

# Establishing dialogues between new and experienced professionals

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## Introduction

Last year I had the opportunity to participate in a session at the SCOUNL Conference, about new professionals' views of the future of academic libraries<sup>1</sup>. The attendees were really keen to engage with us, but interestingly a lot of them held misperceptions about the knowledge and experience that we had. This insight was useful a few months later, when I was looking for my first professional post, as it pointed me towards the things I might need to concentrate on demonstrating in job applications. With the difficult economic climate, newly-qualified librarians and information professionals are having to fight for the jobs – that is, when the person specification for a job even gives them a chance without professional experience. Therefore, it is more important than ever for new professionals to be able to demonstrate that they can bring just as much to a position as a more experienced colleague could. This is one very significant reason why establishing dialogues between new and experienced professionals is important.

Over the past year or so, an amazing community of LIS new professionals has sprung up, on the LIS New Professionals Network (LISNPN) website<sup>2</sup>, and on Twitter. We share experiences, ideas and concerns, and offer encouragement to each other when things are going well and going badly. The CILIP Career Development Group has put a lot of effort into supporting new professionals over the past couple of years; there are New Professional Support Officers on the committee for most divisions, and they run an annual New Professionals Conference. The support network in place for new professionals is fantastic, and has won praise from both new and experienced professionals. However, we need to be careful not to become too insular; as with any network or community, we need to engage with other networks and communities too. Establishing dialogues with experienced LIS professionals is not just about getting a job – it's about engaging with the other people in our profession, in order to work together successfully at a time when the profession is facing difficult times.

I conducted a survey of experienced professionals, aimed at discovering their perceptions of new professionals. I distributed a questionnaire on Twitter and the LIS-LINK mailing list, inviting any LIS professional who did not consider themselves to be “new” to participate. I received 35 responses. While my survey is by no means scientific, and the results cannot be taken to represent the perceptions of experienced LIS professionals as a whole, I believe that many of the responses that I received demonstrate why we should be establishing dialogues. The following results are a summary, with particular comments highlighted. The full results are available on my blog<sup>3</sup>.

## **Experienced professionals' perceptions of new professionals**

Twenty six of the 35 respondents said that they worked with new professionals.

### **How do you perceive their attitude towards their work?**

Fifteen had only positive comments to make: they found the new professionals with whom they worked to be enthusiastic, "keen", "dedicated", "knowledgeable", "professional", "hard-working", "self-motivated", "engaged", "innovative", "willing to learn", "willing to volunteer for tasks and take on new challenges", and said that they demonstrated a "positive" attitude and had a "broad range of interests".

The other 11 respondents who answered this question gave a mixed response, the negative aspects of which mainly covered issues to do with knowledge and skills rather than attitude, although one respondent suggested that new professionals could be "naïve".

### **How do you perceive their knowledge/ability?**

Twenty five of the 26 respondents who worked with new professionals answered this question. Seven had only positive remarks to make, commenting that knowledge and ability was "good" or "excellent". Two highlighted new technologies and social media as being particular areas of expertise. One respondent felt that the new professionals with whom they worked were "knowledgeable". Another highlighted skills such as "resource discovery, cataloguing, classification and systems management" as being good.

The other 19 respondents gave mixed responses. Six felt that new professionals lacked practical skills, although 2 of these respondents felt that this was to be expected when someone is new to any profession. Five respondents felt that new technologies, digital information and social media were strong areas of knowledge and ability. Areas in which new professionals' knowledge and ability were considered to be weak were cataloguing and classification and subject knowledge. One respondents highlighted time management and the ability to prioritise as a "learning need".

Seven respondents felt that ability and knowledge varied depending on the person. Four respondents felt that, where they lacked skills or knowledge, the new professionals with whom they worked were "willing to learn". Three respondents commented that, while library school provides a "basic introduction", it leaves major gaps in new professionals' knowledge and skills (although they do not pinpoint what).

### **If you do not currently work with any new professionals, do you have any comments on LIS new professionals, based on other experience?**

Eight of the 9 respondents who said that they did not currently work with new professionals gave comments on their perceptions based on previous or other experience. Most gave answers similar to those given to the earlier questions.

Two respondents specifically stated that their experience and perceptions of new professionals come from blogs and Twitter. One felt that, although the new professional blogs that they had read were “insightful” and “interesting”, they could sometimes be “frustrating in their stating the obvious, introspective, cliquy”. This respondent was unsure whether they should be defined as a new or experienced professional, but did not “especially identify with the current clique of new prof bloggers”.

### **Have you ever recruited a new professional to a professional role?**

Nineteen respondents had recruited a new professional to a professional role. Six simply said that the new professional was the best candidate on the day.

Four highlighted previous non-professional library experience as a factor. Two indicated that a “willingness to learn” played a part, while three commented on enthusiasm and/or a positive attitude. Other answers included an expectation that they would be “supportive of new technologies”, that they demonstrated an ability to problem-solve, management/leadership potential, or good IT skills, that they had good customer service skills, or that they demonstrated a “committed” approach to the profession.

### **If you have never selected a new professional for a professional role, is there any reason why not?**

All 5 of the respondents who said that they had never recruited a new professional to a professional role replied to this question, as well as 1 respondent who had experience of recruiting and rejecting new professionals.

Of the 5 who had never recruited a new professional, 2 said that this was because none had applied for the job. Two others said that they were looking for someone with a “significant” amount of experience. One said that as there are so few positions available in the current job market, they could “afford to be picky” for professional roles.

The respondent who had both recruited and rejected new professionals for professional roles commented that the rejections often occurred when “the applicants stress what our institution can do for their career, rather than what they can do for the institution”.

### **What would you be looking for when interviewing a new professional for a professional role?**

Twenty four respondents answered this question. Willingness to learn (8 respondents) and enthusiasm (6 respondents) were the most often-cited qualities. Four respondents said that they would be looking for experience, and that this would not have to be professional experience. Other responses included flexibility, IT skills, communication skills, adaptability, self-motivation, customer service skills, common sense, professional commitment, an understanding of what is required from the role, an understanding of and interest in the wider profession, the ability to think in an original way, the ability and willingness to work hard,

leadership/management potential, good presentation skills, subject knowledge, ability to work in a team and ability to reflect.

One respondent expected competency in “librarianship basics”, citing “cat/class, knowledge management, enquiry technique” as examples. None of the respondents who answered this question specifically cited professional experience as something that they would be looking for. One respondent explained that they felt that new professionals can use examples from non-professional experience to meet criteria for professional skills: “successful applicants tend to use the experience they have through work or study to display they meet the criteria specified. Skills such as project management and staff supervision (often required for professional roles) can be demonstrated by new professionals if they analyse their own experiences.” Similarly, another respondent said that if a candidate had no professional experience, they would be looking for “how well they demonstrate transferable skills”.

Two respondents explained that they would be looking for the same skills and competencies that they would be from any candidate for a professional role.

### **Do you have any other comments to make about your perceptions of LIS new professionals?**

Sixteen respondents responded to this question. Seven of them echoed earlier perceptions of new professionals being enthusiastic, positive, hard-working and adaptable. Three referred to the difficult economic climate and how it is “depressing” that this potentially driving new professionals away. Two respondents were unsure about the term “new professional”; one didn’t know when someone stopped being “new” and became “old”, and the other found the term “a bit exclusive”: “I am not that long in the tooth and find myself already classed as too much of an old lag. I generally think the new pros should just get involved with the old pros.” Similarly, another respondent thought that having such a strong support network for new professionals in place was a good thing, but that “it is a slight worry that that it is creating a clique”.

### **What can we learn from the survey results?**

Many of the responses were encouraging. The experienced professionals who responded held many positive perceptions of new professionals. Enthusiasm, a willingness to learn, and a commitment to the profession and to continuing professional development were phrases that appeared throughout, and I was pleased to see that these qualities are coming across; qualities that, in my experience, most new professionals have in abundance, and qualities that are really important in giving new professionals that edge that they need when going up against more experienced candidates in job applications.

However, some negative perceptions which could potentially create barriers between new and experienced professionals came out of the survey questions. As I said earlier, I do not claim that this small-scale survey is something from which we can draw firm conclusions, and there are conflicting opinions within the results. However, the respondents were people who could potentially be our employers now or in the future, so I believe that we should be addressing some of their perceptions. Moreover, regardless of whether these particular perceptions are representative of the

views of experienced LIS professionals as a whole, they are examples of the sort of problems, opinions and barriers that we could discover through establishing dialogues.

Something which was mentioned by quite a few of the respondents was practical skills, which they felt new professionals lacked. Some respondents suggested that library school does not adequately prepare new professionals for the workplace. What can we do about this? Obviously library school cannot teach us everything – how can we cover specialist knowledge for all of the different (and growing) sectors in one fairly short degree? This issue is an example of how establishing a dialogue between new and experienced professionals would be beneficial: new professionals can show that they are willing and able to learn quickly (“willing to learn” being a perception that occurred throughout the questionnaire) while discovering what it is that employers are looking for. While we will not all have practical experience of many things, we can at least demonstrate a commitment to learn. For example, one respondent said they would be looking for what they called “librarianship basics”, citing “cat/class, knowledge management, enquiry technique” as examples. These are things of which it can be difficult to gain experience when not working in a professional role. So we can read up on them, and think about ways in which the theory can be put into practice in a workplace situation, so, even if we don’t have the experience, we do at least have some knowledge, can express some ideas around the practical elements (in lieu of actual practical experience), and can demonstrate an understanding of our learning needs and a commitment to fulfilling them. If you’re working, you can have some idea of the things you could request to shadow as part of your professional development. And those of you who are studying could push your course leaders to cover these skills, perhaps doing some practical work with you; you then have some practical experience even if you’ve not got workplace experience.

Another perception I’d like to address is one regarding the online LIS new professional community. A couple of respondents expressed concern about new professionals and “exclusivity”, with one picking out the network created through LISNPN and blogging as creating a “clique” with which they felt unable to identify, although they felt that they perhaps still fell into the category of new professional. Although it was only one person who said this, it concerns me, and this is another reason why I think we need to forge links and start conversations with experienced professionals. When LISNPN began, Laura Woods wrote about the importance of a network for new professionals, in which she referred to concerns raised on Twitter about a network for a specific set of LIS professionals such as LISNPN<sup>4</sup>, so such concerns are nothing new. Laura argued that networks such as LISNPN are not intended to be a “replacement” for “mainstream networking groups” but that they are important in meeting the specific interests and needs of specific sets of people<sup>5</sup>. I would make the same argument, but I also feel that we need to be careful not to alienate other people and communities within our profession; this respondent’s use of the word “clique” makes me uneasy. This is one example of where we need to establish dialogues with experienced professionals not for the purpose of getting a job, but for working together successfully.

I was really pleased that several of the respondents addressed the “post qualification professional experience” issue, saying that they did not

necessarily require this kind of experience, and instead would be looking for the new professional to demonstrate that they meet the person specification for a job through other experience gained from work or study. I find it really encouraging to discover that some of the potential recruiters who completed my questionnaire are open-minded and willing to give new professionals a chance, providing they are able to demonstrate the required skills from some kind of previous experience. This demonstrates the importance of establishing dialogues with experienced professionals when it comes to job-seeking; we understand what we need to do.

## How can we establish dialogues?

There are things that we can all do to build links and start conversations which will be beneficial for everyone.

Online communities and networks appear to me to be the spaces where we can most easily and effectively get dialogues started. Twitter is a very obvious place, as both new and experienced professionals use it to share and discuss ideas and to network. Get involved in discussions; although it can be daunting to contribute to a discussion where the other participants are more experienced, or where the topic is something around high-level strategic issues or similar, your contribution will be valued, as will any questions that you ask. You don't have to state that you are a new professional; you can contribute as a LIS professional in general. The same goes for reading and commenting on blogposts.

LinkedIn is another online resource which can facilitate dialogues. I am not yet hugely familiar with LinkedIn. However, from what I have seen so far, it appears to be a space where a lot of discussions take place, between different types of LIS professional at different stages of their careers, often on topics around recruitment and professional skills. Thus, it seems to me to be an ideal place in which new professionals who want to know what they need to do to get that first professional post, or to discuss what new professionals can offer, can start a conversation with experienced professionals.

There is, of course, also the LIS New Professionals Network (LISNPN). There are already a number of experienced professionals registered and participating in discussions, as well as contributing their knowledge in articles and guides in the Resources section of the site. This is something which I would like to encourage, as, as valuable as it is to have that space where new professionals can share ideas, concerns and experience, it's also useful to have a different perspective on things. Equally, LISNPN socials are open to anyone with an interest in LISNPN, or in networking with new professionals. I encourage other LISNPN members to invite their experience colleagues to join, as I believe it is another ideal online space in which to establish a valuable dialogue.

I'd like to appeal to those who are not so involved in the online LIS professional community (or not involved at all). I appreciate that LISNPN, Twitter and blogging can all appear daunting, but I have found engaging with the online community to be highly beneficial in making contacts, finding out about opportunities, picking up new ideas, and even just making new friends in the same profession, so I would like to encourage other new professionals to join in. I suggest you start with LISNPN, posting on the "introduce yourself" thread. Read other introductions, many of which include

members' Twitter names; your next step is to join Twitter and start "following" other librarians. One you "follow" a few you discover many more, and your network begins to grow.

It's not just online that you can start dialogues. You can talk to your experienced colleagues at work face-to-face. Your conversations don't have to be about topics like professional skills - talk about what's going on in the library, ask them about what they're working on, show an interest, offer your thoughts, ask questions – anything to demonstrate your interest in the overall workings of the library or organisation, to try to ensure that there are no barriers such as misperceptions. Or chat about anything, in the staffroom at tea break! This applies online as well. Networking is not always about talking about professional issues; talking about things like football, television or hobbies in order to make friends rather than just professional contacts is a valuable way to network too.

There are of course opportunities for face-to-face networking at conferences and training events. Look at going to those with a wider attendance base than new professionals, and devote some time to sharing ideas and getting to know experienced professionals.

Another idea is to get involved in committee work. One of the things that I enjoy about committee work is meeting the other committee members, who are from different LIS sectors and at different stages of their career. Getting involved is a great way to get to know experienced professionals and to work closely with them. Don't presume that you'll need to take on a new professional specific role – on my current committee there are new professionals holding other roles. Additionally, look around at the different committees that you could join – don't presume it has to be the Career Development Group, just because that's something that's important to you as a new professional – join a committee or a group that's involved in another aspect of supporting the LIS profession. As I've said already, you don't always have to focus on the fact that you're a new professional; sometimes it's better to just be a LIS professional in general!

I hope that I have demonstrated why it is important to establish a dialogue between new and experienced professionals, and offered some ideas about how to go about this. I'm sure that there are many other ways to build links and start conversations. I encourage you to go out and get a dialogue started, in any way that you can think of. Breaking down barriers and starting conversations between different members of the LIS community can only be beneficial for all of us, and, as we new professionals are the future of the profession, I believe it is up to us to lead on establishing dialogues with experienced professionals; in the words of one of my survey respondents, "the new pros should just get involved with the old pros".

## References

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