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Every-flavour career beans: sector changes and career development in libraries

Lizz Jennings

Introduction

Changing library sector can be a daunting process, but in a tougher economic climate, flexibility is essential for career development. In her 1978 paper, Slater describes a situation many of us will recognise in today's climate:

"...what the profession seems to be suffering from at the moment is immobility... because of the current economic and employment situation"

(Slater 1978)

During tougher times, stepping into an unfamiliar work environment can feel risky, but traditional career paths may not be available due to financial pressures on employers. This paper aims to illustrate the benefits and drawbacks of sector changes, with ideas for getting the most out of a varied set of experiences.

My own career began at (what was then) the Library Association, in a temporary post in the information services department. This proved to be an excellent place to start, as I quickly learned about the profession in its widest sense, through scanning the press for relevant stories and responding to all manner of library-related enquiries. This was followed by two years working in the specialist tax library at an accountancy firm. Following redundancy, I gained a post as an assistant library manager in a public library, and held two more equivalent posts in that library authority before relocating to another county and taking up a role divided between public and prison librarianship. This did not play to my strengths, and I refocused my career aims, gaining a post in a university library working with electronic resources, a role I still hold.

I chartered in 2008, following my achievement of my CILIP Certification (ACLIP) in 2005, and since 2009 have been studying for an MSc in Information Management by distance learning.

Standard Flavours

Library roles in all sectors will include core information skills, as represented in CILIP's Body of Professional Knowledge. When looking at a career which includes a range of roles, it is important to be able to identify which skills are aspects of the same core activities. Linking work activities with this framework can also make it easier to identify where skills applied in one type of environment might be transferable to another. This requires a good understanding not only of library work, but of your own strengths and interests. The reflection and self-awareness required to re-purpose skills becomes a

habit out of necessity, but it is a productive habit that brings benefits when undertaking professional qualifications, or when convincing potential employers of the relevance of your experience.

Experience gained in an environment with which a prospective employer or assessor is unfamiliar may not seem relevant to them, so it is important to consider how this is demonstrated, by giving examples, and explaining the impact it has on the end user. This is especially important if the skills you are demonstrating lie outside the traditional library skillset, but can be transferred or applied in different ways: just because you understand why they are important does not mean that everyone does.

Carrot? Actually...

One thing I always liked about Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans was that sometimes the least promising flavours were the best: carrot turned out to be my favourite by far. Sometimes when you look at a job description, there are some aspects which do not sound as appealing as others, but when you actually do the work, you find that it is the most rewarding part of the job - I had not expected to become quite so enthusiastic about usage statistics when I began in academic libraries! This is one area in which I feel sector changes can be particularly beneficial, as you very often pull experience from a number of different areas together to meet the requirements of a person specification for a job application, and learning how to adapt skills from one area to another can be a huge advantage in making the most of a new role.

Join the dots

While some skills may only be needed in a particular role, many others form a continuous thread through a sector-changing career.

For example, some level of serials management has been part of most of the roles I have held. However, this has taken a range of different forms, and when applying for my current role, the experience I had gained in special libraries related more closely to what was required, as did the computer aspects. However, in other areas, such as customer service and understanding of library management systems, public and prison library work had provided me with more relevant experience. This synthesis can open up opportunities that might not otherwise be available, as you do not necessarily need to gain all the required experience in one place.

The combination of skills gained in other sectors can prepare you not only to gain posts, but to develop them while you hold them, as your experience will often provide you with different insights, or alternative ways of working. It is crucial, though, to remember to learn from those with more sector-specific experience and ensure you are in dialogue, not monologue, with your colleagues.

**"Alas! Earwax!"
(Rowling 1997, p. 218)**

Changing sector can bring risks as well as benefits. While networking with colleagues through professional activism and visiting libraries in other sectors can give you a good feel for whether you might enjoy working there, they do not give the whole picture. The challenges of a particular sector are not always apparent, and the differences can be hard to identify.

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It is demoralising to find that a particular role does not suit you as you felt it should, but it is usually possible to extract positive benefits from negative experiences. It is easy to focus on the problems in a role, but through honest reflection, it is possible to identify your strengths and weaknesses more clearly. Knowing what does not work for you can be a huge advantage when considering future positions, e.g. if you know that timekeeping is not a strength, look for posts offering a flexitime scheme. Understanding your weaknesses can also help you play to your strengths. For example, one reason librarianship appealed to me as a career was because it had a strong element of computing. As this is a cross-sectoral aspect of librarianship, it was never a significant factor when considering my next career move, until I worked in a prison library, where the ability to use IT was very limited. This highlighted to me that the absence of computing as a key part of the job was a problem, and gave me the impetus to focus my future career on that part of the work.

Too many flavours?

Of course, the biggest advantage of sector changes is that you gain experience in a wider range of skills than others, but this can also be a disadvantage, as your curriculum vitae fills with a range of abilities, which may or may not be relevant to a given situation. It is not unusual to find myself rewriting my CV at length for particular job applications, and then rewriting it again for professional development activities. While this is often desirable, the increased choice can make this a very daunting task indeed. Additionally, it can sometimes be hard to demonstrate skills which are sector-specific, such as academic liaison, or community outreach work.

Grouping skills into broader categories can significantly improve this, especially as greater responsibility often supersedes earlier achievements. Publications such as CILIP Update can be very helpful in understanding whether your experience is equivalent to that being asked for in a potential role. Additionally, using a functional or achievement based format, as opposed to a chronological one, helps to unify your experience and reduce repetition.

Pick and mix

When considering what to include in a particular representation of your career, it is important to remember that ability to select just those parts which highlight the relevant details is a valuable attribute in itself. This can be achieved by paying careful and systematic attention to the requirements. It is also vital to get the balance right between showcasing your adaptability, and demonstrating a deeper understanding of librarianship.

Hall (1996) describes the career of the 21st century as "protean", with success being measured psychologically, in terms of job satisfaction. To pursue a protean career, one must learn about oneself, and the learning curve becomes a series of shorter, progressive curves, dipping where significant career changes occur, but rising higher as each career stage reaches its peak. In my career, this pattern was evident when I looked at the earning patterns in my career. It is common with sector changes to find roles advertised at lower salaries than your current post, as there is a learning curve, but the potential to earn higher salaries over time is also present, especially if progression beyond a certain point is limited, as is common in public sector environments.

A framework for reflection

CILIP's Framework of Qualifications offers library and information professionals an excellent opportunity to consolidate their experience, in whatever form, and to plan for the future in a structured way. The reflective and evaluative statements in the Chartership, Certification and Revalidation qualifications are an ideal chance to bring disparate career elements together, and observe more objectively how learning from each role has contributed to the current post. You, the information professional, become the centre of the process, and this enables you to consider the path you have taken, however scenic, to your current state. When applying for jobs, you apply this reflection speculatively, while the qualifications framework enables you to do this analytically. The need to be selective still applies though, and in this case, it is useful to consider the question, "How did that contribute to where I am now?" when deciding whether a particular item should be included or not.

A framework for development

As well as reflection, the Framework provides a flexible way of assessing your future needs using the personal professional development plan (PPDP). This document is absolutely vital if you follow a protean career path, as you need to be in charge of your learning and development needs. If your current role is not fulfilling these, and you feel that a change is in the foreseeable future, the PPDP gives you a practical framework to plan for the future. Because it can include self-study, it is flexible enough to include areas in which you are unlikely to get training from your current employer.

It also enables you to plan on different timescales, which helps in decision making when new opportunities arise for learning or employment. For this reason, it is worth treating it as a working document after qualification, even if you are not participating in the Revalidation scheme.

Conclusion

Sector changes, while a step into the unknown, can add colour to your CV and enable you to use your existing skills in new ways. They can make some aspects of career development harder, but can also open up avenues which may not be available to those following more traditional career paths. At the core of a protean, cross-sectoral career is a continual process of reflection and self-directed learning, and although this involves a good deal of motivation and work, the benefits in terms of job satisfaction are immense. These lifelong learning habits feed into the CILIP Framework of Qualifications, and the qualifications themselves provide a clear structure in which to make sense of a varied and non-traditional career and to plan for the future, whatever it may hold.

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Lizz Jennings
Information Librarian, University of Bath
E.Jennings@bath.ac.uk

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