

THE ROAD GOES EVER ON AND ON: A LIBRARIAN'S UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

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Introduction

For those entering the Library and Information industry, the task of considering one's career can be a daunting one, especially within an uncertain job market. What was once a clear conventional career path can seem a pipe dream to those new graduates looking for a job, and for those who are employed in the industry, barriers to career progression can seem insurmountable.

This paper will look at the challenges that library and information professionals face when attempting to enter and progress their careers in the industry. It will investigate the options that professionals can take in overcoming these challenges, whether it be making a regional change, volunteering overseas, or moving to an entirely career path. Finally, it will ask the question of what it is that makes a career in the library and information industry meaningful and fulfilling, and how professionals can go about achieving this.

"Being a Librarian"

For many new graduates in the industry, there can be overwhelming pressure to "be a librarian". Many have already been working in the industry for a number of years, gaining valuable workplace experience whilst completing their qualification in library and information management. And so often in the library workplace, the professional hierarchy - and the roles therein - are so well defined and demarcated (even physically, between the "Circulation Desk" and the "Reference Desk") that upon approaching graduation, the would-be librarian is already keen to "cross over" to the qualified professional side of the industry. After years of working in support roles, they are ready to take on a position of authority and professional esteem.

However, in metropolitan areas, professional roles can be few and far between. Many entry-level professional roles at universities are filled internally by those who entered the workplace in a support staff role - and indeed, many universities are currently cutting back their pool of library staff. For those jobs that are advertised, there is a high level of competition, especially for younger graduates who will be competing with more experienced graduates on their second or third career path. For many new graduates, it isn't a question of finding a job that suits their preferred library sector; basically, any job with "Librarian" in the title will do!

Relocating to Regional Australia

Of course, when job hunting, it makes sense to cast a wide net. Whilst it would be ideal to find that first job in one's own home city, preferably easy commuting distance from home, new graduates need to manage their expectations of being able to secure professional work in the library industry. Pretty soon, settling for "any librarian job in Melbourne" becomes "any librarian job in Australia". And indeed, for an entry-level professional role in a regional city, there is often far less competition for the role. Furthermore, graduates with metropolitan library experience have a strong set of experience and skills that they can bring to regional centres, such as interpersonal skills, knowledge of technology, information literacy training experience, and a knowledge of library systems. So, whilst they may lack experience in collection development, there is still a wealth of transferable skills that they can bring to the table.

Furthermore, in a regional centre such as Darwin, where I lived for two and a half years, the population is notoriously transient. Job vacancies arise on a regular basis, and with them the opportunity to build one's range of professional experience. In an online interview with (then-President of ALIA) Roxanne Missingham in 2007, her advice to new librarians was to "Move around and see as much as you can and think. Every library (and manager and colleagues) has good and not so good points. The best way to figure out what is good from your point of view is to be exposed to as many of these as is possible (but you don't have to move every month)."

As a new graduate in 2007, this was a piece of advice that I very much took to heart, and within two and a half years of living in Darwin, I started as a part-time entry-level Liaison Librarian at Charles Darwin University, moved to a full-time Reference Team Leader at Darwin City Libraries, seconded into a temporary part-time Branch Manager position, which became a permanent position, and then finally into a full-time librarian with the Reference and Research Services team at the Northern Territory Library. Through these roles, I developed new skills in team management, collection development, events and programs delivery, strategic development, using research tools for local history and genealogy, online social media, photo digitisation, and the kind of general knowledge that comes with working on a reference desk for two and a half years. There were times where the learning curve was steep, but through networking at interstate events, I'd established a strong support network online, with many librarians who were willing to provide mentoring and share their expertise. Ultimately, I felt like I had made my foothold in the industry, and established a wide set of skills that I felt would equip me to return to a city like Melbourne, and pursue a varied and successful career as a librarian.

In 2006, Christine May was also a new graduate, with no experience in libraries, and struggling to find that first job in Melbourne. "Job applications asked for years of experience in general and specialist roles and it looked like I wouldn't be able to get full time work. I started applying for jobs that sounded interesting, the location was only of secondary importance, and in the end I got a job as a Youth Librarian in Queensland." After three years working in Yeppoon, she moved to Dubbo to broaden her experience in a different specialist area, as a Reference Librarian. And finally, keen to develop her management experience, she moved to Canberra, where she now works as a librarian at the Australian Sports Commission.

She attributed her willingness take these opportunities as a factor in building experience: "Opportunities are everywhere. Every job I've done has been a chance to learn new skills, work with a different clientele and generally find ways to use and expand my existing skills into new

avenues... Moving for work opportunities has enabled me to have a breadth of experience that I don't think I would have been able to accumulate in one town or library service."

Returning from a regional role

So, after two and a half years in Darwin, I was ready to return with my established set of skills to land a similar job in a Metropolitan setting. However, being based in Darwin was a mixed blessing; whilst I had the technical and strategic experience, I didn't have the contextual experience of being a librarian in a metropolitan location, where the needs of clients are often quite different (or at least perceived to be so) than in regional libraries. Ultimately, a prospective employer is going to be asking, "Will this person understand the needs of our clients?" and thus there will often be a perceived risk involved in recruiting such a person." Personally, I was fortunate in that I was able to use my professional networks to immediately start temporary and casual work in Melbourne. However, it took nine months until I secured a full-time renewable contract position as a library manager.

Similarly on the topic of returning, Christine says that "Friends and family in Melbourne continue to ask when I'm coming back. I tell them I'm not avoiding them, or Melbourne itself, but if I can't find work then I can't come back." Personally, for me, there are times where I feel that if I'd just stayed where I was, and did my time with the same organisation, then I would have ended up in a better position. However, I certainly would not have had the breadth of experience as I did by moving interstate, and taking on the challenge of a range of senior roles.

International Volunteering

For a number of librarians, working overseas as a volunteer has been a part of their journey as a professional, and it was at the 4th ALIA New Librarian's Symposium in 2008 where I met a number of these.

Karyn Siegmann, was presenting on her time volunteering as a Library Management Trainer in Papua New Guinea with Australian Business Volunteer. Romany Manuell and Susanne Newton were about to volunteer in the Pacific region - Romany at a school library in Vanuatu and Susanne at the National University of Samoa. It wasn't something that appealed to me at the time, as I was possibly still "too focused on my career" at the time, and keen to establish myself back in Melbourne. However, I stayed in touch with them, and over the following years, the option of international volunteering kept presenting itself. It wasn't until almost five years later that I was more interested in travelling, and engaging in more project-based work. And ultimately, I wanted to use my professional skills in a way that made a real difference in the world.

And so, in early 2013, after completing a fixed-term contract, I took up the opportunity to volunteer for two months in Alotau, PNG, at the St Barnabas School of Nursing as a Librarian Trainer. This role focused mostly on cataloguing and collection management, but also worked alongside teaching staff in academic literacy skills such as research, referencing and citation. During my time there, another role arose to work with the Rabaul Historical Society as an

Information Management Expert, in East New Britain, PNG. This role focused on cataloguing much of the society's museum collection and develop an online presence for the society.

Both of these roles had their share of culture shock, particularly in terms of managing personal safety, and the restrictions on personal freedom to travel around after dark. Cultural barriers could definitely be challenging, whether with the language, work attitudes or social values. That said, my experiences were interesting and diverse, and interacting with the local community, I learned much about the Melanesian culture.

Social and professional isolation was also a challenge, particularly in Rabaul, where I lived near an active volcano, and most of the local infrastructure and business had moved in the 1990s down to Kokopo, 30km away. With somewhat restrictive technological and communication capacity, it was often a case of exercising creative problem solving within the limited means of the organisation, and there were definitely times when I questioned whether any of this was worthwhile or made a real difference in the community.

However, both of these projects were unique opportunities to transfer professional skills and knowledge to others and experience another culture. Papua New Guinea does have a bad reputation but, as with many developing countries, once you travel away from the urban regions, it really is a beautiful place.

Other librarians who have worked in international development have had similar motivations for volunteering: wanting adventure, gaining experience living and working overseas whilst still building career skills, doing something different, and helping people. They have all enjoyed the opportunities to travel and experience other cultures, but whilst some worked with counterparts who were eager to learn, others found attitudes difficult in the workplace, along with the lack of resources, and those in isolated locations definitely struggled with it.

Karyn said "This was a great experience and something I might like to do again at some point. I highly recommend taking some time out to help others."

Romany said, "It wasn't an easy assignment... but I wouldn't change it for the world, and I would not rule out doing it again."

Susanne said, it was "One of the best experiences of my life... it set me on a path to more travel and overseas opportunities..." She's now volunteering with UN Women in Uganda.

Another librarian said, "It looks great on my resume regardless of whether I was successful, and indeed my abilities to handle stress and respond to challenges have been improved... I do wonder whether it was worth the 12 months of my life." In spite of this, she has since returned overseas on another 12-month volunteer assignment.

However, for international development volunteers, one of the main challenges is returning - especially explaining to a prospective employer how you've been spending the past 12 to 18

months of your professional life. The very title "volunteer" is problematic, in that there's the assumption that it's not professional work, as for most library managers, the idea of a volunteer is that of amateur unskilled labour - often a school student or retiree wanting to give back to the community. In contrast, the international development volunteer is selected according to their set of professional skills, and what they are volunteering is their expertise, in transferring professional skills, and building the capacity of an organisation and their staff toward operating to professional standards. And whilst there is the allure of visiting intriguing and exotic locations, the idea of the volunteer experience being an idyllic holiday, or even a break from "real" professional work, is far from the reality of it.

From "Being a Librarian" to "Being a Development Worker".

After three and a half months in Papua New Guinea - two short-term development projects later - I was keen to seek out other development work opportunities overseas. At that point in time, there were none listed for library and information professionals. However, many of the listed roles required transferable skills that library and information officers often possess, including:

- Knowledge of online communication and social media
- Ability to develop web content
- Data entry and database management skills
- Ability to create print and digital publications
- Maintenance of cultural heritage collections
- Planning and delivering youth programs
- Training staff in the usage of information and communication technology.

Whilst these assignments are not explicitly described as library or information roles, they are assigned through a merit-based application system, with much consideration based on the applicant's experience in the field and resilience in coping with challenging cross-cultural situations. Which is how I found myself working in non-library-based development work.

The first of these, based in Hoi An, was based at the Centre for Cultural Heritage Management and Preservation as a "Museum Management Advisor". However, the focus was in the development of outreach programs to youth and community groups, using the heritage collections. In this role, I was able to use my transferable skills to create interactive programs and activities, and conduct training that challenged staff to develop the way that they engage children and other visitors to the museums.

This work has led to a long-term role in Hoi An, working as an "Organisational Development Advisor" with a local NGO. This role is, essentially, a knowledge management and communications role, implementing quality control of documentation, and developing publications and knowledge products for distribution to the organisation's stakeholders. As this organisation works with forest and land resource allocation and usage for ethnic minorities, there is a strong social justice element, thus meeting a desire to work on projects with more altruistic goals.

Like before, these experiences haven't been without its share of challenges, particularly in overcoming cultural barriers and settling into a new social setting, and working outside my professional comfort zone. But so far it has been a valuable experience, and one that I would not be living if I hadn't looked beyond the library and information industry. And as much as I am passionate about libraries and what they can offer society, the ability to apply my professional skills in other sectors, and think outside the square of traditional librarianship.

Furthermore, some strong parallels can be drawn between the nature of librarianship and international development. Much of the contemporary focus in development work has been on building the capacity of individuals, organisation and communities. That is, consulting on strategic goals, assessing skills and resources, and developing the organisation through the implementation of policies and the delivery of training.

Essentially, a development worker in this context is a consultant who determines the information and knowledge needs of the organisation, and their staff, and then delivers products to meet those needs, whether it be through establishing a collection of resources, producing publications and guidelines, or conducting training sessions. These are all outcomes that are also at the core of the library and information profession - the main difference being the context of the work.

Moving beyond the library industry

For many library and information professionals, the library industry will not be their final workplace. Some extensive online searching¹ located a number of self-proclaimed "ex-librarians" who were willing to share their insights. The wide range of job titles included (but were not limited to):

- In-country coordinator
Engineers without Borders
- Program Manager
Melbourne Writers Festival
- Freelance editor and proofreader
- Author
- Communications Officer
UN Women
- Senior Project Director
(Local Government)
- Team Leader
Governance and Policy
(Local Government)
- Communication and Community
Engagement Program Manager
(NSW State Government)
- Humanities Teacher
(Secondary School)
- Cook, restauranter and food writer

When it came to reasons for moving sectors - away from libraries - a couple mentioned job shortages and restructures in the industry, but for many it wasn't necessarily a conscious

¹ Mostly from taking published lists of Associate Members of ALIA from the past 5-10 years, searching for their names in LinkedIn, and assessing their employment history / status.

decision, but rather a natural progression of their career. "Librarianship was never my end-goal," one said. Another mentioned a "need to feel a sense of authenticity between who I am and what I do."

At the same time, others just felt that they "needed a change", that they "needed to do something different" and that their career was "a twisted path, with hopefully more twists to come." They just wanted variety in their careers, and if librarianship couldn't offer that, then opportunities would come elsewhere.

And indeed, many recognised that their transferable skills and experience as a librarian were essential to securing the job that they currently have. These included research skills, the ability to learn to use technology quickly, information management and retrieval principles, and interpersonal skills - being able to work with a wide range of clients and understand their needs.

In the words of Stephanie Alexander, "From my first days working in a professional kitchen, I used the skills of information retrieval and organisation that had become second-nature to me in my library years... The A-Z arrangement of my most successful book, *The Cook's Companion*, is probably influenced by my library years."

The challenge of "being not-a-librarian".

Moving industries is not without its challenges. One ex-librarian, now in a communications and editing role, admitted that she felt "like a bit of a fraud" because she didn't have a communications degree. Some felt that they had since lost many "library specific skills" from their decision to move sectors. Another has even had to rewrite her CV, and replace the word "librarian" with another title that better described the work that she did, so that she could avoid "preconceived notions of what a librarian does" - something that would work against her in a job application.

Curiously, it would seem that, just as "being a librarian" is seen as an lofty career goal for new graduates, and advantageous in progressing one's career in the library and information industry, it is possibly quite the opposite when applying for jobs outside the industry - and prejudices about the profession has applicants at a disadvantage.

However, many of these ex-librarians have been able to build on their library experience to develop new skills in the context of other workplaces. When asked if they'd come back to libraries, some said that they absolutely did not see themselves returning to the industry, whilst others seemed to be reluctant about dedicating themselves full-time to the profession, but that they would return, depending on the nature of the role, and whether it fitted in with what they wanted to be doing in their job. For many, librarianship was now more of a trade that they felt that they could fall-back onto, as a "Plan B" if their current career path didn't work out.

What you are vs. what you do.

One thought that has resonated through this process of analysing career paths is the idea that the professional status of a role is not as important as the duties that they entail. Yes, it is true that, to a point, a professional title will afford responsibilities and decision-making powers. However, having the status of a professional librarian role does not necessarily guarantee a fulfilling professional career, and perhaps what is more important than a job title is the duties that a job entails, whether that is actively engaging with people in the community, or working to preserve and share culture, or keeping workplaces informed with knowledge on professional practices, or helping organisations develop their communications processes to promote an awareness of social issues. These are the kinds of things that libraries do, but there are only a limited number of available roles within library and information services. At the same time, this kind of work isn't restricted to the library industry, and there are certainly roles out there that are primarily concerned with finding, organising and delivering information and knowledge to stakeholder.

This paper had initially been entitled "There and back again", as it intended to explore how expanding one's horizons, both geographically and professionally, could improve one's career prospects when returning to the fold. However, that hasn't necessarily proven itself to be true in many cases. What it has shown, however, is that looking beyond one's immediate career and workplace can open up a whole new world of experiences, to use one's professional skills in new and interesting ways.

Thinking back to Roxanne Missingham's advice, I would also suggest that new librarians ask themselves **why** exactly they want to be a librarian, and what work do they want to do that motivates them in their career. They should be open to the idea of this kind of work being possible outside of libraries, and use their transferable skills to explore new opportunities.

As one of the aforementioned ex-librarians said, "I'm not sure what is in the curriculum for current library students, but during my training, I felt that only the traditional roles in large libraries were valued... I didn't feel that there was any awareness of potential opportunities for work outside of traditional libraries - and yet, this is where I and some of my former co-students or colleagues have ended up."

Ultimately, librarianship is not an end in itself. It is a purely a means to a wide range of career options. Whichever road a library and information professional chooses, will be a continuation of those skills and principles learned in the industry, but the road goes ever on and on...