

My Brilliant Career: from library trainee to UN War Crimes Tribunal

Mark Wigzell

Computer Technician, United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia



My first job was as a library trainee at the Legal Services Commission of SA. It all began in 1990 when I applied for a South Australian government traineeship. I was 17, had just finished Year 12, and didn't have any idea of what I wanted to do with my life. I was working in a factory at the time, and all I knew was that I never ever wanted to see another hot cross bun, which made the idea of a traineeship appealing.

Actually I was very lucky to even get an interview as the Commission Librarian was getting married and wanted to get all the interviews done in the week before her leave. But it was just before Easter and the bakery was not happy about me taking time off. I really couldn't afford to lose my job, so I phoned to say that I couldn't make the interview. Luckily for me the Librarian went out of her way to make sure I got an interview, and came back from her honeymoon early to accommodate me. I was chosen for the job and for me it was the best start anybody could have.

The twelve month traineeship involved two days of study at a TAFE college and three days of on-the-job training. At work I learnt a lot of things about the law and the sort of jobs involved in running a library. This was all so interesting that I learnt it very quickly. My supervisor was a great teacher and made me feel like an equal; there was no "I am the boss, you are my employee". She was very approachable and easy to communicate with. She found out in the early stages of my traineeship that I was interested in computers, and began to give me more tasks in this area, such as data entry and backups. I did not always do computer tasks, however but continued to learn to research for cases and perform other library duties such as shelving, photocopying and ordering, etc.

At the same time I was studying the Library Assistant Course at college. In that first year I learnt a lot of different library and administration skills, both on and off the job, and this was the job I thought I would be doing for the next forty years. Well!

At the beginning of the traineeship, we were all told we were not guaranteed a position on completion of the twelve months, so as the traineeship was coming to an end I was getting worried about my future. My supervisor told me she was going to try to keep me on, and this eased my mind a bit. She had to fight hard, but after producing statistics to show that the work had more than doubled in the past year, she convinced the Commission to give me a full time library assistant job. This gave me a feeling of being wanted - I was going to have a job.

I was taken on with the condition of a six month probationary period. In the six months I had a great time learning even more about the library and its functions. In that period we moved the library from the small rooms that it was in, to the more spacious and easily accessible library that it is today. My time as the library assistant seemed to fly by without me even noticing, and what I was gaining was great experience, which I put down to having a good and patient teacher. A teacher who made things clear and very understandable and I cannot praise her highly enough; I really appreciate all she has done for me.

Things were going along very well until about three months after the probationary period ended. The Commission started to change. The Australian war crimes trials were about to begin. The war crimes lawyers, who included some LSC staff and some lawyers from the private profession, started to invade the building.

As preparation for the trials got underway, the library staff were being called on to do lots of research, and to locate and order all of the materials that were required. The workload became very heavy. Computers and software for litigation support were under consideration. The computing section began to ask my advice about various products, and I was asked to test out software and report on my findings. And that's when things started to change for me personally.

After about a month of conducting research from within the library for the war crimes lawyers, I was offered a position as Litigation Support Manager of the Unit. I felt very strange at this because I was leaving the library to take up this position. Fortunately the Librarian did not stop me - in fact she encouraged me to take the job as she knew it was what I wanted.

Moving to the War Crimes Unit was a big change, with many new things to be learnt, and the experience I gained here was invaluable. I found that the skills I had learned in the library such as research and computer searching helped me to do my work more efficiently. I gained experience in how to run a computer network. I also learnt supervisory skills, and other skills I thought I would never use again, but I was wrong. I had the opportunity to go on numerous courses, and learnt to program in Word for Windows and Excel. The programming skills I developed during this time made my job easier and quicker. Outside companies looking for people with my skills began to approach me, but I stayed on in the War Crimes Unit. In quiet periods, which did not happen all that often, I took the opportunity to learn more and experiment.

I was also called on to do more than just litigation support. I became a part-time chauffeur before my regular working day began (6am to 9am) and also after it ended (5pm to 8pm). I didn't mind the overtime, and those times of driving witnesses and lawyers around town are a story in itself!

Working for the War Crimes Unit also changed me as a person. I had been a very quiet person previously, but working with the likes of Gabby Brown, Ian Press, Ann Sutherland, Michael David and Lindy Powell, bought me out of my shell. And I haven't been the same since!!

Two years later, as the war crimes trials were coming to an end, the thoughts that went through my mind were numerous. I thought I would probably now return to my former position in the library, but this did not happen. The Director of the Legal Services Commission had noticed my talents and decided to place me in the Computing Section of the Commission where my skills could be fully utilised.

For the next couple of years I worked as the Commission Help Desk person, fixing people's computer problems and advising on the purchase of computers and software. I was sent on courses to learn how to utilise the system we had and how to get the most out of it. I was also learning additional things about Microsoft products, and continued writing programs to help people throughout the organisation speed up some of the boring and tedious jobs. Some of those jobs ended up on my shoulders, but I didn't mind as it kept me busy and out of harms way.

Also at this time we were considering updating our computer system. An ITC (Information Technology Consultancy) was undertaken to determine our needs, and I was involved in this process. I was looking forward to the implementation of the proposed IT plan, when fate struck yet again. I was given the opportunity to work for the United Nations.

When I received the UN's offer, I had to give it serious thought. The position involved working as part of the litigation support team for the International War Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. This was a big step and I did not know if I had the experience to do the job. I received a lot of encouragement from my colleagues, particularly my former supervisor, who said to me "If you don't give it a go, you'll never know if you could have done the job". To me this seemed like a favourite saying of mine: "You always gain but you can never lose, because what you don't have you cannot lose". I decided to accept the offer.

From the moment I accepted the position, things began to happen at the Commission. Approval was finally received to implement the new network. I would not be there to be part of what we had been waiting for so long. But I could not change the situation. I was leaving to have the experience of a lifetime. I was going to Europe. I still could have changed my mind and stayed, but when I agree to do something I usually do not renege on the decision. I applied for six months leave without pay, so that I knew I had a job to come back to if it did not work out.

Finally my big day came. On the 19th February 1996 I got on the plane to make that long twenty three hour journey to The Netherlands and to my new job. My new supervisor had said that he would meet me at the airport, and was there with my former War Crimes Unit colleague Ann Sutherland on my arrival. I was not in the country more than a day when I was signing papers for my new job.

You may well ask whether I began immediately, or whether I had some time off to get over my jet lag. I was told I was starting the following day at 9am. Everything was so new and I felt overwhelmed, but I made the most of it.

It was quite strange beginning a new job and not knowing what I was doing. The first task I was asked to do was to put together a requisition for computer equipment. I detailed the specifications of the equipment and then spent ages surfing the Net for prices. When I handed my work to my supervisor he sat me down and explained some of the UN procedures to me. I need not have gone to so much trouble locating prices as the Tribunal has a separate Procurement Section which handles this - I needed only write up the equipment specifications! I soon became accustomed to the different way things were done at the UN.

Moving right along, I have now been at the Tribunal for almost twelve months and have been involved in the following activities:

- * Audio video production - to record the court proceedings and broadcast them to the world. I am still learning how to do this properly.
- * Real-time court reporting - which involves liaising with court reporters and ensuring the transcript is correct and in the required format at the end of each day.
- * Display systems - for display of documents electronically.
- * Scanning of documents - this process is used to get documents on to the display system.
- * Help Desk - when the court is not sitting and my other tasks are completed, I assist in solving hardware and software problems.
- * General administration tasks.
- * Other duties as required - lots of other tasks too numerous to mention.

My main responsibility, however, is in the courtroom maintenance of the computer network, the display system and the real-time court reporting.

This is where my career has taken me. In six years I have come a long way. No longer the shy young man who made hot cross buns in a factory and wondered where life would lead me. What I have to do now is make a decision. My leave without pay is almost over - do I leave the Legal Services Commission for good and take a further contract with the United Nations? I am still deciding at this moment. Whatever the outcome, I have certainly had some wonderful opportunities and experiences on the road from library trainee to the United Nations.