

The Introduction of Youth to the Archival Profession

Gabrielle Wolski

Gabrielle Wolski is a records officer at the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFESB) in Melbourne. Previously working as an archivist at Wesley Central Mission and with a Bachelor of Arts at Deakin University, as well as a Certificate III in Library Studies, she is now completing a Postgraduate of Information Management (in the Archives and Records Management Stream) at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). Gabrielle is a member of the ASA Victorian Branch and has an interest in youth needs in the archival arena. This paper was presented at the ASA *Challenges in the Field* conference in 2004 as part of a winning entry from Ms Wolski on the topic of 'renewing the profession'.

This paper focuses on representing youth needs and formulating ways of enticing young people into the archival profession. It surveys a small sample of young Victorian archivists and records professionals under the age of thirty-five. Compiling a questionnaire and assessing the results, insight has been gained into the work-related concerns of young archivists. This paper attempts to adapt the social theories of contemporary philosopher, Alain De Botton. De Botton specialises in the philosophy of status anxiety, a philosophy used in this paper to highlight areas of the profession problematic for young people.

So, what are the issues of youth? Are archives a place for young people? And what does the profession have to offer them? These questions cannot be fully understood until we reflect upon the current situation of society in general. Globalisation, capitalism, communication methods, linguistic barriers and on a more personal level; kinship structures,

births, deaths and marriages are all factors that intensify environmental and social change in our world. The world is a constantly changing place and as such, the archival profession must also change. If not, archivists will become victims of slow paced ideals in a fast paced world.

How do we manage this change? Though change is difficult to manage and cannot be covered in-depth here, the survey of young archivists (explained further in the supplement report on page 170) was undertaken with an aim to explore the changing occupational sphere of information management. Archives are established to capture social events and while doing so they seek to provide a secure site for documenting and storing records accurately for future generations. Yet, as archivists undertake the role of heritage protector we seem to neglect succession planning within the profession. Currently, there are few courses offered at tertiary institutions in the archives and records management field. Also the rising cost of fees is a sufficient deterrent for youth who want to enter the archival profession. For example, at Monash University it will cost approximately \$16 000 to study for a Postgraduate Diploma in information management. This focus on postgraduate studies neglects young school leavers, however, on a positive note it provides the profession with a wealth of people who usually hold two degrees.

Alain De Botton suggests that people living in a capitalist controlled, western society, are overcome by status anxiety. The accumulation of material wealth and the incessant need to gain respect propels us into a state of security and affirms our position within the world. Our need as humans to be loved and acknowledged, both at home and in the workplace, encourage our desires of belonging and success. These needs can be conflicting. Whether they are good or bad, they all play a part in the development of personal character and career growth. The more nurturing a person receives, the better the likelihood is of that person achieving status prosperity and vice-versa. This process leads individuals to constantly strive to surpass others in an attempt to obtain a superior rank. Consequently, this action evokes the competitive nature in other people and it is this drive that instils the individual with positive concepts of worth or adverse feelings of self-doubt.

De Botton presents us with the equation:¹

$$\text{self esteem} = \frac{\text{success}}{\text{expectation}}$$

This formula demonstrates that self-esteem is reliant on the success of our expectations or goals. For example, an archival student has expectations of completing a course. If they are successful, that achievement will boost their level of confidence. Yet, if they are unsuccessful they may experience feelings of failure and depression. It is also worth noting that, 'with no attempt there can be no failure and with no failure no humiliation'.² Therefore, does this contentious statement promote the possibility of choosing stagnation as an option for living?

De Botton recognises a further stage of status anxiety which involves the gradual loss of religious faith throughout the generations. This leads us to believe we must achieve more within our existence as the idea of an afterlife slowly fades from our thoughts. Concepts of heaven and hell, and God are dispelled as our focus turns to the value of the dollar and the respect we demand based upon our belief in the superiority of our positions. We believe we are no longer judged by God; instead 'our sense of identity is held captive by the judgements of those we live among'.³ Social and kinship structures dissolve as the individual relies upon a belief in self-importance in order to survive. In many instances the family, as a unit, exists as a secondary component with careers becoming the primary aim in people's lives. With so many pressures to succeed it is evident that young people require extraordinary levels of fulfilment and achievement to feel meritorious.

Using a comparative model, the role of the archivist and the notion of status anxiety can first be seen as an awkward relationship. However, if you consider the numerous explanations which are required when having to provide a creditable reason to justify the chosen career path of an archivist it is perhaps conceivable. As one archivist declared:

Archives staff are sometimes treated as flunkies or second class citizens. We spend much of our time explaining what we do, and plenty of time fighting for recognition from people who don't understand why we are here. But that is simply one of the occupational hazards of this particular career.⁴

Doctors, lawyers and financial accountants do not seem to suffer from this lack of recognition. They are accepted, elevated and are seen as important key figures in helping our capitalist society function. It seems the archival profession is not widely recognised outside of the information management sphere, however, it is noted for its valuable work. An example of the value of the archivist is evident in the current popular novel *The Da Vinci Code*, which starts by focusing on the curator of the famous Louvre museum.⁵ Jacques is the keeper all unique artefacts and protector of the secret brotherhood of the Priory of Sion. Of four distinguished individuals entrusted to maintain the secrets of the brotherhood, two are curators and one a senior archivist!

When asked in the questionnaire what keywords best describe the common stereotype of the archivist, results included: boring, anal, staid, conservative and even the term 'file Nazi' surfaced. Society's perceptions of the archival profession are formed on a lack of knowledge of what the vocation entails. This perception produces images of a clerical role requiring little or no skill at all. Such an opinion can be further supported by examining the *Simmons Personal Career Survey*.⁶ It identifies 'simple clerical filing' and 'filing' as professions requiring 'moderate' levels of courage. As an archivist I am unsure why courage would be required, however, it is interesting to note that these jobs rate relatively low next to the 'bounty hunter' and the 'grocery bagger'. Therefore, our attempts to gain respect and to achieve a desirable level of status have been unfairly affected by the judgements of society. By becoming aware of this situation, whereby archivists are not highly recognised in society, we can assume that the archival profession is chosen as a career path by individuals primarily for the love of the industry.

The survey undertaken sought responses from archivists under the age of thirty-five, and asked: what attracted them to the profession? A similar range of results emerged as most participants had either a background or a passion for historical information. Other attractions to the industry included the systematic approach of records keeping and the organisational process of arrangement. Few young archivists stated that they liked the human contact element in their job and many considered themselves to be introverts. As a profession it is important not to ignore responses such as these as they provide crucial insight into the opinions and values of young members of the profession. These responses should

be considered when targeting and informing school leaver groups about archival career options.

People within medical and legal fields are well recognised within society and both enjoy high levels of financial success and social status. Do archivists seek to emulate this position? De Botton notes there is 'a rise in levels of status anxiety among ordinary western citizens, by which is meant a rise in levels of concern about importance, achievement and income'.⁷ Ultimately society is constructed of numerous interwoven hierarchical networks which are all used as gauges for identifying people and their positions. This value system is instilled in us from birth and allows us to measure and compare our worth against others. For archivists the difficulties remain in categorising our profession for both ourselves and for the scrutiny of society.

Questionnaire participants were asked to rank the social status of eight specific professions from highest (first) to lowest (eighth). The occupations offered for evaluation were: a builder, teacher, chef, doctor, accountant, archivist, artist and librarian. Of the twenty-five questionnaires returned, the occupation of doctor consistently ranked highest with the archivist ranking a median of fifth or below. This finding reflected a common belief among all participants of their ideas about the archivist's struggle with occupation value within the community. The same occupations were presented but social status was substituted with financial status. Again similar patterns were evident with doctors ranking highest and archivists ranking a median of sixth. These results come as no surprise, although the results can be used to confirm and illustrate the theory that archivists also struggle with status anxiety.

Archival science as a vocation is generally misunderstood and remains largely immeasurable in comparison to other professions. By presenting the public and school leavers with an immeasurable profession places our worth and value in question. The lack of public knowledge ultimately affects self-esteem and pay rates as archivists are considered lowly 'filers' who are in possession of a simple intellect. De Botton states, 'financial self interest is a recent historical development, a product of the modern age and of advanced Capitalism'.⁸ Therefore, financial satisfaction is a defining factor in western culture which has the ability to 'make or break' an individual dependent on their wealth. Most participants surveyed did not feel pay standards were reflective of the tertiary study they had undertaken. Young archivists did note large

fluctuations in pay rates from one organisation to the other. These discrepancies tended to relate to the attitudes commonly held in those organisations towards recordkeepers. Most importantly, the majority of participants felt they were under-represented, under-valued and under-paid.

On investigation of the ASA and RMAA websites it is evident that there are no standard wage guidelines based upon duties and responsibilities.⁹ It is this lack of standardisation which leaves the profession open to exploitation as prospective employers determine worth – usually done on what little knowledge they have of the profession. The lack of commonly defined skills encourages the blurring of roles and again archivists and recordkeepers become the ‘immeasurable’. By establishing guidelines, not unlike ALIA, we can negotiate and secure reasonable wages and awards which fairly reflect the profession. It is interesting to note that the *One Umbrella Records Management Work and Salary Survey* indicates Australian records managers earn anywhere between \$37 000 to \$100 000 in the private sector.¹⁰ Without recognised protection or standardisation the profession runs the risk of sabotaging its own growth. The question then remains: how can the archival profession be measured against other occupations when it cannot even measure itself?

The fact that the archives and records management professions are not an immediate revenue generating vocation may provide reasons as to why they are not viewed earnestly as a desirable career choices. The job of records professionals is seen as an investment for the future, but people like to see instant financial gain. Lack of concrete funds lead organisations to question the need of such professionals as they are seen as a luxury and not a necessity. Ultimately this concept undermines their work and again leaves them at the mercy of the employer. Young people want to feel proud of their career choices and seek to indulge in the benefits of belonging to an organisation. This feeling of belonging can be related back to De Botton’s primary basis of love and its involvement in the theory of status anxiety.

It is evident that young people living in a capitalist world are brought up in a competitive environment. This recognition and reward system is the drive and motivation which inspires and challenges new ideas. Of the participants surveyed the majority stated that creative ideas were important to the progress of the profession. Participants also felt they

were moderately creative within their current occupational sphere, however, there was no real motivation to excel. This result seems to reflect the lack of competition within the occupation thus, suggesting that the archival profession remains relatively stagnant. With rare opportunities like the 'ASA competition – renewing the profession', young people are encouraged to present opinions that may not otherwise be heard. By providing an incentive to deliver beyond what is expected the archival vocation will advance on a social, professional and individual level.

By revisiting the original question on the issues of youth and by examining what young people want, we can begin to assume that their needs are not unlike those of anyone else; they remain intertwined with ideals of respect, equality, stability, satisfaction and the desire to be happy. At secondary school, students are taught that to be successful they have to aspire to study law, medicine or business. This leaves a great hole in the social fabric of society. Young students face severe pressure to follow this path with the hope that they will meet with respect and financial gain later in life. There is nothing wrong with this belief, yet, not all students want to choose this path. Students usually take on roles to satisfy others, thus, the loss of passion becomes evident as their real interests lie elsewhere. This leads to people becoming uncaring about their profession and the social aspects surrounding it, and they remain focused on the monetary gain. Unhappiness then breeds as money becomes desirable and the value of the 'person' falls to the wayside. As information professionals, we can seek to promote and encourage prospective archival students of the career options available.

Archivists have many hurdles to address to ensure that the value of their profession is widely recognised. They must become flexible to accommodate the demands of society. This awareness will ultimately lead to change, empowering and ensuring the renewal of the profession. Idealistically, the outcome of this and other similar investigations may mean a renaissance of the archival profession, resulting in a profession socially focused and committed to promoting archival services. As we undertake succession planning we need to pay heed to young people and their needs, and allow them to enjoy respect and financial gratification. The establishment of a desirable framework which encourages, nurtures and rewards achievements will provide the profession with passion, interest and the flourishing of creativity. If

records professionals can achieve this they will secure the success of the profession and gain the respect of society. By banding together as one and learning to understand, co-operate and work together the profession can overcome all barriers. So after considering these issues, the last question we should ask ourselves is: how will we welcome the young?

Endnotes

1 Alain De Botton, *Status Anxiety*, Hamish Hamilton, UK, 2004, p. 55.

2 *ibid.*

3 *ibid.*, p. 15.

4 Daniel Sokolow, Archives Co-ordinator, David Taylor Archives, North Shore Long Island Jewish Health System, email response to article, 'Losing Status: A Former Faculty Member Takes a Staff Job', posted 29 January 2002.

5 Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, Corgi Books, 2004.

6 Which is apparently over 99% accurate. See: *Simmons Personal Survey, Emotional Intelligence Success Workbook*, April 15, 2003 <http://www.careertest.us/CT_Proof.htm>.

7 De Botton, p. 45.

8 *ibid.*, p. 105.

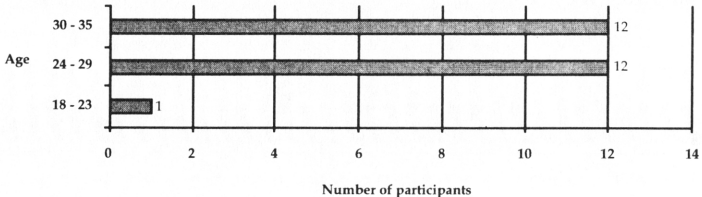
9 Although it is important to acknowledge the developments of recordkeeping competencies, *Australian Standard Records Management AS ISO 15489-2002*, Standards Australia, March 2002.

10 One Umbrella Pty Ltd., *Australian Records Management Work and Salary Survey 2002*, September 2002.

A supplement report is provided from page 170. 'Number of Participants' in each table reflects the number of responses generated by each question.

Supplement Report – Archival Questionnaire

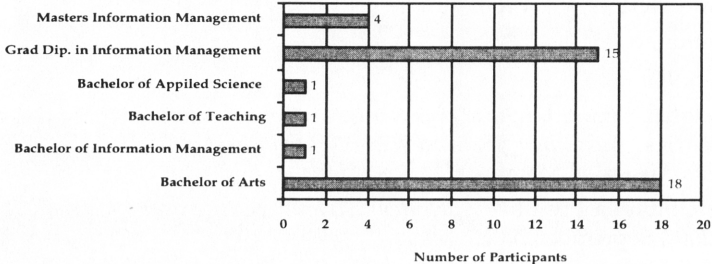
1. Average age of archivists surveyed



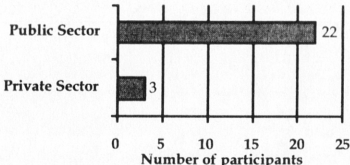
2. Education Levels

4 participants had completed TAFE courses

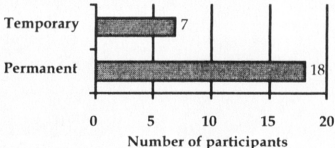
22 participants had completed Higher Education



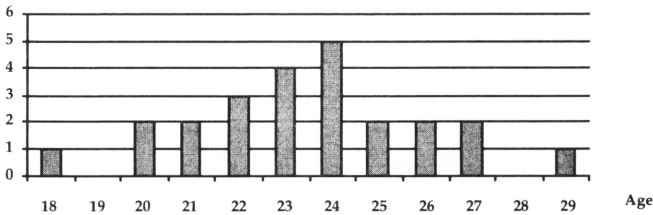
3. Workforce Sector



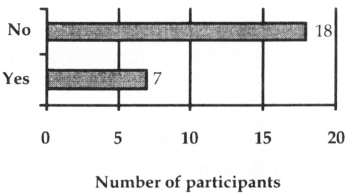
4. Work Status



5. How old were you when you entered the archival profession?



6. Do you feel it is a recognisable profession?



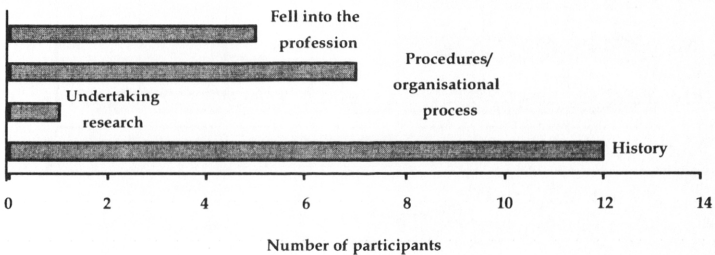
Comments:

'Not known to me when I was at school contemplating the question of careers.'

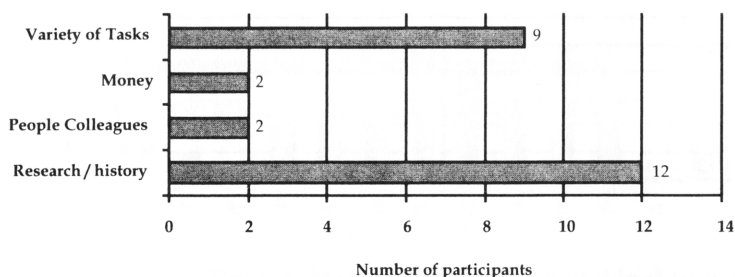
'Yes, recognised by archivists – in the general public archivists are not so much recognised as unheard of!'

'It is not recognised in the mainstream. People have often heard of it but would struggle to describe what we do.'

7. What attracted you to the archival profession?



8. How did you become interested? What keeps you interested in the profession?



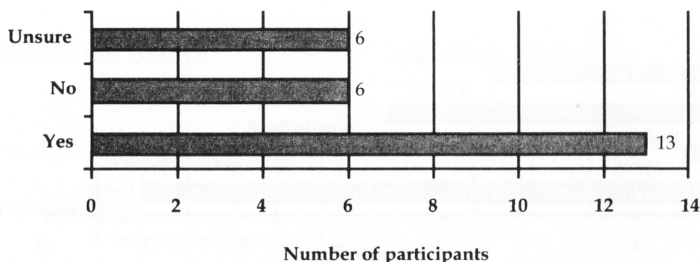
Comments:

‘History keeps me interested. The challenges posed by storing electronic records over time.’

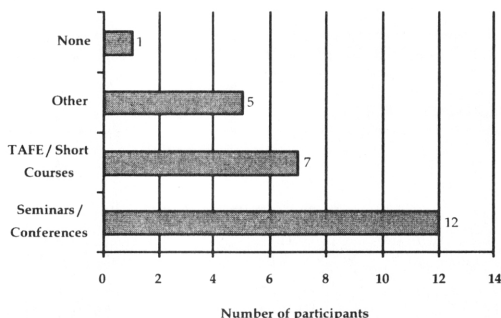
‘Working with interesting and fun people who are open-minded, and who like to develop new concepts. The ability to think outside the box is definitely what keeps me interested.’

‘Constant change – change in technology and legislation. It’s challenging.’

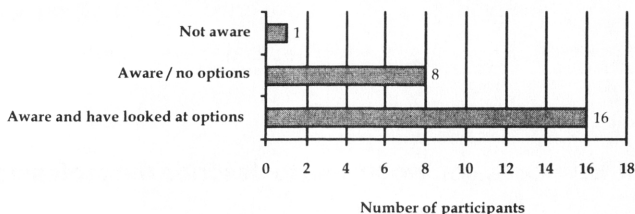
9. Is the archival profession your chosen long-term career path?



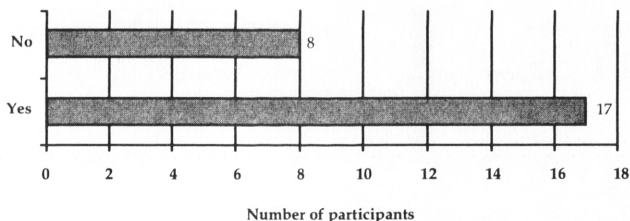
10. What professional development have you undertaken within your archival / records management career?



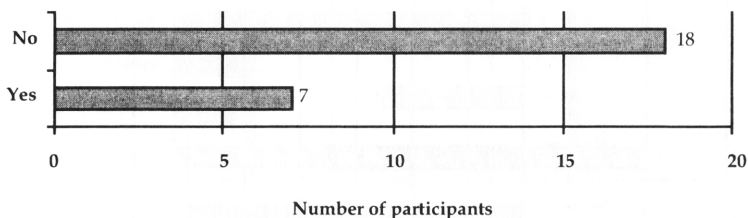
11. Are you aware of the options available for learning and advancing within the archival profession?



12. Would you be willing to pay for training to obtain further qualifications?



13. In comparison to other disciplines do you feel pay standards for the archival profession are reflective of study undertaken?



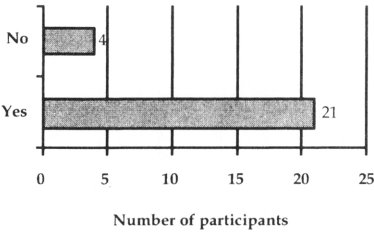
14. What are the keywords that you think would be used to describe the traditional stereotype of the archivist and records manager?

Filing Clerk	Obscure	Stuffy Librarian/ mailroom
Stagnant	Conservative	Introverted Anal retentive
Dusty	Staid	File Nazi Dull

15. What are the keywords you would use to describe the profession as you see it?

Information Managers	Introverted	Problem solvers
Evolving	Innovative	Insular Multi-skilled
Ethical standards	Stuffy	Interesting
Custodians of information	Vibrant /dynamic	

16. Do you think the archival profession suffers due to stereotypical perceptions?



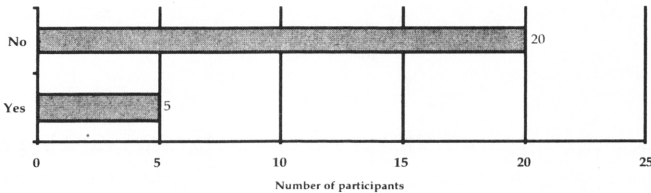
Comments:

‘Most people think ‘records’ can be learnt without much effort in comparison to [work of] a doctor or a lawyer.’

‘Many people think the job is not important and can be done by anyone.’

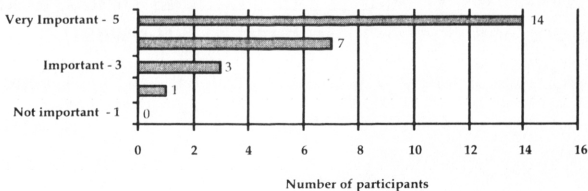
‘Often people need to be educated about what archivists do. Once informed, people don’t put down the profession – they actually rank it highly.’

17. Do you think young people (under 35) are well represented within the profession?



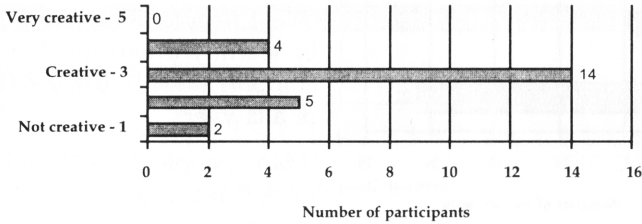
18. How important do you think creative ideas are to the profession?

1 (Lowest) to 5 (Highest)

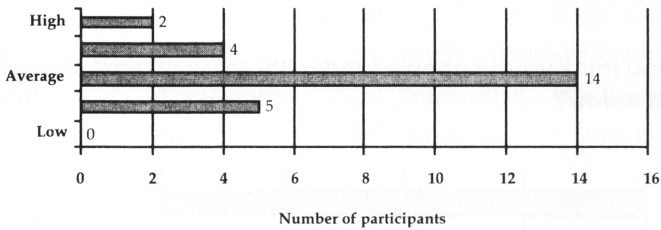


19. How creative do you think we are as a profession?

1 (Lowest) to 5 (Highest)



20. As an archivist or recordkeeper, how do you view your professional status within society? 1 (Lowest) to 5 (Highest)



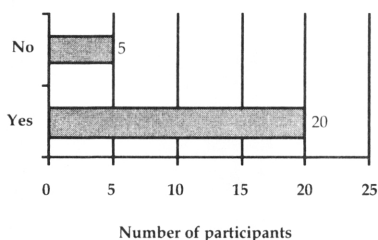
21. What is your opinion? Please rate *social status* ranking of the following professions in the community — 1 (Highest) to 8 (Lowest).

- 1. Doctor 2. Teacher 3. Accountant 4. Builder
- 5. Archivist 6. Librarian 7. Chef 8. Artist

22. What is your opinion? Please rate *financial status* ranking of the following professions — 1 (Highest) to 8 (Lowest).

- 1. Doctor 2. Accountant 3. Builder 4. Teacher
- 5. Librarian 6. Archivist 7. Chef 8. Artist

23. Are you satisfied with your achievements within the archival profession?



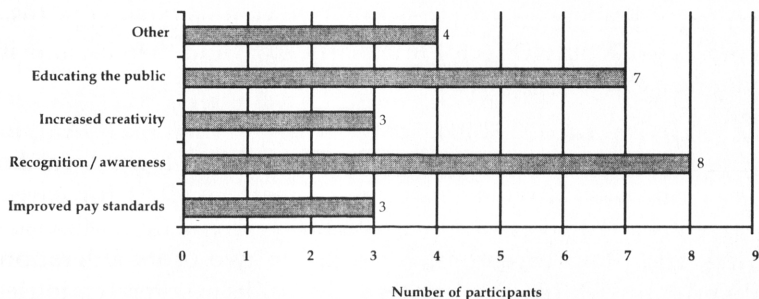
Comments:

'I have been fortunate in the opportunities provided to me and the choices I have made.'

'I have been able to work in a variety of environments across a few countries. I've had to devise systems to better manage records and when they work I get a great sense of achievement.'

'I find the general atmosphere and the people I have worked with have not been inspiring. The way that archivists and records officers are generally treated is pretty crappy, their worth is not recognised.'

24. What aspect of the profession would you like to see improved?



Comments:

'I'd like to see more creative young people working on new concepts for industry, to lead the profession into the future.'

'Our interaction with new client groups — making archives and records more interesting for non-traditional archive users.'

'I have met many wonderful people in the archives world — they were my mentors and teachers, and had more impact than they know. It's the people who make the profession.'