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Career path: accident or design?

My first library job was an accident. I was looking for temporary work to fill the gap between school and university, and I was offered a post at Down County Library HQ in Northern Ireland. I spent most of my time in acquisitions, but I also moved around different sections and enjoyed occasional trips in the mobile library serving readers along the shores of the Ards peninsula. At that time, even though I viewed the experience positively, I had no plans to pursue a career in librarianship. I went to Cambridge with a completely open mind about my future.

Four years later, I found myself taking that decision. I was attracted by the fact that a librarianship qualification offered a wide range of job opportunities, but my initial choice to work in public libraries was made more on instinct than judgement. I found a job as a library assistant at Kenton Library in the London Borough of Harrow, and gained a thorough grounding in all the routines of a busy branch, as well as some insights into professional work provided by a helpful and inspiring manager. I then moved on to the Polytechnic of North London, but retained my link with Harrow by working as a Saturday assistant at Wealdstone Library and carrying out several course assignments at Kenton. I also extended my experience through a summer job at the Institute of Geological Sciences Library, and a short practical placement at Leicester Polytechnic.

I wanted to return to public libraries after my course, but my job-hunting coincided with local government cuts and there were few posts advertised. I found a professional post as Senior Assistant at LASER (the London and South Eastern Library Region) which gave me useful experience in bibliographical research and also supervising a team of six support staff. However, I missed the direct contact with books and readers, and so when the opportunity came to return to Harrow Libraries and take on more responsibility, I moved after only six months. I went back initially as an Assistant Cataloguer, but with the prospect of taking over as Chief Cataloguer within three months - a post probably beyond my reach if it had been properly graded at the time. My duties here also included stock editing of the reserve collection and occasional outings with the Housebound Readers Service, and significant management responsibility for a team of professional and support staff, liaison with computing staff as well as librarians at service points, and the formulation of cataloguing policy for the Borough.

After two and a half years I had implemented as many changes as resources permitted and drawn up a reclassification programme for the next few years, and there seemed no scope for further development locally. I applied for several jobs and eventually received an offer to join the British Library as Reader Services Librarian at the Library Association Library (now the BL Information Sciences Service). I was attracted by an advertisement for the post of Technical Services Librarian, which involved both cataloguing and acquisitions, and promised good career prospects and a high

professional profile. As it turned out, a second vacancy arose during recruitment which gave me considerably more scope to broaden my experience into areas such as publicity and public relations, as well as developing expertise in enquiry work and audiovisual librarianship. The job also brought with it opportunities for professional development through in-house and external training events, day-to-day contact with prominent members of the profession, attendance at meetings, conferences, etc.

I spent four years at the LA Library – longer than in any other post before or since. I began to think about moving on after three years, but was discouraged from doing so as several other staff changes were taking place there at the time, and I did not feel too frustrated as the job continued to offer variety, stimulation and new management challenges. I decided to concentrate on a career within the BL as it offered the possibility of gaining experience in diverse roles in different locations without changing employer. My next move (on level transfer) was to the Research and Development Department as Dissemination Project Officer, which gave me the chance to apply my professional knowledge and skills in an administrative environment. The primary focus was on promoting the results of research sponsored by the BL by organising seminars and writing material for publication. I was also responsible for managing programmes of research in user studies and in manpower, education and training, which included visiting grantees to discuss progress and thus involved travel around the UK.

My time in BLR&DD turned out to be much shorter than expected as less than twelve months later an exceptionally attractive and challenging post became available, and I moved (on promotion) to become Personal Assistant to the Chief Executive of the British Library. Again this was not a mainstream professional post, but effective performance required a good general knowledge of the library world, an extensive network of contacts and information-handling skills of a high order. My primary function was to support the Chief Executive, which involved dealing with correspondence, preparing briefings and drafting papers. I also had a wider role in policy and planning support, which included monitoring external trends and developments, co-ordinating corporate responses (on copyright and other matters) and acting as secretary to internal and external committees and working groups. As well as enabling me to develop a lot of useful skills, the job gave me an invaluable opportunity to gain insights into how the organisation worked, to acquire an understanding of strategic issues and to observe top management at close quarters.

After three years in CEO, I felt I was ready to take on more management responsibility and I was pleased to secure another promotion and the chance to return to an operational area, as Head of Information Services at the Science Reference and Information Service. This presented entirely different challenges, namely a large staff management responsibility (including two dozen in professional/management grades) and substantial revenue targets. I was responsible for a range of priced enquiry/research services covering science and technology, patents and business information, with the focus on the strategic management of the section and continuous evaluation of its activities. The fact that I had no subject knowledge of the areas concerned – my degree is in Classics – probably helped me here, as I was not tempted to get too involved in day-to-day service operations and was able to concentrate on policy, planning and human resource issues. The job also involved internal and external liaison, through planning services for the new BL building at St Pancras, co-operation with other libraries, joint ventures with commercial partners, and advising an outside body on the management of its library and information services on behalf of BL Consultancy Services.

My period at SRIS also turned out to be shorter than anticipated and led to a totally unexpected change of direction, although the change represented an obvious opportunity to build on all my previous experiences. After eighteen months there I felt flattered to be sounded out about my interest in the post of Director of Library and Information Services at Aston University. I had not specifically considered a move into the university sector, although I had certainly begun to think about an eventual move away from the BL (mainly because the prospects for advancement internally seemed

limited). When I looked into the Aston job, and particularly after I had visited the campus and talked to staff, I decided it was an ideal chance to assume a top management role and face the challenge of having total responsibility for delivering a service – to a much more clearly defined client group than I had served before. I was also attracted by the prospect of making a more general contribution to the management of the institution as a whole.

Job satisfaction, motivation and goals

My career has not been planned in the sense of mapping out where I wanted to be at any particular time, and I am conscious that when I entered the profession I had not articulated any goals other than in the broadest terms – a desire for self-fulfilment, a wish to achieve, and an aspiration to reach a high position. I had enjoyed achieving good results at school (both academically and on the sports field) and tended to set my own standards rather than letting others do so for me. I was undoubtedly influenced by my family background: both my parents were successful games players, who had competed at a high level; and my father (like his father) had reached the top of his profession. My two younger sisters and I grew up in an environment where ambition was assumed, competition was encouraged and success was expected. I felt that library work offered both intellectual and personal stimulation in a socially useful context, and I deliberately chose a course which kept my options open.

However, while I have simply take advantage of opportunities as they arose, I have also been quite careful to select jobs offering scope for initiative and innovation. In addition, it is also worth noting that I have sometimes been content to move 'sideways' rather than up. (In fact, I do not think there is any such thing as 'a sideways move', as any new job is an opportunity to learn and develop.). I find the prospect of change exciting – not a threat – and the chance to move around and have different experiences has been a constant stimulus. At the same time, by deliberately seeking different experiences I ensured that I acquired a broad range of skills (particularly early in my career) which meant that I felt I was equipped to apply for a wide choice of posts, and I am sure that this diversity of experience helped me as I moved into senior management. I guess I have also been assisted by an essentially optimistic outlook, an energetic approach and a restlessness which has resisted routine and acceptance of the status quo.

Moving through a succession of professional posts, I have been able to identify elements of my work from which I derived particular pleasure and fulfilment. Initially, I felt I had made a good career choice as I obtained a lot of instant satisfaction from helping other people to solve problems, especially answering enquiries or dealing with queries from readers. Later, I liked being in a position to make a difference, where I was able to have a significant impact on the system, and I tended to seek out jobs that offered the scope for substantial personal input with minimal supervision. Eventually, with a few examples of managing change behind me, I realised that my fulfilment was just as much dependent on the feeling of having achieved something with a team of colleagues, especially if I felt that I had personally helped an individual to develop in the process. (A parallel can be drawn here with my experience in sport, where I enjoyed extending my table tennis activities beyond individual performance and team membership to captaincy, committee involvement and coaching.)

Professional development, networking and mentoring

The concept of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is currently being vigorously promoted within our profession, notably through the launch of the new Library Association framework, which encourages individuals to take responsibility for their own development in partnership with employers. My personal experience confirms the value and importance of taking advantage of opportunities available – both on the job and through external events. The pace of change in the

environment in which we operate makes continuous updating of knowledge and skills essential simply to maintain standards, but the benefits extend beyond these immediate concerns as participation in a wide range of activities can stimulate thinking, suggest new directions and assist in clarifying goals, as well as adding to personal fulfilment.

In my early career in public libraries the formal training provision was minimal and the budget support for attendance at external events was severely limited. Nevertheless, during my pre-library school year I was fortunate in working with a branch librarian who took the trouble to arrange sessions for me at HQ, in the central library and at other branches. He also found projects for me to work on (for example, stock revision of the Classical literature) when I managed to complete routine tasks quickly; and he encouraged me to join The Library Association (and the AAL) and to take an interest in professional issues. When I returned to Harrow, amid continuing pressure on resources, I negotiated partial support for attendance at some events as an acceptable compromise in the circumstances. I also looked for alternative options, such as visits to other libraries in the London area, as a cheaper means of keeping in touch with current practice.

My move to the British Library represented a considerable cultural change, which was particularly evident in the formal procedures for staff reporting/appraisal and the relatively generous support for training and continuing education. The BL supported my return to PNL (on weekly half-day release) to take a module on non-book media, and during this period I was also able to take part in numerous courses on both professional/technical and management-related topics, including a two-week internal course for middle managers. Working at the LA Library provided me with unique opportunities for professional development as it was part of my job to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of the literature and to keep abreast of current concerns, so I was encouraged to participate in professional activities and to write for the professional press as a means of promoting the Library's resources and services. I also joined the committee of the Aslib Audiovisual Group at that time.

My work in BLR&DD also involved developing a network of professional contacts, and I joined the committee of the Library and Information Research Group at that time, later becoming its Publicity Officer. I retained my interest and involvement in LIRG's activities while in the Chief Executive's Office, and added the Circle of State Librarians and the Institute of Information Scientists (Southern Branch) to my committee memberships, eventually becoming their Vice-Chairman and Chair respectively. All these groups provided valuable opportunities for gathering information, exchanging experience and developing expertise. In addition, I attribute a large part of my professional fulfilment to the satisfaction derived from belonging to this wider community and enjoying frequent contacts with colleagues in other organisations, who have been a constant source of advice, inspiration and friendship over the years. In effect, I instinctively sought networking and mentoring relationships before these terms really entered our professional vocabulary; and realising the benefits to me in my career development, I have tried in turn to help others and to put something back into the profession.

I see my professional commitment as the common and enduring factor which has provided continuity and a sense of security as I moved from job to job across sectors. While I am an advocate of involvement in professional activities, I must distinguish here between genuine participation and superficial involvement for 'careerist' motives. My advice is to get involved only if you have a genuine interest, are prepared to contribute actively and willing to do so in your own time. (It is unrealistic to expect an employer to give more than partial support for such activities.). If anyone joins a committee simply to embellish a curriculum vitae, this rapidly becomes apparent to others, word gets around, and the effect is counterproductive.

Returning to more formal development activities, while in CEO I benefited from training in financial management and business planning, including a residential course on management

accounting at the Civil Service College. At SRIS, the focus shifted towards human resource management and involved workshops on improving attendance and performance, and courses on staff selection and interviewing. However, the most significant experience was probably the Roffey Park Management College self-managed learning programme, The Enterprising Manager: Making Things Happen at Work, which had three important outcomes: it helped me to rethink how I communicated with my immediate colleagues, including the conduct of our regular meetings; it brought into focus my long-term career goals (which almost certainly assisted me in my next career move) and it prompted me to apply for the College's new self-managed learning MBA programme – which I have since completed with support from my present employer.

Opportunities for women in librarianship

Personally, I have never felt at a disadvantage in any of the organisations in which I have worked. In every case, women have been under-represented at the top, but reasonably well represented in middle/senior management positions, and the balance now seems to be shifting towards a more equitable distribution. However, moving recently into the university sector has made me more aware of male domination of senior positions as the contrast is more marked here. I am conscious that other women have sometimes perceived sexism when I have not, perhaps because I am not particularly sensitive to supposedly sexist language (which only bothers me if I think the perpetrator is actually being discriminatory or patronising). My perception is that more women than men lack confidence in their own ability, are reluctant to put themselves forward and are afraid of taking risks – and that these factors have inhibited their progress.

The difficulties of juggling competing interests are often cited as another factor affecting women's progress. I know that at times I have struggled to find an acceptable balance in my life and to decide how to divide my time between work, family and friends, and other interests. There are no easy answers to these dilemmas but we must beware of using such issues as an excuse for not properly sorting out our personal priorities, taking responsibility for making hard decisions and being prepared to live with the consequences. I have certainly found it easier to resolve such difficulties as a result of putting some effort into defining my values and articulating my personal 'vision' and 'mission' – in other words, as individuals we need to give our own plans and goals the same sort of attention that we give to those of our organisations. Some argue that women have to cope with more competing interests than men, others see this as having a wider range of options; ultimately, this must be a matter of individual perception – and personal choice.