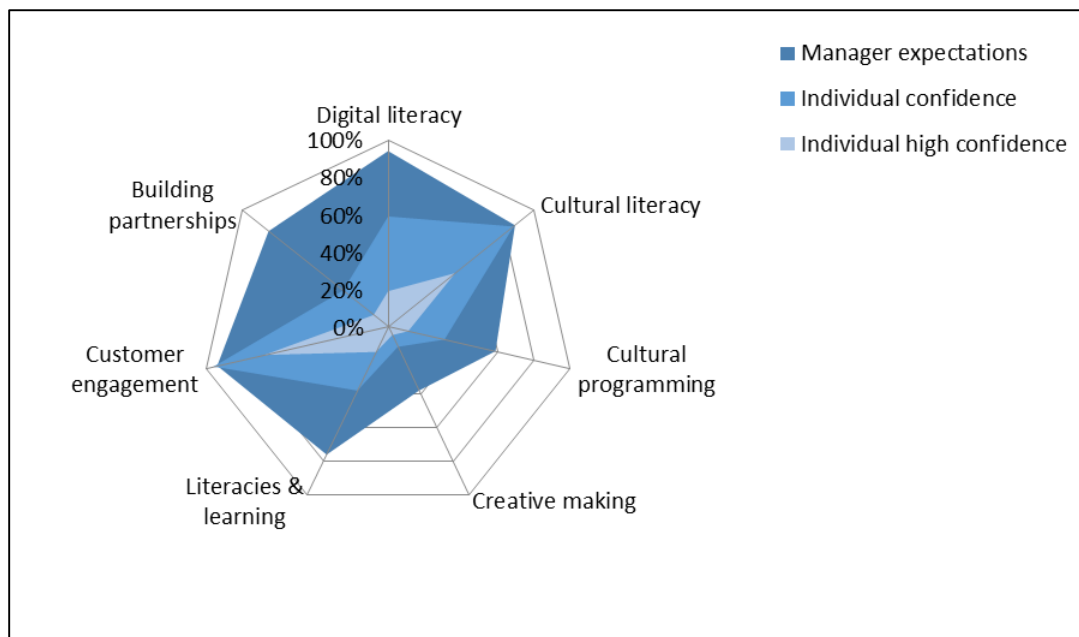

Figure 4: Gap analysis: skills required for the creative library scenario.*
*Managers' expectations ('extremely important') and Individual confidence ('very confident')
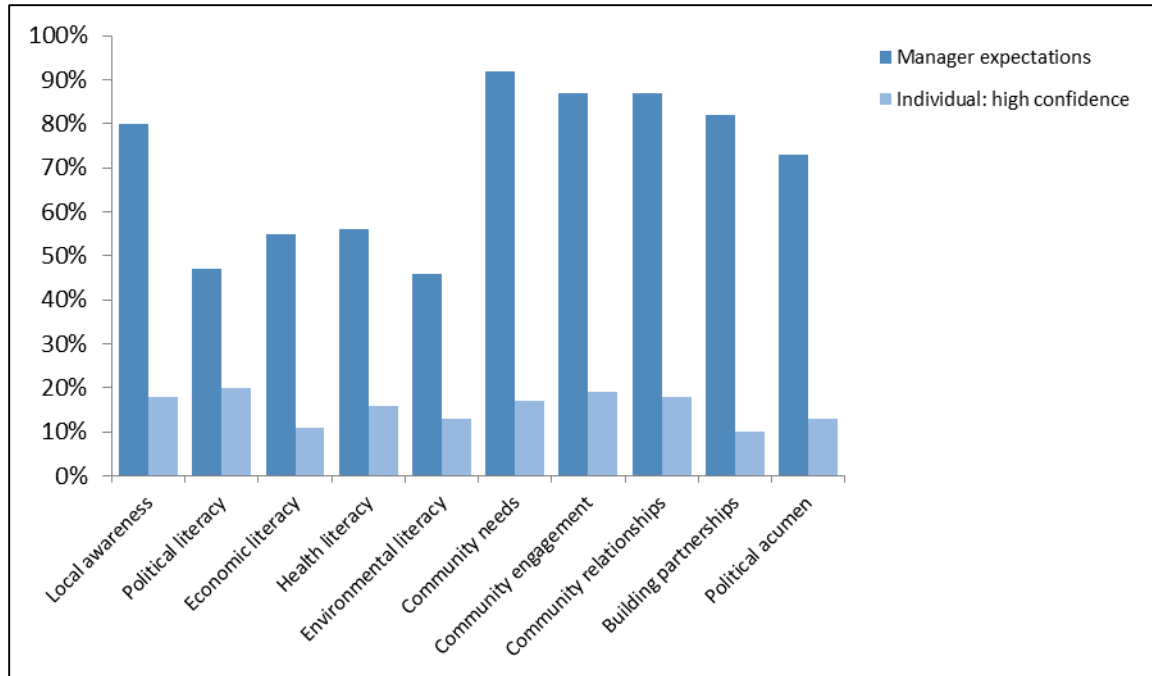
Figure 5: Gap analysis: skills required for the community library scenario.*
*Managers' expectations ('extremely important') and Individual confidence ('very confident').

Professional skills would relate to community development. The field of community development encompasses community needs analysis, for example, through socio-demographic analysis, community profiling and community mapping; community engagement, especially in relation to issues of social exclusion; and establishing productive relationships with other community groups and volunteers. This last skillset is closely aligned with the Behavioural skills relating to building partnerships and alliances across the public and private sectors, which in turn would be augmented by skills in political and business acumen in order to contextualise the environment in which the library operates. Other Behavioural skills such as effective communication, customer engagement and empathy would continue to be important.

The Community Library scenario would therefore require a mix of skills that are, arguably, underdeveloped at the present time. Although staff confidence levels were marginally stronger in this scenario, a degree of

discord was still apparent when they were compared with the value placed on the skillsets by library managers, particularly in the context of community development skills. The gap between managers' views of the future of these skill areas and the confidence felt by staff is presented graphically in Figure 5.

This data is further amplified in Figure 6 to show the combined individual responses for 'confident' (Likert scale 4) and 'very confident' (Likert scale 5).

Strategies for the future

Konrad (2010) stresses that the development of staff competence is intrinsically linked to organisational development, so library leaders face the challenge of ensuring that their staff have the right skills to work in an organisation that encourages and supports interdisciplinary teams and networks within and across the cultural sector. Staff will also need to be able to respond and contribute to an organisation that has the capacity to embrace the "processes of
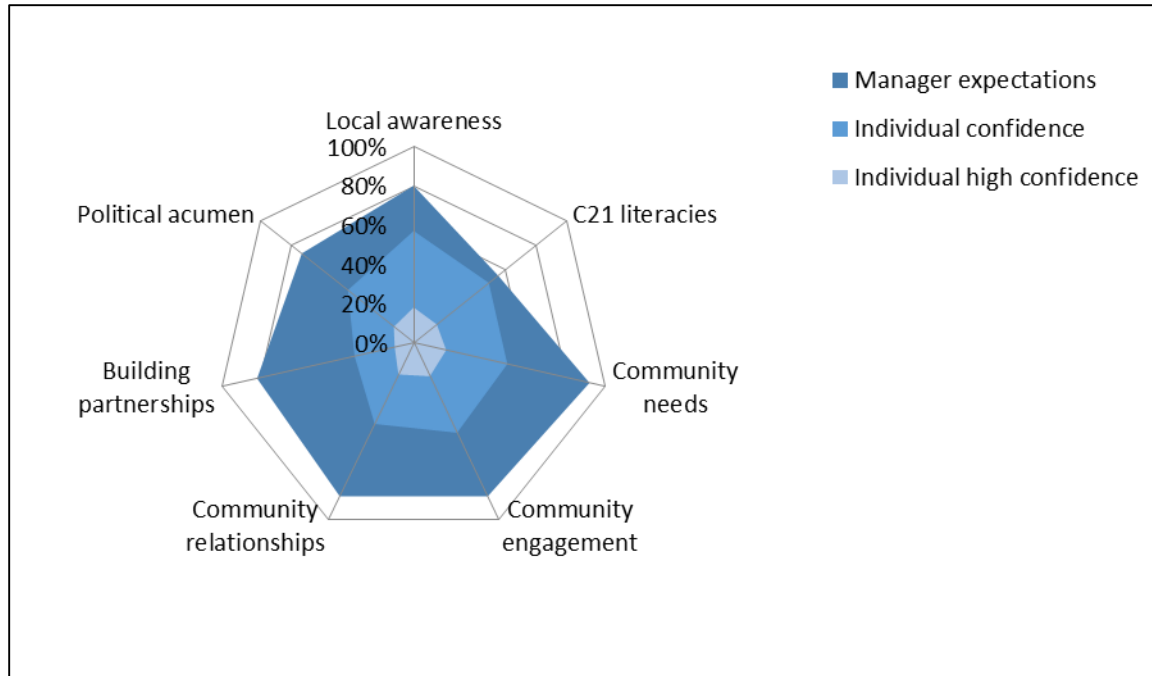
Figure 6: Gap analysis: skills required for the community library scenario.*
*Managers' expectations ('extremely important') and Individual confidence ('very confident').

change and development as a permanent condition for the sector" (Konrad, 2010). The future scenarios of the Creative Library and the Community Library anticipate "a flexible and inclusive organisational culture that attracts and retains people with the right skills and attitude" (SLV, 2013a, p.31) in order to design and deliver the programs and services that will place the public library service at the centre of an active and engaged community. The "right skills and attitude" encompass a range of the competency areas presented in the *Our Future, Our Skills* framework. Some of these skillsets may be regarded as 'traditional' LIS skills while others can be described as 'new' skills.

The research findings indicated that public library staff perform well in those areas where their skills have long been tried and tested: they are "well-trained, experienced and valued" (SLV, 2013a, p.1). However, some of the competency areas that are directly relevant to the Creative Library and the Community Library can be described as underdeveloped. While some of the skills are beginning to become

relevant to public library practice, staff levels of confidence are very low. This is particularly the case with the skillsets relating to cultural programming, creative making, literacies and learning, and community development. The final report for the *Our Future, Our Skills* project included a number of recommendations relating to the development of a set of priorities to help position the Victorian public library sector for the delivery of future-focused programs and services, to use the skills framework as a multi-purpose workforce planning tool, and to develop a productive staff training and development framework.

Translating evidence into practice

The aim of the *Our Future, Our Skills* research project was to establish an evidence-based assessment of the training needs of Victorian public library staff. A major issue was, once the research activities had concluded and the research data had been analysed, how should the findings and recommendations be used in practice? While many public library

managersmay be becoming increasingly aware of the importance of evidence-based library and information practice, they face significant difficulties when it comes to translating evidence into practice.

The research data and recommendations were acknowledged to be key ingredients for future planning efforts. Nevertheless, during the initial review and discussion of the final report by the workgroup which had been responsible for commissioning the project, it became clear that many practitioners in the library and information sector struggled with translating research evidence into everyday solutions. In order to assist librarians in interpreting the data and the final recommendations, a number of actions were implemented. In July 2014, Victorian library service managers, CEOs and senior staff were invited to attend an interactive workshop led by the researcher. The research process was described, the recommendations were examined and the priorities for skills development and training programs were discussed. Workshop participants identified the skills priorities at both the local and sectoral levels to inform staff development programs and recruitment activities.

The workshop provided a good foundation for senior library managers to understand the importance of the recommendations, the rigour of the research and the value of applying evidence based practice in libraries. One of the recommendations in the final report was the development of a workforce action plan for Victorian public libraries: this became the collaborative workgroup's first undertaking. It was agreed that the action plan should align with the Victorian public library sector's strategic direction and agreed priorities, as outlined in the *VPL 2030* document.

The project workgroup undertook an analysis of the two reports, *VPL 2030* and *Our Future, Our Skills,* to establish the critical priorities for the training programs to be delivered during the 2014-2017 timeframe. The workgroup identified

the levels and positions of staff that would benefit from specific training and development, as well as the preferred methods of delivery for the training programs. Four key themes were identified:

1. Building partnerships and alliances
2. Community development and engagement
3. Digital literacy
4. Collection development.

In developing the workforce action plan, the project workgroup scrutinised each of the four key themes to identify:

- Why the theme was critical to the work of public libraries
- What skills should be included under each theme
- What skills gaps currently existed
- What training and development response was required
- How to ensure that the response truly reflected the needs of the public library workforce (e.g. improving access to training opportunities for staff in regional libraries)
- Which library staff would benefit most from the different types of training.

The collated information was translated into a training matrix to drive workforce development over the period 2015-2017. The value of the evidence collected through the *Our Future, Our Skills* project was acknowledged through a successful grant application to the R.E. Ross Trust, a charitable trust in Victoria. One specific area of interest is to provide funding for initiatives which offer "improved access to and achievement of equity and excellence in public education, arts and culture". The application submitted by SLV recognised the innovative nature of the research work and highlighted the importance of implementing the recommendations. The funding will support the delivery of the training program in a range of formats across the state to ensure an equitable

spread of professional development opportunities to ensure that public libraries and their staff are well equipped to service the needs of all Victorian communities now and into the future.

In order to further build on the evidence base, evaluation strategies have been developed to allow the workgroup to monitor the progress made towards reducing the skills gaps. A two-stage evaluation involves assessing the impact of each training course with each participant at the end of the event to consider the effectiveness of the learning activities, and again four weeks later via a survey designed to explore the impact the training had on the attendees' methods, attitude and approach to their work. After the first training event, it was found that levels of confidence had increased, with some respondents reporting significant changes:

> *I have put in a funding application for a LEGO Mindstorm program after hearing how successful it was at Geelong Regional Library Service.*
>
> *[I've] bought an iPad for my own professional learning and development.*
>
> *[There's been] more of a change in attitude underpinning my relationships with colleagues and community groups."*
>
> *All the events have had an impact on my thinking and will influence how I will structure my future career - I am sure that it has already impacted on my practice.*

Conclusions

Library managers face immense challenges to fully comprehend the nature and value of the evidence gathered through the *Our Future, Our Skills* project and to develop effective and workable strategies for a strong and successful public library sector. The library workforce will

be integral to the sector's future success and it is essential that managers develop a clear set of priorities to address skills needed in the future. Some workplace tasks which are currently viewed as routine will inevitably be subject to ongoing change: technological developments will streamline mundane activities and some traditional library roles will become redundant. Together, SLV and PLVN are well positioned to use the *VPL 2030* strategic framework as the springboard to progressively introduce a range of training programs which will enable staff to develop new resources and services to meet the changing needs of the communities they serve.

In both the Creative Library and Community Library scenarios, emphasis is placed on members of the community striving to develop new knowledge and skills. Accordingly, in this dynamic learning environment, it is essential that staff employed in public libraries are also motivated to see themselves as learners. At the conclusion of the study, managers of a number of individual library services requested the analysis of the data directly relating to their staff, to be compared with the aggregated state-wide data. Key areas of strength could be identified, as well as those areas where the skill sets were particularly underdeveloped. The differences between metropolitan and regional libraries highlighted the opportunities to support knowledge exchange and skills development across the state though staff exchanges, job swaps and peer mentoring programs. As it will be important to monitor the impact of the workforce development plan, the survey instrument can be used again to collect updated evidence in order to measure the progress being made towards the upskilling of staff over time.

As libraries forge new directions, alternative career pathways will emerge, with roles that require people to draw on a different range of skills. The value of the research activities undertaken in the public library sector in Victoria extends beyond this immediate context, not only to public libraries in other jurisdictions

within Australia and overseas, but also to other sectors of library and information practice. As a living document, the skills framework can be used as multi-purpose workforce planning tool to raise awareness among library staff about the importance and value of the range of skills which underpin high quality practice, to support performance planning and review processes in libraries, to review staffing structures in order to align skills requirements with library programs and services, to support the recruitment of high calibre library staff, and to advocate on library workforce issues with key stakeholders. The research should also stimulate debate between practitioners, educators and professional associations about the future direction of LIS education with the goal of ensuring a strong future for the sector.

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