

Wanted: Library Manager, must have six years experience.
Anne Sherman

Introduction

Hello everybody. My name is Anne Sherman, and I'm currently employed by the newly formed local authority Cheshire East, and now part of our Arts, Heritage & Museums service. I qualified from library school just over four years ago in 2005, and became a chartered librarian as of January this year so am still very much a 'new professional' like yourselves.

I'm here today to challenge the contention: *Are public libraries are a hierarchical structure and must advancement be slow but sure?* I hope to convince you that although this may be a common perception this has not been my experience to date and I very much hope it is not yours either.

So, are public libraries are a hierarchical structure and must advancement be slow but sure, measured in approved chronology? And if this is the case how can public libraries hope to attract energetic and enthusiastic new entrants? I'm offering what is obviously a very personal perspective and will be interested to hear whether your experiences are similar.

Getting a toe in the door is the hardest step

I graduated with an honours degree in English & European literature, and completed a Masters degree in Renaissance Drama in 1982. I considered a career in public libraries but at that time acceptance into a library school was conditional on a year's work experience. Life intervened, my career took a different turn, and when I applied to library school two decades later this requirement was no longer stipulated. As it happened, the majority of my cohort had had work experience but found professional qualifications by no means guaranteed a move from library assistant to librarian, with lack of experience frequently cited by prospective employers as a disincentive to their selection.

It was felt that getting a toe in the door was the hardest step for new professionals. After attending three interviews in one week with no success, in desperation I accepted a Saturday librarian post of 3.5 hours a week on the advice from my new line manager that this would be a 'good starting point'. Five months later, I was appointed to a full-time post, albeit on a temporary three month contract.

This was unusual; most of my fellow students chose to focus on their dissertations over the summer before actively job seeking, what in retrospect now seems a luxury in today's economic climate. I completed all modules in April, and was in a professional post by May, picking up extra work over the summer months by covering for colleagues on annual leave. My manager was extremely positive and supported my attendance on a range of in-house training courses, not least because other members of the team had been in post for

some time and already worked their way through the training options available. The real casualty was my dissertation. Having applied for an extension at the end of the summer, six months later I was in the position of applying for my temporary post as Literature & Reading Development Officer. A professional qualification was essential for my application so I finally accepted the postgraduate diploma I was already entitled to and have never really regretted that decision.

I do remember meeting with a fellow ex-student just after I'd been appointed Literature & Reading Development Officer. She was still looking for that first professional appointment, somewhat stunned by my latest promotion to a specialist post - as was I. I wouldn't be honest if I didn't confess to a sense of regret when she was awarded an extremely well-deserved distinction for her thesis on metadata, and it gave me enormous pleasure when she was invited to speak at a conference on the topic a year later. We do have to choose - for me a job was the looked for outcome from the library and information management course, more of a priority than academic kudos.

A year later my lecturer approached me with the request that I contribute a chapter to her forthcoming book on reader development, *Literature and its readers*, and this chance to be published was a huge honour.

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So, having got your toe in the door, your foot on the ladder of a service, is it your perception that libraries, and particular public libraries, are indeed a hierarchical structure and where advancement is slow but sure, measured in approved chronology? Are you perhaps now charting your progress over the next three, five years and wondering whether all that energy and enthusiasm is sustainable?

Prior to the 2006 Age Discrimination Act job adverts could stipulate years of service, and *Wanted: Library Manager, must have 6 years experience in a public library service* was the requirement in Cheshire for potential applicants. This enforced the feeling that professionals' rate of advancement was indeed prescribed. The current process of chartership and three year cycles of revalidation continue to contribute to the idea that years of service = ability.

When I joined Cheshire libraries I would have envisaged a couple of years as a branch librarian and then becoming a library manager in the fullness of time, or perhaps, specialising on the stock side, my real interest.

However, seven months after leaving library school I took up a secondment in the post of Literature & Reading Development Officer. This was not in any sense part of a plan. Having recently joined a new team on a short-term contract I applied for a permanent vacancy. At interview I was asked what experience I had of reader development work. As a result of my answer, the chair of the

panel put me forward for another vacancy, Literature & Reading Development Officer, several grades senior and with a county wide remit.

On learning of my appointment, the response from my line manager was shock - 'You!' while another former manager gave his opinion that "*it's the cruellest thing you can do to promote someone above their ability*". Hardly a vote of confidence for a new professional and I believe these responses entirely down to the effect of a hierarchical structure in years past. I am glad to say that both managers were delighted to see me made permanent in post some months later and remain fully supportive.

After three years in post I was seconded to MLA West Midlands in a regional role, and received a more positive response from colleagues, based on my achievements over time.

I'm thinking of training as a bibliotherapist after 20 years in Interlending

When I was on secondment last year, my post was filled by another surprise appointment, a colleague with little reader development experience who fancied a change after 20 years as the county's Interlending Librarian. Together, we agreed a programme of work aimed primarily at older people with a health and well being theme. This fitted well with the service's priorities as well as playing to my colleague's strengths and interests, and her time in post was such a success she recently confided plans for a whole new career: *I'm thinking of training as a bibliotherapist*. A wholly unlooked for outcome and not one I would have dared predict a year ago.

Role models are so important; library assistants looking to progress through the new frameworks in particular take inspiration from anyone who has taken a less orthodox route up the ladder. So how can you scramble up the rungs?

Going the extra mile

I would say that my time at library school was incredibly stimulating as well as an opportunity to build contacts and explore new areas. Personal and professional development is not just a box to tick for your CILIP portfolio. It isn't always possible to develop your passions through the day job so don't expect your employers to take sole responsibility for your development. Look further than your training calendar – and with money evaporating chances of attending training events are slim right now. If you are genuinely interested in a project or a community, an area of work or group of users, going the extra mile, that is to say committing your own time and even resources if necessary can pay off as an investment in your career.

For example, as a student at MMU, I opted for a student work placement at the Portico Library. Technically, I didn't have to complete a placement as I already had relevant experience for the purpose of the course, but I was curious about the institution, and loved every minute of my time there. How many workplaces

have asked you whether you'll be taking sherry or port before your lunch? However, that brief work experience later gained me a job interview at the Shakespeare Centre (unsuccessful I admit!) as well as providing an insight into special libraries, and some practical experience of cataloguing and conservation. The Portico offered a range of opportunities I probably would never have had through my work in public libraries. The placement also enabled me to author a subject list, my first professional publication, and introduced me to library event management and promotion.

Involvement as a student with a new gay and lesbian reading group at Manchester Library gave me the experience to set up a LGBT group in Chester and engage in audience development work with the local gay community. A recent attendance at a Readers Day in Oxford has given me a fresh insight into working with the third sector for the future. My growing interest in digital media has led to my new remit working as part of the cultural services web team. Develop your areas of interest and see where they take you in your career.

On a note of caution - are you a one trick pony or possessor of transferable skills?

I've spent the years since qualifying building up my expertise in a specialised area of librarianship, literature and reader development. In this role, I have engaged in partnership working, secured external funding and managed a whole raft of projects, managed staff, and contributed significantly to service development, in particular, empowering and enabling front line staff to make provision for readers, and increasing use of technology to promote reading for pleasure. I have held county and regional posts with a reader development remit and now after nearly five years as a library and information professional am looking to take on a more senior managerial role. It seems that too much specialist knowledge can tell against you. I recently received this interview feedback:

The panel felt that although you have some great experience in reader development work and you talked about this with knowledge and enthusiasm, you did not demonstrate that you had the experience we were looking for in community involvement work.

It's all how you present yourself. Through literature & reader development working I can't help feeling that I do have extensive and relevant experience of community involvement work but obviously I failed to convince the panel of its relevance on this occasion. As a no longer quite so new professional I also have to recognise areas where I really do lack expertise or experience and come up with a strategy to overcome this if I want to progress in the profession. Yes, it can still be a bit of a uphill task to progress in public libraries but you can do it.

So what can new professionals do to ensure they progress at a reasonable pace in public libraries?

"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings." **Julius Caesar** (I, ii, 140-141)

When I was at library school I constructed an entire essay on the potentially very dry topic of search engines around the above quote and it has stayed with me ever since. With reference to your career progression,

So, in conclusion:

- Get that first appointment, even if it is just 'a toe in the door'
- Be good at your day job
- Ask where am I going – how did I get here?
- Build your CV with out of work involvement if necessary
- Network, network, network
- Try everything that comes your way for a couple of years
- Now focus on your personal areas of interest
- Charter – it isn't that hard, honest!
- Ask where am I going next – how do I get there?
- Be flexible – change is the only constant

And good luck!

Biography

Anne Sherman gained a professional qualification in 2005, working for Cheshire County Council as casual library assistant, Reading Group Co-ordinator, branch librarian and then Literature & Reading Development Officer. During Year of Reading 2008 she was seconded to MLA West Midlands as Regional Reading Development Officer. In April she joined Cheshire East's Arts, Heritage & Museums service. She is part of the editorial team for professional publications *Public Libraries Journal* and *Arts at the Heart* and a member of the Chester Literature Festival Committee.