

Think Big: Investing in your professional and career development

David Clover

In the current financial and political environment opportunities to further library and information careers by changing jobs are limited, and workplace training and development budgets may be restricted. In such an environment it may be tempting to think small in terms of personal and professional development, especially for mid-career professionals, who may feel already equipped for the day-to-day needs of their current roles. Despite these temptations this article will encourage thinking big in terms of professional development. The article outlines an approach to thinking big about professional and career goals, and to identifying powerful goals and working towards them, reflecting on the experiences of taking part in the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education's Future Leaders Programme for Library and IT professionals from 2009-2010, and the receipt of the CILIP/ESU Travelling Librarian Award and following 2010 study tour to the United States.

A planned approach

There is a risk that professional development is a reactive process, one that relies on courses or conferences being offered, and one that is piecemeal in nature, rather than working towards clear personal or professional goals. An alternative approach is to reflect on where you are now, and where you want to be in the future, and to set yourself powerful goals that will help you achieve this vision. It is true that there is always a large element of opportunism in career development - the right person at the right time finding the right job. But, although unpredictable elements exist, planning and personal initiatives can play a major part in creating opportunities for development and advancement. You should try to shape your career rather than simply react to events.

Know yourself

It is useful to first know yourself. Take time to reflect on and understand what interests and motivates you, what skills and knowledge do you want to develop, and what is important to you, as well as what work-related values matter most to you. Think about what you like about your current role, but also ask yourself how much you want to be doing those things in five, ten or twenty years time.

Thinking about skills, knowledge and experience gained through your current job, and also in other academic study, professional roles, voluntary work and your personal life. Remember that skills can be transferred from one context to another. It's not enough just to say you have skills, as you seek career change you will need to ask whether you can provide evidence of your skills.

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Scan the environment

Medium and long term career planning requires you to not only consider what you want from your future career and what kinds of work interest you, but also to think more generally about the environment in which you work. It is worth taking an overview of what is happening in your workplace, the sector, and in society generally, and how these trends and developments may impact on your goals. Useful tools include PESTLE analysis, which considers:

- Political changes
- Economic changes
- Social and demographic changes
- Technological changes
- Legal or regulatory changes and
- Environmental change

And can be done in a few hours and help identify changes that may be threats or opportunities for your future career plans. Think about how much change has happened already in your career, and the impact of this on people's roles and jobs. Reference librarians no longer (in most sectors) carry out mediated searches for users on expensive pay per minute and item databases. With trends such as shelf-ready books, and the growth of e-books, areas such as cataloguing will certainly continue to change, likely to lead to more specialised and fewer jobs.

Setting powerful goals

Powerful goals go beyond a list of new skills and knowledge you want to develop. Powerful goals need to be about where you want to be in the future, be ambitious, and inspire you to go beyond the ordinary. Powerful goals should be both a little scary, and definitely exciting. Be clear about what areas you want to develop, and what you want to be doing in your job, whether for example moving on into management, developing further specialist knowledge, increasing teaching or training roles, or moving onto other specialisms.

Goal 1: Exploring and building on my leadership potential

Managing a small library moving towards converging with a larger organisation I knew that my role would change. This provided a useful opportunity to think about what I enjoyed about the job I was doing and where I wanted to be heading next.

I'd worked as a service manager in libraries in higher education for a number of years, and over that time watching, thinking about, and trying to engage with changes in our external environment, was keen to start to take a broader role in meeting these changes in a strategic and institutional context. Recent responsibilities had made me think more about where I want my career to be heading, my potential for leadership, and the contribution I could make. I decided I enjoyed the management aspects of my role, and that my personal goal was to expand on this and move into more of a strategic role.

In order to help achieve this goal I applied for the Future Leaders Programme.

The Future Leaders Programme is a leadership training programme developed by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, in collaboration with SCONUL, UCISA, The British Library and JISC. The programme takes place over a year, with three residential modules and action learning sets in between, and has been developed specifically to help experienced professional services staff - typically covering library, ICT, student services, and related services - to develop a more strategic approach in preparation for a greater leadership contribution. Key parts of the programme include an emphasis on self-awareness and reflection as well as on tools and knowledge, and working with a highly supportive network of colleagues.

I had initial support from my Senior Management Team for my application and for the project I outlined that I planned to work on as part of the programme. Funding came from both library and the university staff development budgets. I also invested some of my own money towards costs and certainly invested a great deal of my own time. When I embarked on this programme I described my goals as: "to help me to develop a better understanding of my leadership potential, my strengths and weaknesses and the knowledge of how to further develop my skills. I hope it helps me gain longer term and more strategic perspectives on information services and the higher education sector. I am looking for stimulation, insight, support, expansion and shared experience, and prepared for periods of discomfort, to be challenged and of the need for reflection. I expect the programme to assist in clarifying my own goals and in attaining better self-awareness if myself as a manager and potential leader. I am keen to work with a group of colleagues from a variety of organisations and roles, to learn collectively. The programme will be the start of an ongoing process of development, which I hope leads on to taking on and succeeding in further challenges and new roles in my work in the sector, managing the strategic development and delivery of effective information services and transforming these services to meet the new and ongoing needs of our users."

On reflection all those expectations were met, and perhaps if I am honest exceeded some of my initial expectations. The programme was not a magic wand for getting into senior management, but certainly provided an opportunity to reflect on how important or relevant that goal was, as well as opportunities to gain skills, experience and insight to prepare for such a role. It was not without challenges, and due to organisational changes in my workplace it was difficult to progress my project in the way in which I wanted. It was also a difficult year in my personal life, and this impacted on the degree I felt contributed and felt a part of the project at times. For example, I was not able to be present at the first Action Set, despite organising and hosting it. I was pleased things came back on track and by the end of the programme I was able to say that I had learnt a lot about myself, through tools, but also individual and group feedback and through taking part in activities. One of my key learning points was the realisation that I took on leadership and responsibility within the group on a number of occasions, and it was interesting and useful to be called a 'natural' even though at times I was filled with self-doubt. I also discovered a hidden talent for story-telling.

From this programme our action learning set continues to meet once a year and the leadership challenge or goal I set myself is an ongoing one, and an important one to revisit from time to time as new challenges arise.

Action planning

Once you know where you want to be, work out how you can get there. Think about the different options and opportunities that could lead you towards your goals. From these options draw up an action plan, you won't need to follow it letter for letter, but there is much value in having a written record to review and reflect on. Make decisions about the steps you will take, and think about contingencies, if your preferred options can't be acted on. Check your plan for realism.

Think about what has put you off acting on your goals before? What ideas or plans have you put down, abandoned or neglected and why? What barriers have you or are you putting up to acting on your goals?

Take action

One important step that is helpful in being successful in your plans is to share your goals with people who matter. Think about who supports you, who influences you, and who you are accountable to. The people who matter may include partners, family and friends, trusted colleagues, a mentor, your boss.

Be prepared to take risks. Thinking big means being prepared to not always get the opportunities you seek and being prepared to fail and learn and try again.

Goal 2: Gaining international perspectives on my work

As I came towards the end of the Future Leaders Programme, another goal emerged. As a subject librarian in a research library I had managed to develop a certain level of expertise, knowledge and reputation, amongst librarians and academics in my field. I wanted to further develop this and was conscious that my experience was largely limited to the UK.

Each year, the English-Speaking Union (ESU) and CILIP invite applications for the Travelling Librarian Award, from UK library and information professionals. The Travelling Librarian Award is intended to encourage US/UK contacts in the library world and the establishment of permanent links through a professional development study tour. The Award provides funds that substantially cover travel and accommodation costs for this trip. I had been aware of the English Speaking Union/CILIP Travelling Librarian Award for a number of years. I had always thought it would be great to be able to do such a thing, but had done nothing more than think about it. Early in 2010, thinking more about my desire to gain increased international perspectives on my work, I spoke with a previous Award holder and submitted an application. I was fortunate enough to be interviewed and disappointed to receive a call saying that while I had made a good impression on the panel I had not been successful. A few days later I received another call, asking if I'd be interested in a smaller award (£2000 rather than the standard £3000) for my proposed trip. Naturally I agreed! My purposes in applying for the Award were that I wanted to get some new perspectives, to think out of the geographic box, especially in terms of issues around subject librarians, support for research and collection management, including collaborative collection management. In my application I said that the ESU/CILIP Travelling Librarian Award will provide an excellent opportunity to:

- Expand my knowledge of major collections relating to Caribbean Studies in the United States,
- Make personal contact with United States librarians and archivists with Caribbean Studies responsibilities, and
- Develop strategies for collaborative projects with United States libraries, including scoping digital projects, building on previous contacts with some institutions

As I planned my trip I added a further objective, being to learn about current projects relating to Caribbean collections, in particular relating to collaboration and digitisation. During the trip I took the opportunity was taken to discuss other areas of interest, including models of reference service, staff roles for subject specialists, web based subject guides, and fundraising initiatives.

I contacted libraries, checked flights, and confirmed arrangements (all very time consuming activities) and then in October 2010 undertook a seventeen day series of visits to university and research libraries in the United States with significant collections and services relevant to Caribbean Studies. Visits took place at Florida International University; the University of Miami; the University of Florida; the University of North Carolina; Duke University; University of Illinois-Chicago; University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign; New York University; Columbia University; and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

It was a busy itinerary, and by the end of it I was very pleased to return home. And it was an extremely valuable experience. One of the most valuable aspects of this scheme was that it is not tied to specific projects or outcomes and travelling with this open mind to new insights and experiences was highly appreciated. The Award was a valuable opportunity to learn more about US academic and research libraries generally as well as provision for Caribbean Studies, and provided a wealth of information, ideas and inspiration, as well as helping to establish a useful network for ongoing contact and potential collaboration. The visits provided opportunity for important learning about digitisation, collaboration (collections and services), web support, role of subject librarian, reference services - and fed into the development of services in my workplace as well as my own knowledge base and confidence.

Applications for the ESU/CILIP Travelling Librarian Award are certainly competitive, and feedback from the panel is that every year there are applications of a very high standard. This is certainly not a reason to put off applying though, and I was pleased this year when one applicant I had given advice and feedback was also initially unsuccessful but then had a shortened version of his proposed trip paid for by his employer.

Review and reflect

Professional development is an ongoing and evolving process. Regular review and reflection are key to getting the most from the opportunities you experience as well as essential for thinking about what next. Every few months take some time out to reflect on what you have achieved towards your goals. Decide on an annual review period that suits you and the place you work to consider what steps are needed next - this may coincide with formal appraisal timetables, or yearly workflows, for example over summer may be a good time for those working in academic libraries. Preparation for

revalidation provided the impetus to submit this paper (as did goal 3 - to increase my professional profile within the library and information world), and also distracted me from the revalidation process, but only temporarily. Writing this paper has been a useful opportunity to reflect on these recent activities, and start thinking about the next goals, as well as ways of helping achieve them.

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Forthcoming Events

Librarians' Christian Fellowship Annual Conference Librarians and disciples in a time of trouble

Date: 28th April 2012
Time: 10:30am - 4:45pm
Venue: Chancellor's Room, Hughes Parry Hall, 19-26 Cartwright Gardens, London WC1
Cost: £25 (£20 unwaged)

Librarians and Disciples in a Time of Trouble is the title of the annual conference of the Librarians' Christian Fellowship which is to be held on Saturday 28 April 2012 in the Chancellor's Room, Hughes Parry Hall, 19-26 Cartwright Gardens, London, WC1, from 10.30. a.m - 4.45.p.m.

The Conference fee is £25.00, including lunch and refreshments, with a reduced rate of £20.00 for unwaged delegates. Non-members are welcome. Further details are available from The Secretary, Graham Hedges, 34 Thurlstone Avenue, Ilford, Essex, IG3 9DU. Tel: 020 8599 1310. E mail: secretary@librarianscf.org.uk

For more details, visit the web site:
<http://www.librarianscf.org.uk/events/conferences/forthcoming.html>