

Compromise versus integrity: practical tips on how to be a career chameleon

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Introduction

Competition amongst peers for vacancies within all sectors of the Library profession has always been strong, and that has become even more evident over the past few years with increasing political and economic pressures. Even within individual organisations competition for posts is immense and the desire for job security sometimes means making compromises and being flexible in approaching career opportunities.

Within the context of academic libraries this paper aims to share the experiences of two professional librarians both of whom have consistently, over several years, taken on a wide variety of new challenges and roles with the aim of developing and maintaining a high profile within their institutions. This paper will describe how building effective relationships, meeting challenges and coping with and preparing for change can have a positive impact on career development.

Both Katie and Kirsty work at the University of York and are seconded to their current posts as Executive Officer (Refurbishment Project) and Academic Liaison Assistant from Library Assistant posts working in Serials and Cataloguing respectively. Whilst Katie always knew her career would be in the Library sector, for Kirsty this decision came later.

Between them they have 14 years' library experience as a Graduate Trainee, various library assistant roles, professional secondments; plus five degrees between them, including library qualifications. However, there are plenty of well-qualified and well-experienced new librarians out there and they have found that the main challenge is upholding a balance between enhancing career prospects and job security whilst ensuring their professional focus is maintained.

From these experiences they share their strategy and present suggestions on how to develop and sustain skills, knowledge and experience to suit the fast changing landscape of professional Librarianship within the context of academic libraries.

Qualifications vs. Experience

Having read through recent papers, such as those from the most recent New Professionals Conference, it appears that one of the current topics is defining professionalism:

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"The generic skills which are taught at library school are fine in theory but how do you prove that you can put them into practice? In order to do any type of job, you have to have the self-belief that you are capable of carrying out the duties" (1)

What we have taken from this is it doesn't matter how you came into the Library sector, it's what you do when you get here that counts!

On top of doing our day to day jobs, at the start of our career we were also willing to get our hands dirty (quite literally sometimes), do the boring jobs, the jobs no one else wants to do. This enthusiasm, as well as demonstrating a commitment to our own development by seeking out courses, speaking at or attending conferences and Chartering, have all been small steps in gaining and maintaining a high profile.

The practical tips below are based on our own experiences and what we personally have thought were the most instrumental factors in increasing our career potential. We hope that they will be interesting and useful to others.

1. Have clearly defined goals and know your limits

Be open minded and flexible

Early in our careers, when we weren't aware of what area of the large umbrella that is 'The Library Sector' we wanted to work in, we found being as open minded and flexible as possible and applying for a variety of vacancies was advantageous. Not only did it help keep the CV polished and up to date, but also made the chances of actually securing a job more likely.

Experience can help define goals

As we became more experienced in where our strengths lay, what we enjoyed doing and what we'd rather avoid, our goals became more defined. Flexibility is still important, particularly in challenging times, but being aware of the parameters of your flexibility is equally as important. For example, the following factors may affect a decision about whether or not to apply for promotion/other positions: the sector you would prefer to work in, the type of role, whether it is full or part time, temporary or permanent. You are likely to be more specific about such criteria the more experience you acquire.

Kirsty admits that she has made compromises in order to try and reach her goals. Leaving permanent jobs for temporary jobs, full time posts for part time and taking secondment opportunities knowing that these are time sensitive, for instance. These risks are ones that she calculated were worth taking in order to work in her chosen area: Subject Librarianship. She has, however, avoided compromising in other situations: where a job was in a different library sector, but was better paid and permanent, she made the decision not to attend the interview as it would take her away from working in University libraries.

Be flexible enough to work in many and varied teams in various institutions and in varying circumstances, but don't be afraid to stick to your guns once you know what you enjoy doing and where you want to be.

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2. Use challenging situations to your advantage

The role of Executive Officer for a Library refurbishment has been a permanently challenging situation. Working together with the contractors whilst maintaining a fully functional Library service when the Library is effectively a building site is a day to day challenge that Katie has to meet.

Don't view challenges as negative but as opportunities

Challenges are opportunities to display your skills and demonstrate your ability to learn and develop. Skills such as decision making, delegation, and good communication are often the ones that Katie believes can be developed from any challenge.

Challenges such as covering vacant positions can be turned into positive experiences. As part of her role with the Hull York Medical School, Kirsty has been able to gain more experience by covering a vacancy at the University of Hull, teaching information skills sessions there and making new contacts.

Successfully coming through these situations can also increase confidence in facing future challenges.

Saying no can be positive

It is also important to know how much pressure you can take and learn when to say no. Maintain your integrity. You will gain more respect from admitting to a heavy workload or to feeling under pressure, and politely saying no to any extra work that people may want to pass on. Don't merely agree to everything. In these situations, it is better to do a great job of the work that you already have rather than a mediocre job of everything.

3. Be able to manage and cope with change

A large part of any role today is being able to confidently deal with change. This is not just work-based change, but also being able to recognise and manage change in your own development.

Work-based change is always going to occur, especially in a technology-heavy sector such as ours. Being able to have the confidence to keep up with these changes, and work towards change, no matter how large or small, proactively instead of reactively, is an important skill to develop.

Effective communication is key

Implementing change and communicating it effectively and successfully to others is an important factor in how other people manage and cope with change. Having a full understanding of the changes and what effect or perceived effect they may have on others is crucial.

In addition, it is important to be able to communicate the change in a way that people will be able to comprehend it. The way that change is communicated can differ depending on the means of communication, for

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example via twitter, blogs, in meetings or in more formal documentation. It will also differ on your intended audience.

Managing change is a large subject area. Lyndon Pugh's "Change Management in Information Services" (2) is one of the many books out there that can help give direction. There are also numerous courses which can give practical as well as theoretical guidance.

4. Keep developing

As much as this article may play down the importance of qualifications versus soft skills, having a Library qualification can give you an edge over other candidates, and in some sectors this is also an essential requirement.

Chartering, as well as being a professional qualification, is also a useful means of reflective practice. In addition it is an important way to show that you are committed to your development.

Take the plunge!

Attend a conference such as the ones held by the CDG or other specialist areas, or write a paper or present at one. This has many advantages: it allows you to demonstrate an interest in wider fields and your professional development, and provides networking opportunities, for example. Deciding to write or present a paper is a challenging situation that you can learn from.

Work experience

Kirsty benefitted from taking part in an internal work shadowing scheme - work experience isn't just for 16 year olds! This allowed her to gain direct experience of working in a subject librarian post at a time when her experience was limited. Being involved in schemes like this, or volunteering for projects outside your usual remit, has advantages for everyone: you are doing extra work for free, gaining extra experience, and again demonstrating your skills to those who matter.

Developing personally as well as professionally

Acknowledge any weaknesses and embrace them as opportunities for development. Make use of courses and events held nationally and locally, and courses run by your workplace. York, for example has a Professional and Organisational Development (POD) department within the university that offers free courses from all subjects ranging from IT, leadership and management to personal and career planning.

Looking at recent vacancies, even if not actively looking for a new position, is a great way to see what skills and experience are needed to work in a particular area and this can help identify any skills you may need to develop or experience that you may need to gain.

If financial constraints prevent you from attending courses and events, investigate what responsibility your workplace has for staff development and make the most of performance reviews, organise meetings with line managers/team leaders.

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5. Build effective relationships

Effective relationships at work don't just make the day to day work life easier. Establishing a peer-to-peer network can be vital in helping career development. Use these to identify job vacancies for each other, give advice on applications, practice interview techniques, share information about useful courses, or even just as informal way to let off a bit of steam.

Get involved

If you don't have this join a CILIP network or get involved in a group in your wider library community. Social networks and online communities, such as the Library Routes Project (3) and LIS New Professionals Network (4) enable you to exchange experiences of developing a career in libraries.

Build networks wherever possible

Take the opportunity to build networks wherever possible and as soon as possible; you never know where they will lead. Someone you meet at a conference or happen to talk to at work may just remember you when opportunities arise.

Don't be afraid to network internally with those outside your direct team, or with senior members of your workplace. A good start is to simply say hello in the corridor; which might develop into longer conversations in the tea room or staff room at lunch. This can become a semi-informal way of making your intentions known and can develop a way to discuss your goals with the people who may be able to help or point you in the right direction.

6. Be proactive and dynamic

This is essentially taking one or more of the above tips and putting them into practice.

Being proactive is an essential attitude both in your day-to-day job and also with regards to your career. Think about the future: Where are you going? How are you preparing? Does the future look bright or are there potential issues ahead?

Have a plan

It doesn't need to be a full '5 or 10 year plan', but have some sort of direction, or idea about where you want your career to take you and how you think you are going to get there. This may be more difficult at the beginning of a career, but recognising strengths, thinking about what sort of role will suit your skills and personality plus a willingness to experience work outside of your comfort zone will be beneficial.

Be positive

Have a positive outlook and enthusiastic approach to career development, and remember it is a marathon as opposed to a sprint.

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Are you are career chameleon?

Career chameleons adapt to change and have the ability to transform themselves depending on what the role requires from them. However, don't forget to keep an eye on who you really are and where you want to go, otherwise you may end up losing yourself in the process.

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