

# **The Right Staff from X to Y: Generational Change and Professional Development in Future Academic Libraries**

Richard Sayers  
Training Manager, CAVAL Collaborative Solutions, Australia

“If you want happiness for a lifetime - help the next generation.”

- Chinese Proverb

## INTRODUCTION

In many OECD countries, falling birthrates, historically low levels of unemployment and changing attitudes to work are combining to cause a “talent squeeze” (Cooper, 2005) in the labour market. Both business and public sector organizations are finding it increasingly hard to attract and keep talented workers; in particular, younger, highly skilled staff. As a result, workforce planning and generational change have become critical issues for organizations forced to compete for increasingly scarce human resources. The growing concern felt by many business executives has been reflected in the large volume of social research undertaken and published since the appearance of Strauss and Howe’s groundbreaking study *Generations* in 1991.

## BACKGROUND

The idea for this paper dates back at least five years to the author’s time as a library manager in government in Australia. Significant generational differences were starting to become apparent in the public sector workplace, with so-called Baby Boomers born after World War Two often at odds with their Generation X and Y colleagues - all born since the early to mid-1960s. Issues of difference were diverse and ranged from the use of technology (for example, the amount of time spent composing and viewing personal emails) through to flexible working hours and individual freedoms in the workplace. A common tension then and now was the issue of hours worked and actual work achieved. In the author’s experience, Veteran and Baby Boomer supervisors will typically focus on time served in the workplace (gross hours worked) rather than outcomes (net work achieved). Generations X and Y however, argue that the actual time taken to complete a project is largely immaterial provided the outcomes required are all

achieved within the given parameters. In practice, this may mean a work day that starts at 10 am, stops at 3 pm, recommences at 8.30 pm and finishes sometime in the early hours of the following day.

The author's interest in generational change began then as a way of trying to appreciate individual colleagues of different ages and backgrounds; and as a manager, to understand the dynamics of multi-generational teams he was tasked to lead. More recently, as Training Manager for CAVAL, a library consortium based in Australia, the author has found that understanding the effects of generational change has had another important purpose: to help recognize and anticipate the future professional developments needs of library and information workers in Australasia.

Since 2003, CAVAL has conducted an annual Training Needs Survey for library and information workers in Australia and New Zealand. In 2005 and 2006, the survey was expanded to include Asia. This paper examines selected findings of the 2006 survey and assesses their implications for academic libraries in the context of generational change. If for Generation X 'the more they learn the more they stay' and for Generation Y 'continuous learning is a way of life' (Raines, 2002) what are the consequences for academic libraries if the right staff are to be recruited and retained? CAVAL's 2006 findings will be compared with previous surveys (2004 and 2005) and used to inform a range of simple strategies to ensure that academic libraries attract and keep the right staff; from X to Y!

## THE CHALLENGE OF GENERATIONAL CHANGE

In demographic terms, a generation or cohort covers a period of about twenty years – the period of time within which a particular population was born, sometimes called 'birth years'. Most cohorts take approximately 20 years to reach full economic maturity, so a child born in Australia in 1968 would have been expected to enter the economy as a worker and fully fledged consumer around 1988. Assuming a fairly normal working life by OECD standards, that same child will reach the mid point or later of their career in 2008, and retirement potentially in 2028.

Discrete generations are not always neatly defined though; except perhaps within the rarified world of population demography. Outside the laboratory, each generation has a tendency to blur at the edges where they interface with neighbouring cohorts. Demography aside, each generation is ultimately defined in social and cultural terms by the commonality of "its times and tastes" (Zemke

et al, 2000, p. 16). In other words, what historical events, economic trends and social upheavals have impacted and shaped that generation and created a shared sense of identity. Within cohorts too, blanket distinctions based on birth years are sometimes hard to make; individual exceptions are common, particularly in relation to Generation X. Generation Y commentator and author Peter Sheahan sums up the challenge of labelling and describing generations this way: “it’s not about chronology, it’s about mindset. I’ve met 45 year-olds who have got the Gen[eration] Y mindset. They get it.” (Cooper, 2005, p. 21)

Generational change and the friction that often arises at the interface between generations are not new phenomena. Generational change and its attendant issues have been part of human society forever. It is after all, a lucky (or possibly unlucky) parent who has not experienced the frustration of trying to reason, from the parent’s perspective, with a “know all” teenager. As humans, our progression to maturity involves building up a bank of life experiences and learning how and when to carry-on on the work of those that have preceded us. To do this, we must explore and make sense of our world and this often means testing assumptions (about life, society, the workplace), and pushing against social and cultural boundaries. In essence, it is this process of exploring, testing and pushing that typifies all generational change. Historically, however, the process has been limited in the workplace to interactions between two generations of working age: one older generation effectively exiting the workforce and another younger generation entering it, albeit in a planned progression over a period of years. Zemke et al note that until the early to mid 1990s, “contacts were primarily horizontal” within defined organizational hierarchies and “generational mixing was rare and then significantly influenced by formality and protocol” (2000, p. 10).

Since the early 1990s however, various social and economic factors have combined to create for the first time yet recorded a workplace where at least three, and sometimes four, generations are represented. These generations have been broadly labeled Veteran (1922-1943), Baby Boomer (1943-1960), Generation X (1960-1980) and Generation Y: 1980-2000. (Zemke et al, 2000) Furthermore, the rules of succession planning have changed markedly too. Merit selection and the “talent squeeze” are increasingly causing later generations to leap ahead of earlier generations in terms of responsibilities and remuneration. Seniority as a concept has almost ceased to have meaning in many contemporary work settings. The tension thus created is identified in Australia by Peter Sheahan:

For the 40-plus age group, this [Generation Y] attitude does not always sit well. They have done the hard slog and are now seeing 22 year-old upstarts blow in demanding the world, a pay rise... oh, and an overseas posting, now! (Cooper, 2005, p. 20)

Significantly, Baby Boomers for whom the adage “live to work” was a mantra in the 1970s and 1980s are increasingly finding themselves reporting to and at odds with Generation X and Y colleagues who typically want, and will require of employers, greater give and take between their professional and personal lives. The generations reaching economic maturity now want to “work to live” and generally speaking, they have the skills and opportunities in the present labour market to get what they want!

### GENERATIONAL CHANGE AND ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

In Australia, universities have not been spared the impacts of demographic and attitudinal changes in the workplace. In a 2005 response to the Australian Government’s Research Quality Framework for universities, the Australian Association for Research in Education noted:

The large scale generational change that will occur over the coming decade must be considered in many aspects of the development and implementation of a research quality framework... 60 per cent of education academic staff are aged over 50, and 45 per cent of all academic staff are aged over 50... Most of these academics will retire over the coming decade and need to be replaced. (AARE, 2005)

Many university executives in Australia are now asking the question: in an increasingly competitive labour market, what bearing will generational change have on attracting, recruiting and ultimately retaining the right staff for our organizations?

For academic libraries in Australia, the situation is no less acute. In fact, given the rate of technological change to which academic libraries generally are exposed (most recently, social networking and Web 2.0), and demographic changes already impacting the sector in Australasia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, it can be argued that academic libraries are potentially at very great risk of marginalization if generational change is not managed effectively now.

The primary challenge for all libraries in Australia, not just those in the academic sector, is to ensure that there will actually be a new generation of library professionals entering and remaining in the workplace over the next decade. Their existence is not a given but they are critical if the profession is to replace the 40 to 60 percent of colleagues expected to retire within the next 10 to 15 years (Hutley and Solomons, 2004, p. 3). In the background too, exacerbating the problem of replacement, is a constant slow trickle of library professionals leaving academic and special libraries for more attractive prospects in allied fields such as Knowledge Management and Records Administration. Recruiting and importantly retaining new library professionals are thus critical processes if we are to secure the future of academic libraries; in Australia and elsewhere.

In Australia, a number of factors have contributed to recruitment and retention problems within the library profession:

- Nearly a decade of record low levels of unemployment;
- Inability to sell the library profession generally as a dynamic and attractive career alternative, leading to problems finding staff suited to the rigours of the academic library workplace;
- Increased competition from allied information professions, principally Records Management;
- Additional competition from a range of new and higher paying technology-based careers not imagined a decade ago;
- Ongoing 'casual-isation' of the workforce, leading to greater flexibility and mobility, and the attitude that new positions are 'opportunities' for more experience;
- Technological change – the need to know more and more (and quickly!) in order to stay competitive; and related to this final point,
- Internet and social networking applications have created opportunities for home-working and 21<sup>st</sup> century cottage industries that are slowly drawing professional people away from mainstream employment.

Due to the degree of their influence, the first four factors merit further examination.

Firstly, in line with many other OECD countries, Australia is experiencing its lowest levels of unemployment in decades and employers generally are finding it difficult to source both skilled and unskilled labour. Changing demographics are also fueling this trend. Australia now has one of the world's lowest birthrates; caused in large part by a growing tendency for parents to have

children later in life, thereby effectively limiting their reproductive capacity to 'replacement' (two children, one for each parent) or below.

The latest unemployment figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, released in January 2007, paint a picture of consistently falling unemployment over ten years (from 8.4% in January 1997 to 4.6% in January 2007), and rapidly increasing employment rates for both males and females aged 20 years and over (ABS, 2007). In this context, salaries and conditions of employment – for example, flexible working hours – become important bargaining points as employers try to attract and hold onto suitable staff. Typically, libraries in Australia are not resourced to bargain competitively with prospective staff and so find themselves at an immediate disadvantage in a scarce labour market. To attract and keep a new generation of library professionals, libraries will therefore need to consider a range of other enticements that align directly with the core values and characteristics of Generations X and Y. As this paper will seek to demonstrate using data from CAVAL's 2006 Training Needs Survey, professional development and the subsequent opportunities it provides are identifiable attractors to workers born after the early 1960s. To Generation X in particular, sometimes called the "options generation" (Huntley, 2006, p. 7), access to professional development can be a significant lure.

Within this wider context of greater economic and social competition for labour, it may also be argued that the library profession in Australia has not sold itself effectively to potential recruits. Observed outcomes include not only a smaller (and shrinking) talent pool from which to select staff, but one that does not always include individuals particularly well suited to the demands of the contemporary academic library workplace – an environment that places greater emphasis on external engagement through teaching, marketing and promotion, and liaison roles with academic departments. This is not to say that promotional efforts have not been made, particularly in the last decade, only that the strategies employed have not noticeably altered public perceptions of libraries as "nice to have" but not necessarily "nice to work in": think for example of the heavily stereotyped librarian doll with "amazing push-button shushing action" released in 2003. When coupled with low salaries and inflexible working conditions relative to other professions, this lack of promotion can only exacerbate observed recruitment and retention problems within libraries. Factor in geographic 'isolation' if the library is located in a regional area and problems are magnified tenfold!

Also impacting, as we have already noted, is increased competition for graduates and mid-career library professionals from allied information professions: principally Records Management. Additional competition for graduates is provided by a range of new technology-based occupations and careers not imagined a decade ago. In Australia this year, the Queensland University of Technology will admit students to the first year of a Bachelor of Games and Interactive Entertainment. QUT anticipates that graduates will in three years pursue careers as diverse as “games or digital media programmer, game designer, industry entrepreneur, animator, film and television special effects developer, quality assurance tester, games/digital media reviewer, sound designer, mobile entertainment developer, web developer or digital product strategist” (QUT, 2007).

This latest development at QUT, mirrored in other new courses across the Australian academic sector, poses a significant question for libraries: can they offer their staff a similar variety of work and opportunities to grow professionally? This paper argues that libraries, particularly academic libraries, can provide attractive opportunities for professional growth and development, but that any hope of medium to long-term success will almost certainly mean a fundamental shift in strategic priorities and managerial mindsets within these organizations.

DEVELOPING GENERATIONS X AND Y

In their seminal study *Generations at Work*, Zemke et al (2000) identified four cohorts present in the late 1990s workplace, with Baby Boomers born in the period 1943-1960 still pre-eminent: refer Figure 2.

Figure 2:

<b>Veterans</b>	<b>Baby Boomers</b>	<b>Generation X</b>	<b>Generation Y</b>
1922-1943	1943-1960	1960-1980	1980-2000
<i>Traditionalists</i>	<i>Boomers</i>	<i>Xers</i>	<i>Millennials</i>
<i>Seniors</i>		<i>Thirty-somethings</i>	<i>Nexters</i>
<i>Builders</i>		<i>Post-Boomers</i>	<i>Net Generation</i>
		<i>Me Generation</i>	<i>Dot coms</i>
The population born prior to World War Two	A population ‘spike’ created in reaction to World	The first population to grow up with	The last population to enter the current

and shaped by that conflict and the events of the Great Depression.

War Two and influenced by an extended period of economic prosperity, progressive social change and resulting optimism about the future.

personal computers and the information age, but impacted heavily by social and economic upheaval and thus less optimistic but more self-reliant than generations before.

workforce and arguably the most educated, connected, confident and independent generation in recent history.

This paper does not propose to recapitulate the work of Zemke and others, but instead focuses on the two generations – popularly styled X and Y – that have risen to prominence in the intervening decade, and who will have carriage of workplaces over the next two to three decades. Recruiting and retaining these generations will be critical to the future success or otherwise of academic libraries. Training needs data obtained in Australasia by CAVAL suggests that professional development will play a critical role in recruitment and retention efforts.

Generation X employees (born 1960-1980) are renowned for thinking and planning one or two jobs ahead of their current employment. Like chess masters sizing up a new board, their motivation is less about naked ambition and more about pragmatic competitiveness: what moves will be required to win this game? They are the “options” or “me generation”, conditioned by adverse social and economic trends in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s to rely on their own skills and trust in their own judgement. Self-reliance is a hallmark value of Generation X and figures prominently in its work psyche. Generation X is also considered to be the first cohort in recent history to successfully embrace change in the workplace – rapid and profound change at that – and feel comfortable with it; anticipating change and adapting to it proactively rather than reactively. It is not unreasonable, for example, to expect “the current 25-40 year olds will transform themselves through as many as six career changes before they collect their superannuation [retire].” (Neat, 2005, p. 22) This process of career transformation does not take into account discrete jobs or positions within organisations, which may number in high double figures by retirement. Thus, the flexibility and pragmatism this acceptance of change requires are also defining values of Generation X (Huntley, 2006).

It should come as no surprise then that the Generation X learning style is typically motivated by a desire to enhance professional skills and thus marketability to future employers. Their thinking is clear: how will this learning position me for the future and help to keep my options open - what is in this experience for me? For many Generation X staff working across a range of professions, access to professional development has become an important component of their overall remuneration package, and thus their decision to remain with an organization longer term. In IT related professions for example, many Generation X'ers are happy to forgo traditional perks such as company cars in favour of attendance at expensive industry conferences; where they can acquire new skills and network with old and new contacts. Access to professional development also figures highly in any decision to join a new organization. To counter this, academic libraries must be prepared to identify ways to help Generation X employees see the bigger picture and "not give in to their impatience to move on quickly to other organizations or other careers" (Hutley and Solomons, 2004, p. 4).

Now, as of the early 2000s, we have a new 'Millennials' generation entering the workforce: Generation Y, born 1980 – 2000. Like their Generation X colleagues, and possibly parents (remember, this issue relates to mindset as much as chronology), early Generation Y'ers are also looking for portable careers. However, their needs extend to even greater degrees of personal flexibility, professional satisfaction and immediacy. And with the identified "talent squeeze" in many professions including librarianship, Generation Y can afford to be fussy in their choice of employment and employer. If organizations find they cannot adapt in time, Generation Y professionals may find it attractive to ride the wave of 'casual-isation' in the labour market and opt out of institutionalized employment altogether; returning on their own terms as outsourced consultants. As social networking technologies become more pervasive, many are joining their Generation X colleagues in embracing a trend towards "smaller, entrepreneurial operations and independent home-based knowledge workers" (Zemke et al, 2000, p. 146). As early as 1998, Donald Tapscott warned employers in his book *Growing Up Digital* that Generation Y (N-Geners as he called them) would be more inclined to strike out on their own; abandoning the workplace status quo. For Generation Y, the majority of whom have been born since the advent of the Internet, self employment is a very real alternative; providing the career challenges, opportunities for skills development and personal flexibility that they crave.

For Generation Y then, change is a given and continuous learning a way of life; it is expected as part of any employment package, not something to be negotiated. In *The World According to Y*, Australian sociologist Rebecca Huntley (2006) notes that Generation Y'ers are typically "highly educated and value institutionalized learning" (p. 89). Whether they join the growing ranks of independent knowledge workers or remain within the orbit of institutionalized workplaces, it is certain nonetheless that Generation Y wants and needs to learn. They have no choice.

### THE 2006 CAVAL TRAINING NEEDS SURVEY

Since 2003, CAVAL has undertaken an annual Training Needs Survey for library and information workers in Australia and New Zealand. The most recent survey was conducted over four weeks in August and September 2006 and concluded with 613 responses; a significantly lower response rate than 2005 (n=776) but higher than 2004 (n=500). Responses were received from across Australia, New Zealand and Asia. As in past years, the 2006 survey had two primary objectives:

- To provide feedback on professional development needs and trends to inform the 2007 training program; and,
- To diagnose current and emerging issues in the delivery and administration of the training program.

Four datasets within the survey are examined with particular interest each year: geographic representation of responses (country of residence or work), library and information sector representation, type of training preferred, and emerging training topics and themes. Unfortunately, surveys to date have not included questions regarding age, 'career stage' or level of responsibility necessary to track and correlate the training needs of specific generations. Questions of this type will feature in the 2007 survey.

In 2005, the survey was expanded to include Asia for the first time and publicized via email and the iGroup's Aardvark service to libraries. The 2005 survey attracted a modest 11 responses from across East Asia and South-East Asia, including China (1), India (3), Indonesia (1), Pakistan (3), Philippines (1), Singapore (1), and Thailand (1). Sadly, the small and dispersed nature of this sample made it difficult to identify any specific regional needs or trends. In 2006 however, strong interest was evident in Singapore where the Library Association promoted the survey to members in return for access to survey data. From a

total survey sample of 613 responses, Singapore provided 199 responses (32%) and a range of useful data was obtained: refer Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Question 1 – Country of residence or work?**

	2004		2005		2006	
		%		%		%
Australia	326	65	600	77	349	57
New Zealand	174	35	145	19	55	9
Singapore	0	0	0	0	199	32
Other	0	0	22	3	4	1
Skipped question	0	0	9	1	6	1
<b>Total (= n)</b>	500	100	776	100	613	100

Similar support from LIANZA in New Zealand in 2006 did not translate into significant interest from members and the total number of responses was down nearly two-thirds on 2005. This disappointing result in 2006 may in part be explained by members' preoccupation with the issue of professional registration and confusion about its implications for professional development in New Zealand. Colleagues from the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand also undertook an extensive CPD Needs Assessment in 2005 (Cossham and Fields, 2006) and potential respondents may have experienced 'survey fatigue'. Of interest though, actual numbers attending CAVAL Training courses in New Zealand in 2006 were not noticeably affected. Similarly, despite substantially fewer survey responses from Australia in 2006, total numbers participating in training were higher than 2005: 1,611 in 2006 compared to 1,399 in 2005.

All library sectors were again represented in the 2006 survey with responses from special and university libraries dominating: refer figure 4. In 2006, for the first time, a separate category for records and information managers was added and 27 responses (5.2%) were received. The university or academic library sector contributed 27% of responses - up from 20% in 2005 and 22% in 2004 - while National / State libraries were better represented than previous years with 10% of responses. Representation from public libraries dipped marginally to 9%; down from 13% in 2005 and 15% in 2004. CAVAL's strongest market sector for professional development, special libraries, was again very well represented; contributing 152 responses (29%) across Australia, New Zealand and Asia. Although this figure was proportionately lower than 2005 (36%), there is no reason to infer that special libraries were less supportive of professional

development generally. On the contrary, in 2006, special libraries contributed over a third of all participants attending CAVAL courses in Australia and New Zealand; followed closely by the academic sector. Anecdotal feedback and course evaluations received in 2006 and to date in 2007 also indicate a robust market for professional development in special libraries. Potentially, this sector is a fertile recruiting ground for academic libraries seeking talented staff with current skills and a commitment to professional development.

**Figure 4: Question 4 - In which library or information sector are you currently employed?**

	2004		2005		2006	
Special Libraries	144	26	201	36	152	29
University Libraries	121	22	113	20	139	27
National / State Libraries	22	4	26	5	50	10
Public Libraries	86	15	70	13	44	9
Polytechnic / TAFE Libraries	36	6	59	11	42	8
Archives, Records Management	49	9	0	0	30	6
Other Sector, including KM	104	19	86	15	27	5
School Libraries	0	0	0	0	18	3
Self-employed, Unemployed, Students	0	0	0	0	18	3
<b>Total (= n)</b>	<b>562</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>555</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>520</b>	<b>100</b>

As in 2005, the 2006 survey again asked respondents to identify which types of training would be of interest to them and their organizations (Question 8). Four categories of training were provided: customized in-house (onsite) training; public courses; mediated web-based training; and, unmediated (self paced) web-based training. Data obtained in 2005 showed strong interest in web-based training (71% of responses) and this trend was supported by 2006 figures: mediated web-based training, 39%, and unmediated (self paced) web-based training, 32%. These outcomes are not unexpected given the proportionately higher representation of Generations X and Y in the contemporary library workplace and our knowledge of their values, motivations and preferences for development. Both generations – Y in particular – want the flexibility and freedom to access professional development on their terms; when and where they require it – at home at 3 am if necessary. Structured web-based training using an e-learning system such as WebCT or Moodle, whether courses are

mediated or unmediated, is one solution. However, the rapid growth and acceptance of social networking (Web 2.0) applications such as blogs, wikis, podcasts and more recently Second Life also potentially provide new opportunities for less structured training.

An important adjunct to the issue of what types of training are preferred is the question “what factors are important to you and your organization when selecting a training course?” (Question 5) Again, when responses are examined in the context of generational change, the preferences revealed are in line with expectations: refer Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Question 5 – What factors are important to you and your organization when selecting a training course?**

Top 6 factors (of 12)	2006	
		%
Relevance of course content	510	99
Expertise of trainer	400	77
Value for money	334	65
Convenience	314	61
Price	311	60
Quality of materials	304	59
<b>Total (= n)</b>	<b>518</b>	

For anyone identifying with Generation X thinking (how will this learning position me for the future?) it makes sense that the relevance of course content will be at the top of their list. There is little spare time, or money for that matter, in the contemporary workplace for professional development that is “nice to have”. While the old adage that extra skills are “no burden to carry” is still true to a large extent, younger professionals are becoming more discriminating about the composition of their load. This selectivity applies also to the knowledge and experience of the trainer. With the growing popularity of web-based education and training has also come the phenomenon of ‘brand name’ providers. To ensure maximum impact in the workplace, Generations X and Y are generally more savvy about choosing brands or ‘names’ – for example, Harvard – than their older colleagues. The most appealing brands are those that are immediately recognizable across a range of contexts, and that are held in high regard by current and future employers. Convenience also figures prominently

and aligns with key Generation X and Y values such as flexibility, choice and immediacy.

In 2006, the CAVAL Training Needs Survey introduced for the first time a new style of question – one that asked respondents to clarify their own hopes and fears for the library profession in the decade ahead. Respondents were asked to nominate what they believed to be the top three issues or challenges facing libraries and information services through to 2010 (question 15). By posing this question, the author sought to use the qualitative data obtained to test a range of assumptions about emerging training topics and themes: for example, to what extent are new and emerging technologies actually of interest to library workers? A total of 328 responses were received, representing over half (53%) of those who answered the survey. Using a simple technique of keyword analysis, the author was able to identify at least 50 separate issues or challenges and rank them highest to lowest by counting the number of individual mentions in responses. Interestingly, the picture that emerges from this analysis suggests a library and information profession that is proactively seeking the means to resolve or at least adapt to some very significant challenges; of which, generational change (workforce and succession planning) is but one.

Looking ahead to 2010 then, the top 14 challenges (10 mentions or higher) identified by library workers in 2006 include:

- New and emerging technologies impacting libraries, focusing on Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 applications such as blogs, wikis and podcasts (44);
- Managing budgets and seeking new funding sources for libraries (44);
- Marketing and promoting libraries and information services (32);
- Workforce and succession planning (30);
- Managing e-resources (22);
- Demonstrating the value, relevance and return on investment of libraries (20);
- Library design and space planning – making the most of what we have (14);
- Copyright compliance (12);
- Google! – specifically, staying one step ahead of clients (11);
- Information and digital literacy (11);
- Outsourcing library services (11);
- Understanding users' needs - needs analysis (11);
- Digital Rights Management (10); and,
- Institutional repositories – linked in several responses to changes in scholarly publishing (10).

## THREE SIMPLE STRATEGIES

In seeking to highlight the connections and correlations between generational change and professional development, this paper argues that it is possible to recruit and retain talented staff for future academic libraries; even in a fluid “buyers’ market”. The solution begins with a detailed understanding of the generations present in the workplace today, and continues with the application of three simple strategies that can be employed now to ensure that academic libraries attract and keep the right staff; from X to Y!

### **1. Value the individual – in word and deed!**

Sheahan (2005) and others remind us that by 2007, concepts such as flexible workplaces and work-life balance should be part of the nuts and bolts of the workplace, along with fair if not – for the library profession at least – generous remuneration. If these ‘basics’ are not present, talented staff will compare and contrast elsewhere. Assuming they are present though, prospective Generation X and Y staff are then likely to look to other factors such as the degree to which they will be respected as individuals and colleagues in the workplace, if and how their ideas will be valued, how they will be developed professionally, and for many the critical issue, how they will be supervised. Sheahan however urges caution before organizations start radically altering work spaces or team structures:

Don’t think that building a funky workspace is going to solve your problem. And don’t think promising a really great work-life balance program is going to solve your problem. What is required is an underlying commitment to change from management – a philosophy that is preached and practiced. (Cooper, 2005, p. 21)

There is no value, for example, in offering flexible work hours at an organizational level if supervisors or outdated work practices make their application problematic at the operational level. Speaking in the context of business organizations in the late 1990s, Zemke et al nevertheless make a similar observation that “American companies have, for years, given lip service to the concept of treating employees as customers. With the advent of this generation [Y], that concept must move from pure dogma to literal, active practice.” (2000, p. 146) The same point might also be made in relation to future academic libraries.

### **2. Provide plentiful access to meaningful professional development opportunities**

For this author, the underlying message of CAVAL's 2006 Training Needs Survey is that the professional development preferences of the library workforce seem to be moving inexorably away from higher level conceptual matters towards vocational, work-based skills. The 2006 survey suggests an Australasian library workforce seeking professional development that is directly relevant to their needs, credible, convenient, good value for money, and above all, practical: related to outcomes and outputs. We might argue that the 'how' is now more critical for library and information workers from a professional development perspective than the 'why'. Professional development must have meaning.

Again though, if we revisit our profiles of Generations X and Y, these findings should come as no surprise. In *Generation Y: Thriving and Surviving with Generation Y at Work* (2005), Peter Sheahan provides arguably the definitive guide to training Generation Y in the workplace. His approach may be summarised very simply in four points. For training to be effective, he argues, it must be relevant, interactive, personalised, and entertaining. The similarities between Sheahan's work and the outcomes of the 2006 survey are uncanny but not unexpected. Sheahan goes on to say:

Generation Y [and X too] will embrace training, providing it is relevant, interactive, personalised and entertaining. And most of all, providing it is effective and practical... You will need to be very diligent in who you choose to do that training, and as always, will need to make sure the workplace is open and conducive to the application of skills transferred in the training room. (Sheahan, 2005, p. 156)

### **3. Provide rich and varied access to mentors and other living career guides**

Despite an outward confidence and independence, Generations X and Y do not have all the answers. Like generations before them, they still require guidance from older and hopefully wiser colleagues. In Australia however, two decades of structural change in the workplace have left many mid-career – Generation X – managers to fend for themselves. Gary Neat, National President of the Australian Institute of Management in 2005, writes that “the informal mentoring processes so valued and enjoyed by their parents’ generation are largely gone thanks to 15 years of downsizing, restructuring and the sad loss of much corporate memory and goodwill.” (2005, p. 22) Perhaps in response to this loss, many Generation X managers and other professionals are now actively seeking access to mentors, and not simply in the context of the work they do. The plethora of life coaches currently advertising in business magazines in Australia suggests that Generations X and Y are looking for candid perspectives and

genuine support from people they can trust and respect; even if those insights and encouragement have to be purchased! Remember the rule of thumb: what is in this for me? Which is another point raised by Neat (2005), that in the 2000s the mentor has become “a career enhancement tool just like the value-added degree [MBA] or well-timed interstate or overseas move” (p. 22). In short then, academic libraries looking to attract and retain staff into the future would do well to consider providing access to a mentor or coach as part of any employment package.

## CONCLUSION

Drawing on recent research regarding generations in the workplace and training needs data obtained in Australasia by CAVAL, this paper has argued that an understanding of generational change and commitment to professional development will combine to play a critical role in the recruitment and retention efforts of future academic libraries. In stepping forward to embrace this future, academic libraries might do well to consider the words of American writer Eric Hoffer - a Veteran who died in 1983 but who could have been describing Generations X and Y:

In times of change, learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.

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## The author:



**Richard Sayers** is the Training Manager at CAVAL where he coordinates and presents professional development programs for library and information professionals in Australia and overseas. Richard also facilitates popular workshops in marketing information services and personal leadership development and undertakes consultancy work in the area of strategic planning and group facilitation. Prior to joining CAVAL, Richard worked as a library and information manager in government agencies and universities in Australia. Richard holds postgraduate degrees in library and information management and political science and is a qualified workplace trainer. He is also an experienced group facilitator and speaker. Richard is an Associate Fellow of the Australian Library and Information Association and Member of the Australian Institute of Management and the Australian Institute of Training and Development. In 1995, Richard was a proud graduate of the first Aurora Leadership Institute. In addition to journal articles and conference papers, Richard is the author of "Principles of Awareness-Raising: Information Literacy, A Case Study"; published by UNESCO in 2006. His current professional interests include generational change within the library profession and the implications for professional development and training in current and future information services.