
Career development: It's your option

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How to get ahead in ten easy steps.

Many of us who have been academic librarians for a while find we are often approached by colleagues seeking advice on career development. There is a definite value to be placed on career development: making you a more prepared, valuable academic librarian, especially during a period of such revolutionary change as we are presently experiencing in academic libraries. The five chief components of career development—the role it plays, need for mentors, continuing education, networking, and attitude—can be combined into a career “action plan” designed to develop your career skills.

The role of career development

First, consider the role of career development and its importance. Pursuing career development is a conscious decision that an individual must make. Advancement within the profession may not be a person's goal in entering or remaining in the library/information science field. However, advancement within our profession isn't the only reason for pursuing career development. Career development, an effective combination of participation and creativity, also helps focus talents and stimulates intellect.

Academic librarians always have two obvious options at all stages of a career: “yes” or “no.” While those options are the obvious ones, what may not be so evident is how to proceed with promoting your own career development.

Deciding not to pursue career development may

mean maintaining an established work schedule, producing the expected quantity of work, and otherwise not participating in library or institutional activities or in the profession at large. A librarian may choose this option if the organization does not promote or encourage career development; if professional activities are not rewarded by the employing organization; if personal needs negate career development; or for any number of other reasons. A career may also be put on hold temporarily.

Paying attention to how a career develops can be a positive step even if remaining in a particular locale or library for much of a career. The decision favoring career development can mean rewarding activities leading to advancement within the organization or profession. It can also mean meeting position requirements while pushing time management to the limit fitting in the different components of career development.

Certainly, even in academia, there are libraries in which career development is not expected or encouraged. Participation in professional activities is simply not a part of the organizational culture. A change in administration is usually necessary to effect a different approach and attitude toward career development. The administration must institutionalize and reward the creativity that leads to participation and career development. Emphasis must be placed upon maintaining communication within the library and among professionals outside the work group and organization, keeping up with innovations in the profession, and the stimulus of relationships with other professionals.

How should you approach career development?

A librarian can progress by volunteering for committees, joining organizations and attending conferences, researching topics of interest, and writing for publication or presentation. If, however, you are determined to pursue career development aggressively, an action plan will help identify skills gaps, determine career direction, and help you move toward desired goals. What prompts creation of a career action plan as the basis of your strategy for career development?

- A plateaued career where the need for a new direction is apparent.

- A librarian decides he or she is not receiving enough rewards from his or her career as it is presently progressing.

- A new librarian who recognizes that being a librarian is a career, not just a job, may create a plan of action in order to begin attaining goals early in a career.

- A librarian who has been in an organization where career development and professional participation were not stressed may—because of a change in administration or a personal job change—find there are now radically different performance expectations to meet.

Designing the action plan

For individuals in situations such as those described, an action plan will prove helpful in laying the groundwork for career development. If you have decided that having an action plan for career development is the approach you will use, how do you proceed? What should be the elements on which you base your action plan?

1. Self-analysis. Step one in your action plan should be to conduct an honest written self-analysis.

- If just starting your career, have you made definite decisions about the type of library in which you plan to work and specialization you wish to pursue?

- If already launched upon a career, what have you accomplished? Are you satisfied? Are you motivated to proceed? Are you committed to a career rather than a job?

- When conducting this self-analysis, review your present resume with a critical eye. Identify gaps or weaknesses in your career progress. If you don't have a current resume, compiling one will help you focus on your progress—or lack thereof.

- What are your personal career goals?

- Where are you in meeting the expectations within the library's career ladder or promotion and tenure requirements? What is the time frame you are facing for career development?

- What are the areas in which you excel? What are the areas where you need to develop skills?

2. Shared appraisal. Step two in your action plan is to request that a colleague review the self-

analysis and offer suggestions. This reviewer should be someone who has made substantial career progress and who will be critical in a constructive manner. If you have a mentor, that is the person to review your self-analysis.

You need an honest appraisal of where you are and what talents, strengths, and weaknesses you have. You need to know where progress is possible and in which areas improvement is needed. As you identify career goals, you need to know if it is reasonable for you to direct your energies toward those goals. You may be a superb cataloger or an effective reference librarian, but if you find it difficult to make decisions or to deal with personnel problems, it is unwise for you to strive toward an administrative position unless you can successfully overcome those shortcomings. The reviewer of your self-analysis should offer suggestions to help you create and complete the action plan; he or she should comment honestly on your attitude, reliability, flexibility, and professionalism.

3. Organizational expectations. What further steps are necessary for implementation of career development goals? In your self-analysis you defined the organizational requirements for career advancement. In an academic library this may involve identifying the required time frame and expectations for promotion or tenure. If you plan to remain in your present position, step three should begin with those organizational expectations. Meeting the expectations of your present employer will also make you more valuable to future employers. Do your library's career advancement expectations include:

- Additional training. Does this mean continuing education, such as workshops and seminars, or does it mean a second masters or a doctorate? Are these requirements or preferred expectations for certain positions within your library?

- Is a record of library, institutional, or local community activities expected? Are professional activities desirable?

- Is a publication record required? Must it include certain types of publications such as those scholarly in focus?

4. Educational aspects. Step four directly focuses on the educational aspects of the organization's expectations: that additional graduate degree and/or continuing education. If you are an academic librarian, begin by identifying the graduate program that will meet your needs. If you plan to remain within an area where subject expertise is helpful, a subject masters will be preferable. If your goal is administration, a second masters in an administration area will be more useful.

Two universities—Miami University (Oxford, Ohio) and the University of Maryland, College Park—offer annual institutes aimed toward library administrators. Also take advantage of continuing education opportunities available nearby that focus on areas you need to develop. In many states there are continuing education courses of-

ferred by library schools, the State Library, or the state library association. Nationally there are continuing education courses offered by divisions within the American Library Association, by the Special Library Association, and by the Medical Library Association.

The further along in your career you progress, the more important continuing education becomes not only because there are new developments in the field, developments to which you were not exposed in your original library training, but also because continuing education is stimulating and helps you keep up-to-date in your chosen career. Additional training or advanced degrees will help you develop your personal potential and focus your career direction.

5. Keeping up. Step five of your career action plan focuses on an aspect that may seem obvious but too often isn't pursued: keeping up with professional literature and current events. If professional periodicals aren't received as part of a personal membership, most libraries subscribe to at least the basic library periodicals; librarians can also share subscriptions. Step five—keeping up with the profession through its literature—should begin early in a career and continue throughout. This step is especially critical in keeping you up-to-date if your career is primarily spent within one library.

6. Activities and job performance. Step six focuses on library and institutional activities. A librarian who directs all energies toward external activities and ignores participation in activities in his or her own library is not going to be regarded as a contributing staff member by library peers. Activities within your own library and the parent organization will help you develop a variety of skills at no cost to you.

Most libraries and their parent institutions are busy places with task forces and committees on which staff can serve; within the local community there are other opportunities for participation. Such participation not only keeps the individual librarian aware of events within the college or university and the community but also raises the visibility of the library. There are skills that can be attained from these activities: learning to function on a committee as a member of a team; gaining the ability to effectively chair a meeting; writing minutes in a concise, clear manner; arranging for special events; and negotiating compromises in approaching solutions to problems.

Another aspect of step six is conscientious performance of your responsibilities within the workplace. Very little will alienate your peers faster than avoidance of responsibilities and abuse of their good nature. The successful performer has a high energy level, is willing to work long hours, and is committed to the profession.

7. Mentoring, networking, participating. Accomplishing step seven in your career development plan will make it possible to gain a record of professional activities and recognition. This step in your

action plan is actually in three parts, all three of which are closely linked and will prove effective in your career development:

- Having a mentor.
- Becoming part of an active network of professionals.
- Participating in professional organizations.

Mentors. You may already have a mentor, someone who has made progress in the profession and now is discharging a responsibility to assist colleagues in their career development. The role mentors play in the careers of academic librarians cannot be overemphasized. The colleague who has identified you as a person with potential for growth and as someone who will make contributions to the profession can open doors for you, offer advice, and generally serve as a cheerleader and supporter. If you have not been approached by a mentor, you can also select a mentor if there is a person with the appropriate attributes available and if the person is willing. Mentoring is a time-consuming, frustrating role; both the mentor and the protege must be willing to put forth a great deal of effort. Those just entering this profession or those who may feel their careers have plateaued, should seek a mentor to provide guidance. For those who have done well in academic careers, it is important to assume the role of mentor to others; this is an obligation to the profession.

Networking. Building a network and participation in organizations are closely linked with mentorship. Being an active professional is a career step into which much energy and time must be expended. One way to begin being involved is to build a network or become a part of an existing network. Within your own area of library specialization, you can become a part of a network—and that network is likely to intersect with networks based upon other aspects of the profession. In order to build an effective, reliable network, it is imperative that a librarian belong to professional organizations, attend conferences, and participate in organizational activities.

Conference attendance. Some academic librarians do not attend conferences because their library will not or cannot fund the cost of attendance. Part of becoming a professional and maintaining that status is a willingness to invest in your own profession and career. The benefits and rewards are worth the expenditure of time and money. Not all conferences must be attended. An individual can focus his or her energies on one organization, attending meetings, contributing ideas and time, volunteering for committees. There may also be organizations in which you have an interest in keeping up with their activities but may choose not to attend conferences.

Your mentor will play an important role in networking and participating in organizations. At conferences a mentor can introduce you to valuable contacts. Those contacts within organizations are an important assist in gaining committee ap-

pointments as well as being an aid when you are struggling with a problem within your own area of specialization and need to discuss issues with a colleague.

As you can see, the interlocking aspects of step seven—having a mentor, developing a network, and participating in professional organizations—can help your career progress and help you gain visibility.

8. Areas of expertise. Step eight is also critical to career development: developing areas of expertise. This may be in reference, cataloging, acquisitions, collection development, automation, management, or in any number of other areas. Becoming known for your expertise will lead to recognition for you, will offer opportunities for publication, and will assist with career development. Remember, information and knowledge are power.

9. Researching and writing. Successful accomplishment in obtaining recognition in an area or areas of expertise will help you in step nine. This step is dependent upon your own talents, interests, and perseverance: researching and writing for publication and presentation. In some academic libraries, being published is a criterion for advancement in rank, attaining tenure, and salary compensation. Today there are more potential places to seek publication than ever before. They include:

- periodicals in which librarians can share experiences and save time and effort for colleagues;
- theme periodicals to which authors are often invited to contribute on specific topics;
- commercial periodicals which may pay for contributions but which often solicit most of their articles; and
- scholarly refereed periodicals where submissions must survive the scrutiny of several readers.

Don't write just for the exercise of writing. Identify research areas of interest. Do a literature review of what has been published on the topic. Conduct research. Draft an article. Study the periodicals; notice the type of articles they publish. Write on what you know. Don't limit yourself to heavily researched publications. Also be willing to share your opinions and successful experiences with colleagues through publication in more popular periodicals.

Other publication outlets are book reviewing, compiling bibliographies, and writing monographs. If you are interested in pursuing writing interests, read books on writing techniques, attend writing courses, and look upon everything you write—reports, correspondence, project proposals—as writing learning experiences.

10. Attitude adjustment. Step ten, attitude adjustment, is important to your well-being within an organization. An underlying message throughout these guidelines for creating an action plan has been developing a positive, constructive attitude. Be cautious in your organizational connections, in your relationships with co-workers. Be careful of too close involvement in cliques, of blindly accept-

ing other individual's perceptions of colleagues, and of acceptance of values colleagues attempt to impose upon you without thinking them through for yourself. The group with which you ally yourself will often determine your success or failure within the organization. Remaining somewhat aloof from entanglements with a clique is usually safer than too close involvement. Too many individuals new to an organization restrict their own development by relying too closely upon their friendships with others within the organization.

Refrain from assuming too cynical a viewpoint of administrators; you may be an administrator yourself one day. Administrators must take courses of action and make decisions based on information or perceptions of situations they have which may not be within your knowledge.

Another attitude that can't be stressed enough is the need for flexibility—in attitude, in the workplace, in job location, in defining of responsibilities.

Also keep in mind that when colleagues succeed or make progress in their careers, you should share the pleasure in their accomplishments rather than being jealous. You can play a role in assisting colleagues to develop an action plan of their own. Encourage staff to congratulate their peers on their successes. An unpleasant, backbiting atmosphere is created when working with staff who are jealous or competitive or routinely degrade accomplishments. Working within an organization where accomplishments are shared helps create an atmosphere of sharing, teamwork, and a positive outlook.

Consequences of career development

An action plan helps focus energies and directs progress. However, there are negative consequences of career development:

- jealousy from co-workers or supervisors;
- frustration as you advance and others around you or the organization do not;
- a feeling that your new skills are underutilized.

What are some positive consequences?

- new skills;
- a new confidence level;
- do a better job—or get a better job;
- self-actualization;
- responsibility to others;
- intangible rewards and benefits.

A librarian who is employed in a library that does not support and may even actively discourage career development may find that the only way to retain sanity, a feeling of involvement in the library world, is to engage in activities and career development, even if on his or her own time.

Summary

Career development is worth the time, effort, and expense and is a reward unto itself. Using a ca-

reer action plan will help boost career development. Following the ten steps requires conscientious efforts and keeping on track. To recap:

1. Conduct a self-analysis.
2. Ask a colleague to review that self-analysis and to offer constructive criticism and advice.
3. Identify organizational expectations for career advancement.
4. Pursue additional education.
5. Keep up with the profession through its literature.
6. Participate in library, organizational, or local

activities.

7. Pursue career development through effective use of a mentor, development of a network, and participation in professional organizations.
8. Develop an area or areas of expertise.
9. Research and write for publication.
10. Concentrate on attitude adjustment.

Successful completion of these ten steps will help an academic librarian realize the goals of a rewarding career in increasingly more responsible positions—or, if committed to a particular locale or library—it will lead to personal satisfaction. ■■

Staff retreats in ACRL libraries

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What types of libraries hold staff retreats, and why.

Libraries are changing. As part of the change process, they are becoming more participative, staff-centered organizations. They try to foster the adaptability, creativity, and development of their human resources to better serve their clients and to advance the profession. To achieve these goals, some administrators are incorporating managerial tools which have proven effective in other organizational development efforts. One such tool is a retreat which can be used, in addition to other purposes, to clarify new missions and goals, open communication channels, brainstorm and plan future programs and improve the skills of staff.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to determine:

- a) whether academic libraries were holding, have held, or were planning to hold retreats as defined;

- b) the nature of these retreats;
- c) the usefulness of these retreats; and
- d) whether libraries holding or likely to hold retreats had common characteristics.

Methodology

During the last ten years, no mention of retreats for library staff was found in the literature, although meetings were being held for similar purposes. They were called “workshops,” “continuing education seminars,” “staff development meetings,” “institutes,” “in-service training,” etc. These activities had some components of a retreat as defined by the researchers, but not all.

A 35-item self-administered questionnaire was mailed to 192 college and university libraries selected from the membership list of the Association of College and Research Libraries. After non-academic libraries were excluded, every third li-