

A YEAR ON THE FLIP SIDE: JOB/LIFE EXCHANGE TO THE UK

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ABSTRACT: For the calendar year of 2009, I undertook an international job exchange to the United Kingdom. The position was as an Assistant Librarian, (formal Librarian qualification required) to the Department for Work and Pensions, (DWP) Information Management and Archives Team, based in Leeds, West Yorkshire. Graham Taylor, my exchange partner, likewise came to Mackay and acted in my role as Information Services Librarian, based at Gordon White Library. We also exchanged homes, pets and social circles. In effect, our 'lives'.

During May 2008, my personal circumstances had a dramatic change. I decided to turn a negative into a positive, and take the opportunity to live abroad. I approached my Branch Librarian and Manager of Library Services, who were both very supportive of the idea and encouraged me to pursue it. Courtesy of the CILIP LibEx database, I was able to make contact with Graham, and begin preparing the paper road works for an exchange.

As my exchange was to a government library, my professional development extended to an entirely different working environment. I therefore added to my skills base, and broadened my knowledge of global information management requirements, such as legal deposit, immeasurably.

Although based in Leeds, I regularly visited the main DWP library in London. Here I met and occasionally worked with specialists in database management, and archives for example. I also relieved the archivist for 2 weeks in November (while she visited Australia). This was a fabulous opportunity to delve into the history of the social conscience of the preeminent country of the western world. The oldest document in the DWP archive dates to 1729!

Both Graham and I faced the occasional challenge while organising, and during the exchange, however they were few and far between. The overall experience, the professional and personal development, the fabulous opportunity to travel in the northern hemisphere, and to make new life-long friends, will be an enduring highlight of my life.

My daughter, now 18, travelled with me to the UK. We recorded many of our adventures 'Up over' in our blog: www.gothling.wordpress.com

Idea

Mid 2008 brought about changes in my personal life that I decided to transform into an opportunity. My grandmother was born in England, so I knew I had access to the Ancestry Visa that allows citizens of

British Commonwealth countries to work in the UK for 5 years. Previous life choices and circumstances had not allowed me to make use of this in the past, but now, things had changed.

Initially I considered taking a year leave of absence and 'winging it' in the hope of obtaining regular work via the numerous employment agencies that deal with library and information science professionals. Temporary and contract work in this field appears quite plentiful. However, while researching (as we librarians do) I came across the LibEx database hosted by CILIP, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (www.cilip.org.uk). As my daughter (then 17) would be joining me on this adventure, an exchange appeared a much more practical choice. If successful, we would have a steady place of residence for the duration, and it would enable me to become better acquainted with one position in one place of work, rather than a series of juxtaposed jobs.

And so, in late June 2008, I registered with the Libex database, and started sending emails...

Stage 1: finding a suitable mate

I sent eight emails to potential exchangees. As you can see from these screen shots of the LibEx database, basic information regarding your position and place of residence is required. Of the eight emails sent, I received six replies. (Actually no, I received seven. The last reply I received was in March 2009 when I was three months into my year in the UK.) Two of the initial six replies were from academic librarians who were not keen to try their hand in a public library. (Mine is not to judge). One preferred the US as an exchange location. (Still staying away from the judging) Another replied stating she had since fallen in love and was no longer interested in an exchange, and the last of the six replies was Graham Taylor. A librarian working in the Information Management and Archives team for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), based in Leeds, West Yorkshire.

From our employers' point of view, one of the most crucial factors to consider when looking for a potential exchange partner is that your jobs are 'swappable'. While seeking to expand ones skills base is important, an exchangee should have the ability to step in to a position with enough of the basics to keep service levels and processes at an acceptable level, without the host employer having to invest undue resources in training.

Where Graham was concerned, he had previous experience in public libraries, and was therefore familiar with the demands of customer service. He also had web editing, statistics, database research and reference collection maintenance experience. Therefore the base requirements to slip into my position as an Information Services Librarian were covered.

For my part, Graham's job dealt largely with cataloguing and archiving of electronic documents, ISBN allocation and monitoring, managing a media library and the DWP publication scheme, established to deal specifically with the DWP's freedom of information obligations. While my experience in cataloguing was certainly not extensive, I had a wonderful manual (written by Graham) to help me bumble through until it all sank in, and my experience in systems, (and hounding people), proved to be enough grounding for the remainder.

In so far as our respective places of residents were concerned, our homes were obviously very different. Mine is a smallish Queenslander, enhanced by a sizeable veranda, on an average size suburban block with an above ground pool, shed, and all the extra accumulations that come with raising a family, including two dogs and a cat.

Graham, by contrast, owned a one bedroom ex-council flat; twenty minutes walk from the centre of Leeds that he shared with his two cats. We both considered seeking alternative accommodation, and just swapping the jobs, but after some investigation this proved to be more costly to both of us. Graham offered to make a little 'nook' in his sizeable lounge room for my daughter so she could at least have her own sleeping space, which proved to be perfect. I made arrangements for my dogs to be cared for, which ultimately didn't work out. But Graham viewed this added responsibility as compensation for the extra space available to him.

So after much toing and froing of emails containing ideas, concerns, possibilities, excitement and a little trepidation, a decision was made, and in late July Graham and I approached our respective managers...

Stage 2: the paperwork

“Bureaucracy is the art of making the possible impossible” Javier Pascual Salcedo.

At times it did seem that our brilliant idea would be wallowing in the land of officialdom, possibly never to be seen again. Graham and I both obtained agreement in principle from our respective managers almost immediately, however the formal ‘stamps of approval’ proved more elusive. We both submitted business cases and spent some nail biting weeks waiting for senior managers to return from leave, and then be accessible so as we could get a formal ‘yes’ and start things rolling in earnest.

Finally, in September, we both had dates and signatures on our business cases alongside a big fat APPROVED. Now the fun would really begin. Graham offered to draft a formal agreement, using the DWP’s Secondment agreement as a template and got to work. In our case, and if possible I would imagine this would be advisable in most exchange situations, we both maintained our employment with our respective employers, rather than being terminated, employed, terminated and re-employed. Graham continued to be remunerated by the DWP as I was by the Mackay Regional Council. All timesheets and leave applications were handled via email for the duration of the exchange. This arrangement also prevented us from having to open local bank accounts to receive our salaries, although we both did have to pay conversion fees at ATMs, and of course, were subject to the fluctuating exchange rates.

Now into October and while the draft formal agreement went back and forth with amendments constituting almost as much as the document itself, we also both started our visa applications. A note to Australians applying for UK working visas, they are complicated and take forever! They are also very costly to chase up. The British Consulate charges \$10 per phone call to answer any questions, or \$3 per minute and they insist on receiving original documents only, (no verified copies).

Bolstered by progress however, I took the plunge and purchased the flights!

Mid November, (the agreement was still going back and forth) and my daughter and I had to travel to Brisbane for the biometric fingertip scanning. We also discovered that as we were having a 36 hour stopover in Shanghai, we also needed to obtain a visitor’s visa from the Chinese Embassy in Canberra. We had but five weeks before leaving Mackay and the stress was definitely building. My daughter was also in her final weeks of school and we were trying to ascertain whether she would be able to attend college in Leeds. (Yes she did) Graham had obtained his exchange visa from the Australian Consulate within 2 weeks of applying, and we were still waiting.

Two weeks to go, and our visas finally arrived! Fortunately it took less than a week for the Chinese Embassy to process our visitor’s visa. The formal agreement was STILL going back and forth between our respective HR departments! But, at this stage, we had our visas, had our tickets, and had all our travel arrangements in place. We WERE going to do it, and some political ‘one upmanship’ was not going to stop us!

Finally, my daughter and I flew out of Sydney on the 29th of December, and after brief stopovers in Shanghai and Helsinki, arrived in Leeds on 2 January 2009.

Stage 3: settling in

Graham and I had a few precious hours in the same hemisphere, after which he was off to London to catch his plane for Australia the next day. During those few hours we had a walking tour of the beautiful city of Leeds, and a crash course of all appliances (especially the heaters) in the flat. We also met a couple of his friends, who would become ours, and an overview of the 20 page house/life manual he put together for us. By comparison, I left Graham numerous bits of paper sticky taped to numerous appliances, drawers, my ‘In tray’ and the pets.

I had a few days to explore and get over the evil phenomenon of jetlag (it is definitely real) before my first day as the new Assistant Librarian, Information Management and Archives Team – Library Services, Department for Works and Pensions. My work place was Quarry House, an enormous monolith of a building on the edge of the centre of Leeds. Quarry House consists of seven levels of equally enormous rooms, countless smaller offices and meeting rooms, a gym, a pool, a canteen and

a restaurant, 2 large courtyards and a workforce of approximately 3000 people! Three of these people, including myself, made up the IMA Leeds team. We took up one end of a bank of desks in the centre of a room that housed the northern contingent of the DWP Internal Communications Department. (About one hundred people). Slightly daunting compared to the workroom at Gordon White Library, Mackay that I share with a maximum of about sixteen? Uumm – YES!

However, within a week I was able to navigate my way in and out of the building within an hour, (I'm NOT kidding), and most importantly of course, I was getting a handle on the job at hand.

Stage 4: Learning the job

I have a theory that as Australians, and perhaps this is shared by citizens of other countries currently or previously members of the British Commonwealth, we have this innate sense of inferiority where the Mother country is concerned. Particularly when considering our professions. I was cataloguing items that would also be accessible via the British Library for heaven's sake. The British Library! It took every ounce of my self confidence to get past this thought alone.

However, within my first few days, and after a visit to the main DWP library in London, I came to the stunning realisation that there was nothing about the position I couldn't do, and do well. There was nothing about their systems or procedures that were superior to our own, and nothing about these librarians that was superior to me, as another librarian. Yes, I kept my trusty cataloguing manual close at hand, and I wasn't backwards in asking questions. But very soon I was tearing through the backlogged gigabytes of electronic documents including minister speeches, parliamentary reports, research reports, statutes, and a myriad of internal and external publications relevant to the DWP and all its previous manifestations.

While the cataloguing in itself could, at times, become a little mundane, it provided an education opportunity into the workings of a government that was the precursor to our own, and still has a profound influence on the western world. (Ask me anything any British MP said about welfare reform in 1998 and I can tell you).

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The snippets of time I had working in the DWP archive, based in the London branch, were perhaps the most enjoyable. Here was housed the social conscience of a nation, once the world's most powerful nation, spanning more than 280 years. Photo's of Winston Churchill opening a Ministry of Labour office in 1944 overlooked folio's of browning pages containing poverty relief records from 1729. Every information leaflet issued from the British government regarding social welfare is stored here. The DWP archive is recognised by the British Library as the main repository for leaflets, booklets, and welfare application forms produced for citizens of the UK. There are also staff manuals, countless reports, and internal promotional material, including a teapot!

As a lover of history and antiquities, I felt privileged to be able to handle documents created when Captain Cook was still a boy in Whitby, and without a white glove in sight. So much so that I have seriously considered further study in the archives stream, however, after a year of no contact with the public other than via email, I think I would miss customers too much.

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As mentioned earlier, another of my responsibilities was managing the DWP media library. A collection of thousands of images available to any staff member of the UK government, or an authorised contractor, who might require them for promotional and general information material. Eligibility for access, additions, indexing and copyright obligations was all managed by me! Another initially daunting prospect that was soon overcome.

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My previous knowledge or experience with ISBNs was limited to say the least. To be perfectly honest, I had rarely considered where ISBNs come from. I was also unaware of the criterion that constitutes a published item requiring legal deposit and how the UK Agency for Legal deposit appears to have an uncanny sense of when something should have been deposited, but has not. I soon learnt however, that I could employ some Australian directness and a bit of bargaining. Various UK government departments needed efficient ISBN and ISSN allocation; I needed to ensure they met their publishing

obligations. Amazing what you can get away with when they hear the accent over the phone and any hope they had of a 'polite reminder' dissipates.

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Another intriguing part of my duties with the DWP was to manage and facilitate access to information deemed appropriate under the *Freedom of Information Act 2000 (UK)*. I liaised with senior managers and their colleagues to ensure the public were directed to the correct contacts for their queries by maintaining the Information Finder pages on the DWP website: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/freedom-of-information/information-finder/>. As with any government however, its methods of operation are linked to the ideals of the political party in power at the time. Accordingly, various departments have appeared, undergone reviews and reorganisation, expanded and contracted, been renamed, merged with other departments, and sometimes disappeared in relatively short periods of time. Maintaining currency for the public, while being completely reliant on managers to keep you informed, was a lesson in perseverance to say the least.

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The DWP encourages their staff to be involved in community programs by often including them as task objectives in staff appraisals. I personally believe this is a terrific idea. As I was not technically employed by the DWP, this was not required of me. However, when I received an email offering DWP staff the opportunity to be involved in skill building events at local high schools, my interest was piqued. I enjoy working with young adults, hence my instigation of the Knowledge Navigators program in the Mackay region, and my involvement in youth theatre. I therefore attended four days of skill building at two high schools in the Leeds area as a team leader/mentor. While challenging at times, the days were rewarding for all participants, and reinforced my faith in the younger generations, and my ability to interact with them.

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Conclusion

I still consider myself a relative newby to the world of Libraries and Information Science, having started as a casual in the public library in 2002 and graduating from Charles Sturt University in 2006. I therefore cannot claim the wealth of experience that graces the halls and rooms of this conference. I can state however, and state categorically, that this lack of experience was no obstacle to initiating and fully exploiting the opportunities afforded by this exchange. I fervently believe that the foremost requirements to make an exchange work, are the ability to learn quickly, willingness to adapt, eagerness to contribute, and, above all, faith in oneself that you can do ALL of that, and do it well.

I think I am still to some degree, disseminating and collating the entire experience. While based in Leeds, my daughter and I travelled to Ireland (twice), Greece, Rome, Paris, Canterbury and all over the south east, Wales, Scotland, Northumberland, Oxford, York and Durham, just to name a few. I spent many a weekend hiking through the stunning Yorkshire Dales and peaceful medieval forests. I sat at the window where Emily Bronte penned *Wuthering Heights*, and peered through archers' slots of 1100 year old castles. I wandered through the abbey that inspired Bram Stokers *Dracula*, and sat at the desk where James Cook studied navigation manuals.

I also drank a lot of lager, and made some incredible lifelong friends! Not the least of which is Graham Taylor himself.

In terms of 'broadening ones horizons', both professionally and personally, I could not recommend an exchange more strenuously. Becoming entrenched in one's own comfort zone is a risk to self development that many of us face during our working lives. While I don't believe I was at this point upon investigating the exchange, I can categorically state that I will not be in the foreseeable future. Australia is an extremely isolated country, and despite advances in technology bringing us ever closer to the rest of the world, there is no comparison to actually living and working in another country to gain a full appreciation of that isolation, and the inherent differences that have resulted. I have gained a new understanding and admiration for the Australian work ethic. I am also more appreciative of the challenges faced by the United Kingdom, both within the Library and Information profession, and further afield.

As far as the bureaucracy and organising is concerned, YES, it is tiresome and often stressful. However, I sincerely believe that if an individual feels their personal circumstances would allow for an exchange, and they are *open to new experiences*, they will find the benefits outweigh the challenges (and the credit card bill) immensely.