

Making sense of the Australian workplace

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In August 1991 I answered a *Sydney Morning Herald* advertisement for a librarian to 'develop a clearing house of contemporary industrial relations material and to maintain an existing small reference library'. The appointment was for a period of four months with the 'possibility' of an extension. This was my introduction to the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT). Nine and a half years and four libraries later, I am still there.

ACIRRT is not quite a household name, but ALIA members may remember it from the 1997 survey of employment conditions in the library and information sector, which the Centre carried out for the Association. The scope of ACIRRT's work is, however, much greater than survey research. Since its establishment in 1989 as a Key Centre in Industrial Relations based at the University of Sydney, ACIRRT has been monitoring and analysing the changing nature of work in Australia.

The last decade has been a turbulent period in Australian workplaces and for the institutions that regulate them. Retrenchment, redundancy, downsizing, outsourcing, deregulation, globalisation, work intensification — there has been much to investigate. The introduction to *Australia at work: just managing?* (known to us as 'the book') gives some idea of the variety of the research that has been done:

Over the last ten years our research ... has dealt with issues like wages shift work, bargaining arrangements and enterprise agreements, part-time work. New training arrangements, migrants in the labour market, long term unemployment, mature age workers, the youth labour market and redundancy practices. Our work has taken us into a range of organisations in industries such as manufacturing, finance, hospitality, construction, mining, public administration and retailing. (Australia at work, Prentice Hall, c.1999, xvii)

Commissioned and contract research is ACIRRT's principal activity and its main source of income. It works with business, governments, social welfare groups, trade unions, legal firms and employer organisations. ACIRRT has also diversified into related areas, stimulated both by its commitment to disseminating its research findings, and by the need to generate income from sources other than research. It publishes working papers and monographs, runs conferences, provides training courses and maintains ADAM — Agreements Database

and Monitor — an authoritative database of more than 6000 federal and state enterprise agreements.

Its own efforts have made ACIRRT information-rich, but its 20 research training and administrative staff have information needs that cannot be satisfied either from their own resources or from those created in-house. The researchers, in particular, have a pressing need for relevant and up-to-date information. Their work deals with emerging workplace issues where policy and practice intersect, and projects, typically, must be completed within three to nine months. 'Long term' in local parlance means more than one year.

It was the recognition of the potential of a specialist information service to support ACIRRT's research program and to attract Australian and overseas researchers to the Centre that prompted Associate Professor Ron Callus to make the development of a resource centre a priority when he took up the director's post in July 1991.

When I began my three-days-a-week adventure at the Kingsley Laffer Resource Centre, my start-up assets comprised: the Director's support, lively colleagues (all five of them), a small collection of grey literature, an online catalogue/database which used 'Notebook' software, a folder labelled 'Research Assistant', which listed my predecessor's duties and routines, and a 4m x 5m library.

Collection development was both a priority and a challenge in our early years. Industrial relations is not boundary-less, but relevant material appears in a wide range of subject areas including economics, management, law, sociology, psychology, political science, public administration, statistics and occupational health and safety.

Grey literature is most useful to us. Although the existing collection provided a solid nucleus, there was much work to be done in tracking down working papers from Australian and overseas research centres, publications from federal and state governments, trade unions and employer associations, theses and statistical material, which are the focus of the collection (the internet has been a real boon in making this material easier to identify). ACIRRT's own research reports, its *ADAM Report* and its datasets, specialist newsletters and looseleaf services have been easier to acquire. We now have a collection of some 5000 items, which provides a documentary base for work carried out by ACIRRT researchers and a record of

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contemporary policy, practice and research in the areas already mentioned.

The collection also provides the base for the range of services that the Kingsley Laffer Centre provides to ACIRRT's staff, and to a varied 'outside' clientele. In this group are researchers from other centres, academics, industrial relations practitioners, graduate students and commentators.

Most on-site users come from New South Wales, but there are regular interstate visitors who use the Centre when in Sydney. Overseas visitors find the Centre's collection and services helpful for gaining an awareness of Australian systems and developments.

The number of 'remote' (or virtual) users is increasing. Many of them contact the Resource Centre after exploring the ACIRRT website or as the result of wider publicity about ACIRRT and its reputation for high-quality research.

All ACIRRT'S staff are experienced and skilled library users, but the demands of their work and the information avalanche rule out self-sufficiency. In-depth searches and information 'scoping' in the early stages of projects are my specialities together with the instantaneous retrieval of 'tricky' items of information. The researchers' expertise means that they are sought after by the media, and

I've pulled out many executive and statistical summaries in the hour/half-hour before interviews. When these are recorded on-site, it is not uncommon for the library to be the back-drop too. I also provide advice on information retrieval techniques, electronic database use and internet searching. I was introduced to the internet in 1995 and have been an avid user ever since.

ACIRRT has a well-established public profile, which makes it a hub for enquirers wanting to make sense of workplace issues. Increasingly I spend as much time advising 'outside' users how and where to find information as I do in providing it, or in answering the many phone and email reference queries. Coupled with my other work at ACIRRT, which ranges from proofreading to acting as tea-towel monitor, it makes for a rich life. I still have the same sense of adventure that I felt when I first arrived. Like Thomas Baines of the North Australian Expedition, but with much more optimism, I can say 'I see no end to travelling'.

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