

# OLAQ

OLA Quarterly

---

Volume 3  
Number 1  
*Library Support Staff (Spring 1997)*

---

July 2014

## What a long, strange trip it's been

Jey Wann  
*Oregon State Library*

### Recommended Citation

Wann, J. (2014). What a long, strange trip it's been. *OLA Quarterly*, 3(1), 8-10. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1435>

© 2014 by the author(s).

*OLA Quarterly* is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

*Sometimes the light's all shining on me,  
Other times I can barely see.  
Lately it occurs to me  
What a long, strange trip it's been.  
-Grateful Dead*

In November, I reached my 20th anniversary as an employee of the Oregon State Library. The staff celebrated with a party that included more than enough chocolate to satiate ordinary mortals, the traditional OSL pen and mug, and the non-traditional Dilbert calendar, complete with a Dilbert mask and cardboard tie.

## What a Long, Strange Trip It's Been

by Jey Wann  
Oregon State Library

It's hard to reach a milestone like this without contemplating on the achievement. After all I have spent nearly half my life here. Maybe, as one colleague quipped in my anniversary card, it's "time to get a real job." Maybe there is a reason that old

college chums I have not seen for a long time always say, "Are you still at the library?"

Last spring, I attended a conference for library and media technicians in Portland. It was my first national conference, and I enjoyed meeting library paraprofessionals from around the country. One day at lunch we got on the topic of how long we'd been either at our libraries or in our jobs. I noticed that folks seemed a bit defensive about their length of tenure if it was more than a few years. People would say things like "Well, I've been there eight years, but ...", and then give some justification for not having gone elsewhere.

Ever since then, I've been wondering whether paraprofessionals tend to stay in their jobs a long time

and whether they tend to be defensive about it. In December, I posted the following questions to lib-sup-1 (the listserv for library support staff) and libs-or (the listserv for Oregon libraries):

- How long have you been in your present job?
- How long have you been at your present library?
- How many other library jobs have you had?
- At how many other libraries have you worked?
- What is your job?
- At what kind of library do you work (e.g., public, academic, special, school)?
- What reflections or observations do you have about the length of time you've been in your job, in your library, in working in libraries in general?

I expected 30 or 40 people to respond. To my amazement, more than 130 did. With this number of responses, it was interesting to look at the data, but keep in mind that this isn't a random sample of library paraprofessionals.

I divided the responses by job type, by residency (Oregon or non-Oregon), and by library type. For job type, the circulation/ILL and technical services categories are self-explanatory. Administrative jobs include any that fell outside the usual library functions (e.g., accountants, office managers, and assistants to the director). The "mixed" category was truly a mixed bag, composed of jobs with functions in at least two traditional library areas, like circulation and cataloging. Many of the respondents in this category had major duties in virtually all areas of their library. The "other" category was for job types for which there were only one or two respondents and included reference, media, stack supervision, youth services, and bookmobile.

In 1995, *Library Journal* conducted a survey of paraprofessionals in libraries (St. Lifer, 1995). It found that the average paraprofessional had been in his or her job seven years eight months (compared to eight years for librarians). My data was very similar: Overall, my respondents had been in theirs an average of 7.8 years. An earlier survey of academic libraries reported similar results, with most paraprofessionals staying in a job six to 10 years (Oberger et al., 1992).

Figure 1

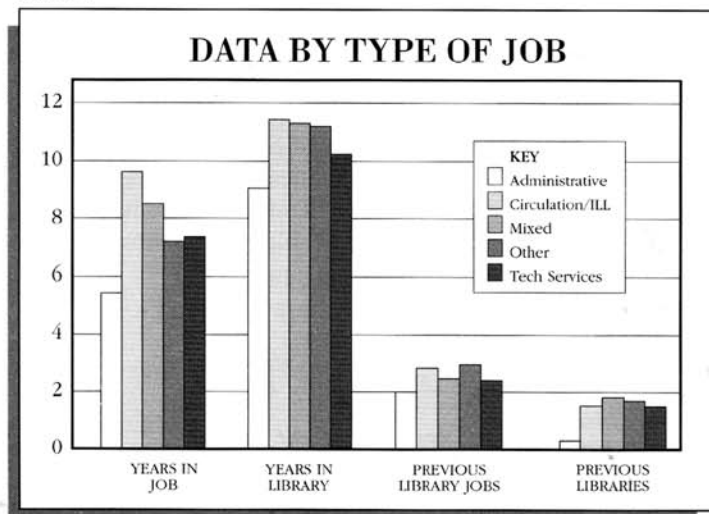


Figure 1 shows the data by type of job. I was not surprised that administrative jobs showed the shortest stay in their positions (5.3 years), since those general skills may be more transferable to non-library organizations than library skills. The longest-lasting types appear to be circulation folks (9.7 years). Judging from specific jobs that respondents reported, this could be because circulation has traditionally been a paraprofessional field, and support staff are more likely to have supervisory, better-paying jobs in circulation than in other areas.

Figure 2 shows the data by residency. Oregonians appear to stay in their jobs a bit longer (8.8 years compared to 7.5 years), but not to have been at their libraries as long (10.3 years compared to 11.7

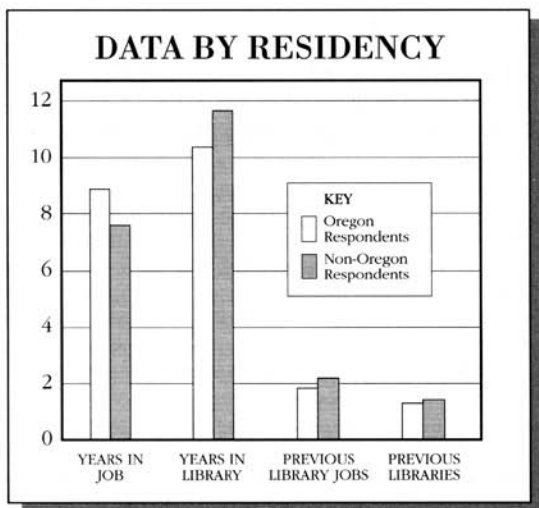


Figure 2

years). The higher number of previous library jobs (2.8 for non-Oregonians compared to 1.9 for Oregonians) may offer a partial explanation. Perhaps non-Oregon libraries in the survey were either larger on average, or for some other reason offered more opportunities for paraprofessionals to transfer to different jobs or be promoted to higher levels. One non-Oregon respondent reported that her library gives a 5 percent pay raise to any paraprofessional who transfers to another job in the library; the only stipulation is that he or she must remain in the job for at least six months.

Figure 3 shows the data by library type. Public library paraprofessionals stay in their jobs longest, at 8.1 years. Comments tended to report more stress in academic libraries than in public because of campus politics; this could affect how long staff members stay.

Looking at the data, I saw an eight-year gap between the highest (30) and next-highest (22) years in job, and a five-year gap between the two highest values for time at library (30 years and 25 years). These were the only such gaps in the data and could cause skewing toward the higher values. So, for those inquiring minds who want to know, Figure 4 shows responses to Years in Job by five-year intervals, and Figure 5 does the same for Years at Library. The grouping shows that more responses came from people who had been in their jobs or at their libraries less than the average.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1991 the median time with one employer for all Americans was 4.5 years. The median for time in one occupation was 6.5 years. Librarians stayed longer: 7.3 years with one employer and 7 years in one occupation (Maguire, 1993). Although economists do not agree whether U.S. jobs are becoming shorter and less stable, most citizens expect to make several employer and career changes during their work life (Zachary, 1995 and 1996). I've certainly seen my

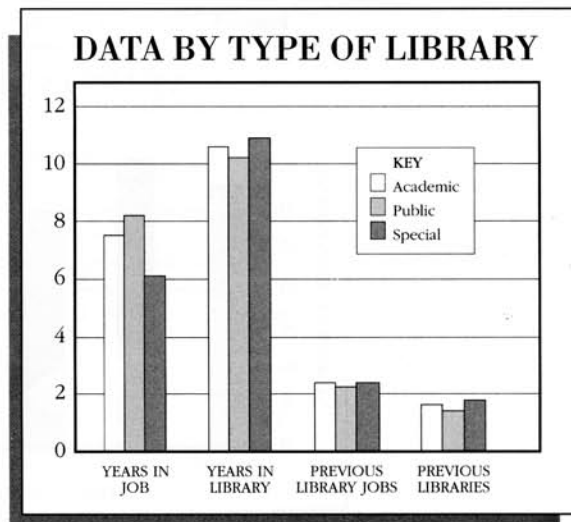
share of headlines announcing how often the average American will change jobs. If library paraprofessionals stay with their employers and in their careers longer than average, maybe the comments from respondents can show why.

Getting the data from the survey was great, but the real fun was reading people's reflections on their years in libraries. "Sorry if I rambled on too long" was the most common last line. Obviously, the folks who responded to my survey had thought about the issue.

Some of the respondents were planning to leave their jobs, their libraries, or the library field. Low pay and lack of promotional opportunities were common themes, and some mentioned disrespect from, or conflict with, librarians. Many of those planning to leave their jobs were doing so to pursue an MLS or because they had received their MLS. A few reported that they were planning to leave the library field for another where they felt there was more opportunity for advancement. Interestingly, while at least one respondent wondered whether library skills were useful in the non-library world, another proposed that library paraprofessionals recognize their skills and act as entrepreneurs, realizing that they could work in a variety of fields.

The issue of working relations between paraprofessionals and librarians is an important one. Respondents from all types of libraries reported feeling that librarians looked down on them, did not respect their work, or didn't include them in the planning process. Respondents from academic libraries were most vocal on the subject; this may result from pressure that faculty status has put on academic librarians (Ober, 1992, and Voelck, 1995). However, some in academic libraries spoke in glowing terms of their working relationship with librarians. A few mentioned team management as helping bridge the gap. And faculty status for librarians has opened areas of library work formerly done solely by librarians, like original cataloging and reference work, to paraprofessionals.

Figure 3



Although respondents reported a number of reasons for staying in their jobs, many said essentially the same thing: They love working with books and information, and they love seeing what they do help the patrons they serve. They are proud of their jobs, and glad to be in a field with high ethical standards and ideals. One person in an Oregon

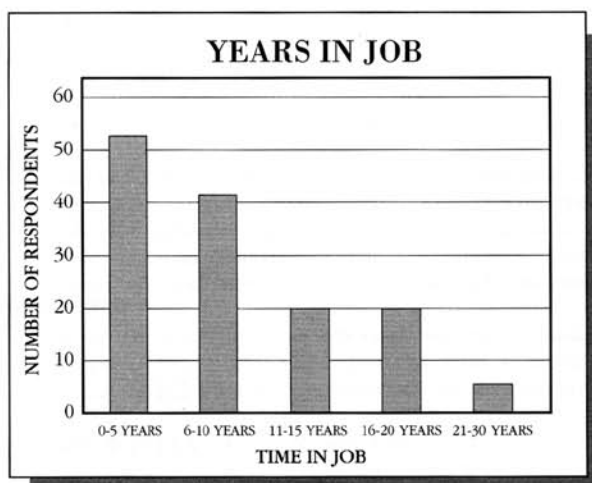


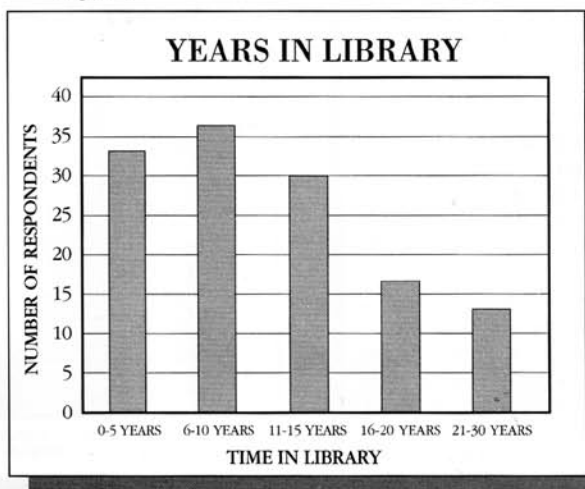
Figure 4

academic library wrote, "This job is one which doesn't make you ashamed to come to work. You're not selling people another hunk of useless plastic junk, you're filling a real need, and you don't parcel it out based on how someone looks or what their income is."

I know that I feel privileged to do some of my job duties, particularly cataloging unique scrapbooks and manuscripts or rare publications in the Oregon State Library's Oregon Collection. To handle and peruse these items and feel a connection with the people that made or wrote them is a wonderful experience. It's the kind of thing that Susan Gilmont of the Hatfield Marine Science Center has referred to as "a great gift" (Gilmont, 1996).

Many mentioned low pay as a drawback to their jobs, but some said at least the pay "isn't bad." Good benefits, sick leave, and vacation packages make a big difference. For staff who work in academic libraries and have college-age children, tuition waivers are a major financial incentive.

Figure 5



Some of those not going for an MLS commented on that decision. For some, the expense of going back to school was a factor, especially if they were already making a comfortable salary. Others were happy with their jobs or the kinds of jobs available to them and didn't find librarian jobs attractive.

How respondents ended up in libraries is also interesting. I had assumed that most, like me, came to libraries by serendipity, not conscious choice. Several originally got into libraries as work-study students in college or as student assistants in public libraries, worked up to full-time employment, and stayed. At least one respondent at an academic library did so before completing her degree. Then there was the respondent at a public library in Iowa who figured "The money I invested in the mandatory retirement plan would make a good savings for a trip to Hawaii. I loved the job so much I'm still in libraries 18 years later and still haven't been to Hawaii."

The important thing that stood out in the survey responses, is our love of and dedication to the library world. For the record, I have been at my library 20 years. I entered the field by serendipity: I was fresh out of college, still didn't know what I wanted to do when I grew up, and needed a job. A comment from a Colorado academic library staffer sums up well how I feel: "I remember hearing something about librarians choose to be librarians, but library staff usually fall into the work." Well, I'm glad I fell in. **Q**

*Thanks to Barbara O'Neill and Mark Cowan for assistance with this article and to all the paraprofessionals who took the time to respond to my survey.*

#### REFERENCES

- Gilmont S., 1996. Do Crabs have Favorite Colors? *LIBRARY MOSAICS* Vol. 7, no. 6 (November/December 1996):8-10.
- Maguire S., 1993. Employer and Occupational Trends: 1991 Update. *Monthly Labor Review* Vol. 116, no. 6 (June 1993):45-56.
- Oberg L. et al., 1992. The Role, Status, and Working Conditions of Paraprofessionals: A National Survey of Academic Libraries. *College & Research Libraries* Vol. 53, no. 2 (May 1992):215-235.
- St. Lifer E., 1995. We are the Library: Support Staff Speak Out. *Library Journal* Vol. 120, no. 18 (Nov. 1, 1995):30-34.
- Voelck J., 1995. Job Satisfaction Among Support Staff in Michigan Academic Libraries. *College & Research Libraries* Vol. 56, no. 2 (March 1995):157-170
- Zachary G., 1995. Data about Job Instability may be Shaky. *Wall Street Journal* March 31, 1995:A2.
- Zachary G., 1996. Global Unemployment at 'Grim' Levels, Study Finds, but Job Tenure is Steady. *Wall Street Journal* Nov. 26, 1996:A4.