

I am going to make an impact!
**Skills and attributes needed to move up in the library and
information world**

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Abstract

This paper enables new librarians to obtain a better understanding of the skills and attributes needed to move into base and lower to middle level positions as an information professional. The skills and attributes required to obtain your first professional librarian position through to achieving your first library management position (such as managing cataloguing, information or lending services) are examined. This will be achieved by looking at a number of factors that can affect the way you progress in your organisation or your own career planning. Areas to be discussed include communication, management, project management, librarianship, networking, education and training, attitudes and professionalism at work and throughout the profession. Also included is a current analysis of your own skill development with strategies for moving up in your own organisation. Professionalism in the work place is discussed, as are the key areas that employers are looking at when they are reading your application.

Paper

The following paper will target six main areas that should be of assistance to new librarians. These areas include communication, building relationships in the workplace, managing perceptions, marketing yourself, interview skills and setting specific goals. These six areas have been identified from discussions with experienced librarians who have made many mistakes, had many successes and who, most of all, enjoy being librarians.

New librarians today enjoy many challenges from completing a degree with the added pressure of managing families and households, to struggling to find that first professional library position in a public library, university or one of the many fields librarians have managed to weave their way into. University course/degrees in librarianship throughout Australia focus on learning specific librarianship skills such as cataloguing, reference skills and managing information. The author is currently unaware of any programs taught in Australian library and information departments that concentrate on the six main areas as mentioned above. Library and information graduates are being sent out into the workforce willing to try out their newly obtained librarian skills with their first contact with a prospective employer usually being in the form of an application for a position, an informal interview, a phone conversation or a chat with a different supervisor in the workplace where the person is currently employed as a library assistant. In all of the above cases, communication is the key that will make the difference.

Communication is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "The imparting, conveying, or exchange of ideas, knowledge, information, etc. (whether by speech, writing, or signs). Hence (often *pl.*), the science or process of conveying information, esp. by means of electronic or mechanical techniques." (OED, 1989)

Interview skills

The way many new librarians initially communicate and interact with prospective employers will usually be with an application for a professional library position. All experienced librarians consulted stated that new librarians that wrote applications stood out for the following reasons:

Applicants completed their applications in a professional manner by submitting their application on time, with no spelling errors, grammatically correct, and most importantly answered (all points of) the selection criteria.

Selection criteria are a list of skills and attributes that are required (or desirable) to be successful in a certain position. The selection criteria was a strong issue, with librarians discussing how many applicants would submit a general introductory letter and briefly discuss the selection criteria in a couple of paragraphs. It was felt that applicants should have an introductory letter and list each point from the selection criteria and how they meet each of the criteria separately. Librarians stated that new librarians should still submit an application even if they don't meet all of the selection criteria. Very often new librarians don't think of previous employment, subjects studied or volunteer work and how this may help their application. Also stated by one librarian was that the skills from new graduates are fairly similar, it's more about how they 'fit' into the library team that matters most. 'Fit' refers to how a person will relate to other team members and the organisation, their personality and motivation.

Librarians that have obtained their first position and want to move up need to work into their application areas that show an ability to play an important role in team work. Also, that they have completed projects or tasks that required some degree of self direction, and significantly developed communication skills such as report writing and clear and concise discussion in meetings. Applicants should also identify that they have started to display certain management characteristics i.e. the capacity to plan an information literacy training program.

The key area here noted by the librarians was the capacity to complete projects and tasks as shown through real experience and concrete outcomes e.g. the development of a web site or the successful running of an information literacy program.

Other areas include being confident when walking in to an interview; approach each person on the panel and shake their hand. Be clear with your greeting and remember to speak clearly. Your appearance is important and discussed in more depth later in this paper. Body language

can make the difference; use your body to show that you are interested in the panel questions by leaning slightly forward and making eye contact with each of the panel members. Don't worry too much about nerves, as most panels recognise that an applicant will be nervous. Nerves are only a concern when they impede your communication of your skills and attributes. Good referees can also help; the people you list must be able to talk about you positively, and they should know you both personally and how you operate in a work environment.

Communication

How you communicate with colleagues, supervisors and clients will play a key role in your success as a librarian. In most cases it will not matter what personality type you are, as all positions in libraries (even one person libraries) require communication with clients and management. If you are introverted you will still need to be able to communicate effectively to your clients. This may mean that you come out of your comfort zone for those periods in which you interact with clients or other staff members.

How do you communicate with your colleagues? How do you mix or interact with your teammates, other librarians, library technicians or council staff from a public library? It is important that you can communicate in a professional manner with your colleagues. Effective communication can be shown in a number of ways. Most common is the way you speak to the staff that make up your team mates. What kind of relationship do you think you have with the people around you in your workplace? When you are next in your workplace, think about how you are communicating with the staff around you and the kind of language you use. Do you only speak to your friends on the staff? Do you go out of your way to speak to those who you think can help you move up in the organisation? What is your body language like in the office and when you are speaking with team mates? Do you communicate positively with your fellow staff or do you come to work and whinge about your job?

Communicating with supervisors is marginally different from communicating with fellow colleagues. Your relationship with your supervisor can have a huge impact on your career, the tasks that you are given and possible chances to be on quality projects as you can guarantee that when making these decisions your supervisor will speak to other senior staff on how certain staff members are performing.

When communicating with you supervisor do you feel scared, always under pressure, feel they are waiting for you to trip up, or do you see your relationship and the communication you have with your supervisor in a far more positive light, or maybe somewhere in between? Is your relationship with your supervisor one where you both share information freely and you have an awareness of the pressures your supervisor might be experiencing? What is your body language like when you speak with your supervisor? Is it open, thus encouraging a more positive exchange, or is it closed blocking any positive interactions?

How does your supervisor obtain a picture of your effectiveness and value to the workplace? One of the keys ways is via the interaction and input you have in meetings. Are you prepared for the meetings which you are required to attend? Do you read the minutes and action items from the last meeting well before the next meeting in case you need to have completed certain tasks or simply to just make notes and prepare some discussion for the next meeting? Do you print off a copy of the agenda before the meeting or are you the person coming in to the meeting delaying the start so you can go and photocopy the chair's agenda? When in the meeting, do you sit back and contribute only occasionally or are you an active participant who is also willing to take on certain roles like secretary/minute taker or chairperson. Your supervisor is able to get a clear picture quite quickly on the way you communicate with other staff so it is important that these meetings show a positive picture of your communication skills.

Another way to show your effective communication skills in an organisation is the way you communicate via email. Do you have a spell checker on your email; are your messages free of poor spelling and poor grammar? Remember emails can be read in a number of different ways where your meaning may be lost or misinterpreted and where offence may be taken. Double check the address to whom you are sending the email too. Personal emails to other staff or friends regarding your negative opinion of fellow colleagues have a mysterious way of being accidentally sent on. Be careful sending emails when upset or angry as this too can backfire when your mood has calmed.

The staffroom is an interesting place to sit and watch how your colleagues communicate with each other. When in the staffroom do you sit quietly and eat your lunch or do you share in the laughter with the lady with the crazy hair from acquisitions? Do you mix with staff on a personal level or only interact with colleagues on a work basis? Your supervisor will have an understanding of how you interact with the staff around you.

Interacting and communicating with clients can be one of the most satisfying aspects of being a librarian. The satisfaction on meeting a client's information needs through a successful exchange of words and gestures is significant, as is the relief from successfully answering your first reference query. New librarians will work with senior staff, which may very well be a supervisor, when receiving training on the reference desk. Do you speak clearly when answering queries from clients? Do you face the client when you speak to them? Do you use appropriate language that is not full of jargon (DDC's, LCSH's)? Can you handle queues at the reference desk without appearing flustered or rushed (difficult for even the most experienced reference librarians)?

Building relationships in the workplace

Making an impact in your workplace is heavily assisted by the relationships that you build around you in your workplace, the professional

associations or groups with whom you belong, and of course your family and friends. In the workplace your teammates provide you with the most direct support on a day to day basis. Learning, training and sharing knowledge and skills is a very important aspect of your development as a new librarian. It is important that the people around you during this stage are positive and able to challenge and develop your skills.

Recognise the people around you in your workplace who can help you with your current position. Your supervisor does have a role to play in your staff development, however career development is up to you in many cases. Your supervisor usually has more experience with the culture of the organisation; what can and can't be done, and who to speak to if you want a project or brief pushed through. Your supervisor is the one person in the organisation who you want to ensure you communicate with effectively and build a positive relationship with. This person can help your career take off, or on the flip side, keep you stamping books. Build your relationship with your supervisor and management by providing input into ideas, ask to be put on projects where you know you can add your expertise, and contribute at meetings.

Mentors are a useful source of support; ALIA (the Australian Library and Information Association) offer a mentoring program for members and some organisations offer mentoring or buddying-up programs. It is important that this person is not your supervisor and possibly not in the same organisation. You are then free to discuss work related issues and concerns without impacting on a work relationship. Mentors can offer career advice, support on work related issues, can be a handy referee, and can expand your relationships with other librarians throughout the industry.

Strategic alliances through the relationships that you build in your workplace will help you share valuable information and help you and your library achieve certain goals. E.g. you are a liaison librarian at a University library and you have worked on a relationship with an academic

who looks after the first year marketing students. Through this relationship you have managed to organise information literacy training sessions for all of these students. This is an achievement for the students, yourself as a professional, and your library in marketing its services.

Managing perceptions

It is important that you develop skills in managing the way people perceive you in both your workplace and, as you move on in your career, the industry. This of course can be achieved with a conscientious work ethic and good communication skills but there are ways additional to these that can help.

Look at your current workplace and examine the people around you that you think are a) happy with the work that they are doing, b) most likely to progress in the organisation, and c) most likely to stagnate in their current position (please note – remaining in a rewarding position due to a high level of job satisfaction is different from stagnating in a position where you find little joy in the work you do). Why are you able to group these people into these three main areas? It is because you have a perception (which may or may not be shared by co-workers and supervisors) of the way a person works, their work ethic, and the way they communicate with others. Look at group number 1 and 2 and note why you thought they were happy and most likely to progress. Is it certain skills and abilities, or is it personal motivation and drive? What can you learn from these people?

How are you perceived by your workmates? How are you perceived by management? Are you seen as a person who enjoys what they do and who could move up in the organisation? What kind of image do you present to your work mates and how could you better market yourself to management and your colleagues?

Marketing yourself

Marketing yourself to your current employer and your supervisor is a way of improving your chances of success in the workplace. There are four key areas – education, skills, attitude and appearance – that should assist you in showing management that you are able to take on that project or that the next job.

If you are applying for a job in a medical library, education will make a difference if you have an undergraduate degree in nursing and a graduate diploma in librarianship; the organisation will be able to use your extra skills (non core librarianship skills) to add value to your current workplace. Librarians involved in teaching information literacy classes may find a competitive advantage over other applicants if they have completed advanced study in either information literacy or education. A Masters in Library and Information Management is fast becoming the base degree for many middle to senior library management roles in academic librarianship. To join the American Library Association the base qualification is a Masters in Librarianship. Australia is not at this point, with a number of levels of admission to ALIA on offer. The Australian library training qualifications that exist at the moment are library technicians, undergraduate and graduate diploma Library qualifications, Masters qualifications, and increasingly senior librarians are looking at Doctoral studies (PhD or professional doctorate) (Macauley, 2004).

Education is a great way to differentiate yourself from other applicants and it also shows employers that you are able to start a course of study and complete it, i.e. you are serious about your own career development.

Skills that can be learnt in the workplace and through less formal education channels will benefit you greatly in areas such as project management or public speaking. In many cases a supervisor will guide/recommend certain training programs you should be attending but it will help if you take some responsibility in your own development in this

area. Look at what training programs are on offer through your library or organisation, your regional ALIA group or other organisation such as CAVAL. What skills do you think will be needed in the future that could provide you with a competitive advantage?

Library conferences are an important part of your staff development as they provide a chance to keep up-to-date with what is currently happening in the industry. Many organisations that send employees to conferences plan this well in advance to obtain early bird rates and cheaper flights, so plan ahead for conferences that you think may benefit you and your organisation. You may even find the confidence to present a conference paper. Conferences are also a great way to build relationships with other librarians, vendors and future employers.

One of the first things that becomes evident to your employer is your attitude to your work and the people around you. A professional attitude in the way you approach your work is important. Take a look at the people around you in your work place who you believe care about the work that they do or take pride in their work. These people stand out and are easily identifiable in the work place by fellow workers and supervisors. Marketing yourself requires a professional attitude and your appearance makes up an important part of this attitude. Are you a person who is shy and hides away in an office or are you someone who exudes confidence? Your appearance can impact the way people relate to you and how you feel in your self. This is particularly important in an interview situation as well. Your appearance can be a reflection of your professionalism in your workplace. Both men and women use fashion to make them feel good and to give them confidence.

Setting goals

To make an impact in your own career it helps if you have a plan. Try and plan ahead about three to five years. In this plan have a target that you want to have reached at the end of the period specified – this may be a

promotion, to give a paper at a conference, to start a Masters degree, plan a family or an overseas trip. In this plan write down the skills that you think you will need to achieve the goals you have set for yourself. Are there specific courses, training programs or workshops that you think would assist you in reaching your goals? Map out a way to attend these seminars or workshops. Enrol in that graduate diploma in marketing or session on public speaking. It is important that you set reasonable goals with incremental and achievable targets that you think you can obtain. Don't put too much pressure on yourself but do you use some pressure as a motivational tool to achieve your goals.

This paper targeted six main areas that could be of assistance to new librarians. The information obtained from professional librarians on these areas – communication, interview skills, building relationships in the workplace, managing perceptions, marketing yourself and setting specific goals – can provide you with a framework to map out some achievable goals and to set yourself some realistic targets for your own career. Take a look at the people around you in your workplace, look at your supervisor and your co-workers. Hopefully you will become more aware of the attitudes and perceptions of, and pressures on, the people around and how you can make an impact in their lives. Challenge yourself to make an impact in your career and personal life.

References

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