

How do I get there from here?

Changing jobs, changing roles, changing institutions

by Susanne Markgren and Tiffany Allen

How do librarians working in nonacademic institutions find their way into academic librarianship positions? How do technical service librarians move into public service roles or vice versa? Making the move from one type of position, or one type of library, to another can be a daunting prospect for many librarians today.

Whether you have a fear of being typecast or a fear of leaving your safety zone, the idea of transitioning to a new library can be as intimidating and overwhelming as starting over again in a new country. Recent graduates who would like to work in a specific setting, whether it is academic or special or public, often take the first job that comes along, even if it is not their desired position or their ideal environment. They want and need experience of any kind. After a few years, they find it difficult to break into a different setting and end up staying unhappily where they are.

The good news for librarians hoping to make the transition into a different library setting is that times, and roles, are changing. And the stereotypes, at least within the library world, are slowly dissolving. Librarian posi-

tions, on the whole, are becoming more and more diversified. Traditional roles are getting harder to find in today's rapidly changing environment as librarians (in survival mode) are forced to acquire a variety of skills and, in many cases, take on multiple roles within their libraries. The evolving nature of the current library landscape is helping to transform and, in some settings, abolish traditional roles and titles, while producing new titles, new career paths, and exciting opportunities for the future. All of this leads to more mobility and flexibility for librarians today.

As columnists for the Career Q&A From the Library Career People in the Info Career Trends newsletter,¹ we have received several questions from frustrated librarians—recent graduates and 20-year veterans alike—wanting to know how to make the move from one library to another or how to transition into a different area of librarianship. In response to these questions and to address this common dilemma in librarianship today, we offer some advice for those transition seekers.

Assess your skills

What is it they say about good intentions?

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The pathway to library school is paved with good intentions? Seriously, a lot of us go into library school with one career plan in mind, and come out with a job in something else. We have all met the recent graduate who starts out wanting to be a reference librarian but discovers a passion for preservation, special collections or archives, or something else he or she stumbled across in the classroom or a field experience. The question is, once you have taken a job in one area, and then decide to get back to your first love, how do you make that transition? How do I get there from here?

First you need to assess the skills you have. Think about it from a global perspective. For example, in your current position, you may work with individuals from the public or from a highly specialized field. Think of these people as your customer or patron and consider the work you do for them in terms of public service. Do you work with them to answer questions they have? Do you consult reference materials? Do you perform a mini reference interview with your customers to gather more information regarding their requests? You need to examine your skill set outside of your current context to find transferable skills.

Useful job searching sites

ALA's Library Employment Resources, www.ala.org/ala/hrdr/libraryempresources/libraryemployment.htm

ALA's Human Resource Development and Recruitment's Careers in Libraries, www.ala.org/ala/hrdr/careersinlibraries/careerslibraries.htm

Association of Research Libraries Career Resources Online Service, db.arl.org/careers/index.html

C&RL News career opportunities, www.ala.org/acrl/jobs

LIBJOBS, www.ia.org/II/lists/libjobs.htm

Lisjobs.com and Library Job Postings on the Internet (now merged), www.lisjobs.com/jobs/index.htm

Transferable skills are skills that you pick up in one context and can carry to a new situation. Computer skills; customer service skills; budget, management, and supervisory experience—these are all examples of transferable skills. Think about the skills you have and how they may fit into the new career opportunity you are pursuing.

Do your homework

To assist you in your job search and to prepare you for interviewing, you may want to acquire more relevant experience and knowledge. This could include taking classes, finding a mentor, or simply doing some research.

Continuing education classes, workshops, conferences, and symposia are always good ways to network with other librarians, learn and update skills, and keep up with technology and new trends in the profession. You can find out about these from local and national organizations like ACRL, ALA, SLA, and ARL.

The experience you crave may be right under your nose. Find out what you can do at your current job to gain experience in a different field or subject area. Is there someone who can mentor you or teach you new skills? Can you spend time learning and performing reference duties or technical services duties? Some libraries even offer exchange programs between departments, such as cataloging and reference or acquisitions and archives. Talk to your supervisor and find out if something like this is possible. Also, find out if your library or institution will pay for you to attend classes or workshops. This may be part of the budget of the library, and is a common, and often necessary, part of professional development.

At the very least, do your homework and research the ins and outs of your desired position or field. Find competencies, best practices, guidelines, and standards dealing with library environments and librarian roles. Identify and read current literature to stay informed of trends and initiatives going on in your specific field. Showing a potential employer that you know what's going on in the field is a sure sign that you are interested in the position.

Job hunting

Keeping an open mind about librarian roles and titles may help to open more doors. Stop thinking of librarian roles in the traditional sense and consider looking for alternative roles and positions. For academic positions, how about considering a special academic or research library such as health sciences, law, or art?

If you are looking for a reference position, how about considering a position that includes reference duties, such as regular desk hours or instruction hours, as part of the position but not necessarily the majority of the position. You may find an electronic services position that includes regular reference desk hours.

Sometimes the more diverse a position is, the more interesting it will be. Also, diverse positions, which involve a variety of duties and skills, may allow for more growth and more flexibility to move into different roles within the library. But be careful—don't apply for a job only for one part of it; you should be interested in all aspects of the job.

As you begin your job search, be as exhaustive and thorough as you can. Look at job postings in journals, trade magazines, association Web sites, e-mail job lists, and job-related Web sites. Check a variety of different sources on a daily basis. Most employers will try to post positions in several different places, but some will only post in one or two. Be sure to look closely at the descriptions, the qualifications, and the requirements for the position before applying. Titles can be deceptive, and may not accurately, or completely, describe the position. Don't rule out positions that sound too specialized because you think you are not qualified—you may be surprised to find out that you are qualified, or at least meet the requirements, for these specialized positions.

Take time to write a thorough and detailed cover letter that emphasizes your transferable skills and your experience as it relates to the position at hand. Include all related experience and skills even if they were obtained from classes, workshops, nonlibrary jobs, or school projects. Related experience of any

kind will add weight to your résumé and show potential employers that you are motivated and willing to learn.

The interview

You have assessed your experience and strengths, found an opportunity that matches both your interests and skills, created a résumé that expresses the skills you have and how they match the needs of the new position . . . and they have called you for an interview. The interview is your opportunity to once again express your enthusiasm for the position and to reiterate how your skills closely match the needs of the position.

Think of your experience in terms of the needs of the position and be sure to convey how the skills you possess will transfer from one context to another. Inevitably, someone will ask why you are making a switch, for example, from a special library to an academic library. Be sure to have an answer prepared for this. And you'll need something more than, "It's what I went to library school for." Again, speak in terms of the position. Hiring organizations want to hear that you want *their* job, not just *any* job.

You can begin with something like: "I always thought I would work in a university library, but an excellent opportunity (the special library) came along and it was something I wanted to pursue to gain valuable skills and experience."

But then get more specific: "But I recently saw this opportunity and it reinforced my desire to get back to the university, working more directly with students and faculty. I like the challenges presented in the position and believe my experience in [x, y, and z] closely match the needs of this position. Bring your transferable skills into the conversation and match them to the positions required and preferred qualifications."

In any organization, people want to hire the best candidate, the candidate who most closely matches the needs of the position and the organization. It will be your job as the candidate to educate the individuals making the hiring decision that your skills, although gained in

a different environment, will transfer to their organization and will make you the best qualified candidate for the position. If you take the time to assess your skills, closely examine the qualifications of the position during your job search, and prepare to discuss how your skills closely match the needs of the organization, you will have the information you need for a successful interview.

Conclusion

Librarianship is an evolving profession and those working in it know that change is not only inevitable, but it is around every corner and quickly coming up from behind. Because we are in this constant state of change,

("Internet Resources," cont. from page 651)
of historical artifacts, photographs, and documents that tell the story of the Army's past. Just select the Research Catalogs tab from the main page. Access: <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usamhi/>.

U.S. Military Academy. The academy has begun an ambitious project of digitizing its rich resources, which cover the history of

moving from role to role or institution to institution is not as difficult as it is perceived to be. Similar skills are needed in all libraries no matter what your constituency is, or your role is, or what subject matter you deal with. If you remember that skill sets are transferable and experience is relative, it is possible to get there from here.

Note

1. A shorter version of this article appeared in the March 2004 issue of Info Career Trends, see www.lisjobs.com/newsletter/index.htm. Questions for the Library Career People can be sent to e-mail: librarycareerpeople@lisjobs.com. ■

the academy and of its many illustrious alumni. Included are multimedia recordings about Douglas MacArthur and the West Point Honor Code, maps from the Revolutionary era, as well as books, photos, and manuscripts documenting and preserving the history of West Point. Access: <http://digital-library.usma.edu/collections/>. ■