

Changing places:

how a job exchange can (maybe) change your life.

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1. Introduction

In a globalised economy, new graduates often look overseas for job opportunities; indeed, it is considered a rite of passage for many Australians to do so. Of course, new librarians are no different. But the reality of working in a profession where there are few permanent, full-time positions means those who find one are likely to want to keep it.

Given the many universal qualities of librarianship, a job exchange creates the ideal scenario in which work and travel can be combined. There are benefits for both the individual and employer. Links are forged internationally, commonalities found and differences explored. It is an opportunity to broaden both personal and professional horizons, without having to leave a continuing position.

This paper will outline what is required in organising a job exchange, from finding a potential exchange partner to selling the idea to library management, from the financial and legal considerations to the host library's expectations, and what to do after the exchange.

2. Background

To set the scene: I swapped jobs with a librarian at Glasgow Caledonian University (www.gcal.ac.uk) who came to work at Flinders University (www.flinders.edu.au) for the duration of the 1997 Australian academic year. My job exchange proved to be a seminal year for me, both professionally and personally.

As an "exchangee" I was exposed to a new range of duties, a different group of colleagues, and a new country in which to live and work. I learnt a lot – about working in a different library, about interacting with new workmates, about living in another country, and – perhaps most importantly – about myself. It was difficult at times, but all the more rewarding for it.

3. Why go on a job exchange?

Opportunities for professional development can be rare in librarianship at times, and it can be difficult to improve one's expertise in such circumstances. A job exchange is the ideal way to experience a different working environment, to learn new skills and hone old ones, and to develop knowledge and experience in areas that may not be accessible in one's regular workplace.

Personal skills will be enhanced too. Organising a job exchange is an exercise in project management, from developing a timeline to liaising with numerous parties to ensure everything goes to plan. And of course, living and working overseas can be a great test of personal strength.

4. Sell the idea to library management

It can be very difficult to proceed if library management isn't supportive of participating in a job exchange. At the very least, an informal discussion to ascertain their position will be necessary. If there is an enthusiastic response – great! Management approval, as well as their support and guidance, will be crucial. On the other hand, a tentative – or even negative – reaction need not be the end of it. Some time and effort in researching and presenting the positive benefits that an exchange will bring to the library may be all that is needed to convince them.

The staff development librarian or human resources (HR) manager can be a strong source of support; indeed, their help may prove essential to a successful exchange. Also seek out members of the library management team who are likely to be supportive.

Ascertain whether there are any established procedures for exchange programmes within the organisation, not necessarily librarians, but for any staff. This gives a precedent from which to work, and saves having to reinvent the wheel.

5. Find an exchange partner

Ideally, exchange partners should have a similar level of skills and experience and work in similar libraries. Be prepared to think laterally though, as exchanges can still be arranged between partners of different skills. Flexibility is the key.

If possible, use established networks, as personal contact can make all the difference. Although neither I, nor my library manager, had met my exchange partner, we had both met the University Librarian from Glasgow Caledonian. This, I believe, was crucial to our exchange being successful.

If the library has any links with similar bodies overseas (for example, many universities establish links internationally), then explore the possibility of exchanging with one of their librarians. There may be a more favourable reaction to such a swap, as the benefits, not to mention the PR, will be very positive.

A targeted approach is worth considering. Research potential libraries, cities or areas that are appealing (personally or professionally), and approach the library manager, staff development librarian, or HR manager there directly. Keep in mind that more than one place should be approached to increase the chance of a successful response.

Other resources include the LIBEX job exchange listing, at www.cilip.org.uk/jobscareers/libex. This is free a service to overseas librarians wishing to exchange with UK librarians. For other countries, try contacting professional library associations. The American Library Association has a committee on international exchanges; their home page is on the ALA website at www.ala.org/ala/irrt/irrtcommittees/irrtintlexc/international.htm

6. The details

Research, planning and communication are fundamental to a successful exchange. It also takes time – and lots of it – even in this age of electronic communication. Be prepared to deal with the slow wheels of bureaucracy, as well as an onslaught of paperwork!

6.1 Documentation and legal requirements

Both partners should document their objectives for the exchange. It's not necessary that they be exactly the same, but it will help clarify what each party wants to achieve, as well as assist their host employers, to have something in writing.

The dates and duration of the exchange will have to be agreed upon formally between the libraries, as will any requirements for work insurance (WorkCover). The host organisations may need to exchange memorandums of understanding, or similar.

Determine whether medical insurance will be necessary, as well as travel insurance. If there is the possibility of many short trips, maybe on the spur of the moment, travel insurance for the duration of the exchange might prove to be more cost effective.

On a less cheerful, but by no means unimportant, note: make out a will and think about power of attorney.

6.2 Work permits

Check and double check the necessary work permit or visa requirements, and apply for these well in advance of the exchange date. Don't assume anything, or take advice on hearsay, as requirements change all the time.

My exchange very nearly didn't go ahead because I had made a rather big assumption about work permits for the UK. Anne (my exchange partner) was able to get a year's work permit for Australia with relative ease, so I assumed I would be able to get one for the UK. After all, there was probably some sort of reciprocal agreement, surely? There wasn't, and for all I know, still isn't. Glasgow Caledonian University had to apply for a permit on my behalf, and to this day I'm not sure exactly how they managed it! The moral of the story is to find out exactly what is necessary to secure a work permit well in advance of applying for one.

6.3 Salaries and cost of living

Many exchangers choose not to swap salaries, as this makes tax and superannuation issues irrelevant. But it does mean that careful consideration will have to be given to living overseas on an Australian salary, given potential fluctuations in the dollar. An up to date comparison of the dollar's purchasing power can be ascertained by using the McParity index, which is based on the price of a Big Mac. It's a surprisingly accurate measure of the cost of living! It can be found at: www.economist.com/markets/bigmac/about.cfm.

However, the best indication of the cost of living will come from one's exchange partner. Direct questions can be asked, and absolutes (such as the rent) can be assured. Don't forget to factor in local conditions; for example, moving to Scotland in the middle of winter meant higher power bills than I was used to.

6.4 Duties and conditions at the host library

Obtaining a job description and official title will help gain an understanding of what the host library will expect. If there are any deviations from this, these should be documented so all parties agree on what will be expected. Once again, however, flexibility is important: all workplaces are subject to change, and it could be that such changes will occur during the exchange period.

Working conditions and staff benefits may be different, too. For example, many Australian workplaces have some sort of flexitime system, but this may not necessarily be the case overseas. Are evening or weekend shifts required? What are the sick leave requirements? How will recreation leave be organised? Some of these details may seem minor, but it is still necessary to find out about them in advance.

It is also worth finding out about training and professional development opportunities while on exchange. Investigate any conferences being held that might be relevant, and apply to attend. Other training opportunities should also be considered, such as in-house programmes.

6. 5 Personal effects

As well as swapping jobs, it is customary to also swap accommodation, vehicles, personal effects and even pets! Of course, both parties need to be comfortable with this, and communication is all important in ensuring this side of the exchange works smoothly.

Domestic arrangements should be discussed at length between exchange partners, and it does help to get to know each other on a personal level. Specifically, think about:

- Accommodation – payment of rent/mortgage, rates and taxes, insurance.
- Household goods – what will and won't be available for use. Do certain things need to be packed up and put away? How might any damages or breakages be paid for?
- Vehicles – insurance and registration, maintenance, and again how any damages might be paid for. Don't forget to find out whether an international driver's licence will be needed.
- Personal effects – what are you comfortable with your exchange partner using? Think about packing away anything of sentimental value if you're worried about damages.

The key to a successful exchange is planning and communicating, every step of the way. It took us nearly a year to organise a nine month job exchange, but it was worth every minute of it.

7. After the exchange

Returning home from a job exchange can be difficult after the excitement of living and working overseas. If possible, and especially if it wasn't feasible at the start of the exchange, try to have a crossover period for the exchange partners to meet "face to face", and to debrief on any issues that may have arisen, both at work

and at home. It is also a wonderful way to conclude the whole experience, as it allows the partners to cement what is often the beginning of a lifelong friendship.

Returning from an exchange is also a good opportunity evaluate library practice with fresh eyes. Indeed, the library manager may commission such a report! Be prepared to compare work procedures, organisational styles, management practice and even library systems; it will help to take copious notes while on exchange.

Use the exchange experience to enhance professional opportunities at home by offering to write up the experience for the library newsletter, the local ALIA newsletter or InCite. Don't forget to document everything for your CV, especially any new duties that were undertaken on the exchange, training or professional development courses, conferences attended, or professional visits to other libraries or organisations.

It is also important to maintain professional relationships with your colleagues overseas. The benefits of having a second set of work colleagues cannot be underestimated; they can provide a friendly ear for potential problems, or be a sounding board for a new idea. And of course, there is always the possibility of a return visit!

8. Conclusion

Did a job exchange change my life? Yes, but they were subtle changes. It made me more confident of my professional abilities as a librarian, more capable of tackling new tasks and responsibilities, and more aware of the importance of networking and contacts. Personally, I discovered what I was capable of as an individual, away from the comfort of family and friends. It was an extremely rewarding experience, and one I wouldn't hesitate to recommend.

Appendix A: Checklist for organising an exchange

Initially:

1. Talk to your library manager, HR manager, supervisor or staff development officer to ascertain the feasibility of a job exchange
2. Find a suitable exchange partner; ideally someone of similar skills and experience
3. Investigate the location to ensure suitability: check climate, lifestyle and cost of living
4. Enquire about visas and work permits; allow plenty of time for this as it may be more complex than anticipated
5. Discuss domestic arrangements: accommodation, vehicles, personal effects, pets, etc will need to be negotiated

Once an exchange partner has been found:

1. Document the objectives of the exchange
2. Apply for your work permit
3. Discuss your duties and working conditions with your host employer
4. Decide on the duration of the exchange, including each partner's official start and finish dates
5. Organise work insurance (institutions may want to exchange legal documentation, or a memorandum of understanding)
6. Investigate whether medical insurance is necessary, think about travel insurance
7. Make or update your will.

Exchange transition:

1. Organize for someone to meet your exchange partner at the airport and drive them to their accommodation
2. If they'll be living in your house, leave out any relevant instruction manuals, note domestic arrangements such as rubbish collection, and leave recommendations of local services (dry cleaners, takeaways, etc)
3. Leave behind a local street directory, a guide to the city, bus/train timetables, and emergency services contacts
4. Give your exchange partner a contact number of a friend or relative who they can call on in case of emergency

Starting work:

1. If possible, organise for someone to accompany your exchange partner on their first day at work
2. If your library has an induction or orientation procedure for new staff, adapt this for your exchange partner
3. Make sure any appropriate training manuals are available for use
4. If possible, get an email address set up for them in advance.

After the exchange:

1. Debrief, face to face if possible
2. Document any changes in workplace procedures or practices that may have occurred
3. Document any changes in household arrangements.

Webliography

ALA IRRT International Exchanges Committee:

www.ala.org/ala/irrt/irrtcommittees/irrtintlexc/international.htm

ALA IRRT International Exchanges Committee: Guidelines for short-term visits to the US by foreign librarians:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/irrt/irrtcommittees/irrtintlexc/guidelineshortterm.htm>

Dept. of Foreign Affairs and Trade: Smarttraveller:

<http://www.smartraveller.gov.au>

The Economist Big Mac index:

www.economist.com/markets/bigmac/about.cfm

LIBEX international library and information job exchange:

www.cilip.org.uk/jobscareers/libex

The universal currency converter:

<http://www.xe.com/ucc/>