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Library Life Article Jan 2016

Laboratory to Library – Switching Information Tracks

I'm pretty new to libraries as a career, it's been about 18 months since I started my first paid job in the library, and I've only been an official "Librarian" since September. So with my fortieth birthday rapidly approaching, I might not be your idea of a typical early library professional. My previous career was as a research scientist in a range of fields around Molecular Biology, and I'd worked at a couple of Crown Research Institutes (CRIs) and Tertiary Education Institutes.

I came out of an unsuccessful research grant funding round in my current job at the time and decided it was time to reassess where I was and what I wanted to do. Unless you get the equivalent of tenure at a University, science is a bit of a risky career where you often don't have job security more than a year or so in the future. However it is similar to the library profession in that information is at the centre of people's objectives and aspirations.

The part I loved most about my previous job was working with the post-graduate students who were based out at the CRIs, and helping them to learn how to find information, how to create new information through research and how to position their research within the larger body of knowledge in their field when writing their theses. I had been interested in information management, and enjoyed the wide range of information resources when I worked and studied at universities. I had had good relationships with the special librarians at the CRIs and always felt that I had come away from discussions with a new idea or tweak on a tool to use.

The idea of working as a librarian in an academic or research library was really appealing to me, but I had been talking to a careers consultant, who was firmly against me changing careers, but was very useful in helping me confirm what my priorities in life and work really were. Talking my options through with my husband, he looked at me and said "Well, honestly, haven't you always wanted to be a librarian? And besides, you're about due for another degree." (the MIS will be my fourth when I finish). His support made all the difference.

At that point, I had no idea about what qualifications were required to be a librarian, but I was familiar with online research and went for a bit of a hunt. I discovered the courses available through the Open Polytechnic, Victoria University and Te Wānanga o Raukawa, but it wasn't immediately obvious which of the qualifications would be required for a position working in an academic or research library. Did the qualifications I already had make any difference to the course I was required to do?

My contact at the CRI library had recently moved out of libraries into a position in publishing, but luckily a search of the LIANZA website found me some email contacts in what was then the career development section. Advice from them put me on to the Programme Director of the Information Studies Programme at Victoria University, and after discussions with the director and my family I decided to apply for and enrol in the Masters in Information Studies (MIS). I studied full time for the first six months of my study although the distance study was a bit of a culture shock at first. Eventually I made the decision that I would need some experience actually working in, rather than using, an academic library and applied for a half-time library/desk assistant position, that still allowed me to study a couple of papers at the same time.

I applied for a subject librarian position in the Science team last year and the panel took the chance on an applicant with a lot of experience working with researchers and post-grad students, but not a huge background in academic libraries or teaching at an undergraduate level. I love my work and have not regretted making the switch for a moment. The people are great, the work is varied and challenging, and I am looking forward to my first full academic year in the position, but with the added demands of a research project that will fulfil the final part of my MIS degree.

For me, making the switch from a career as a laboratory researcher in science to a career in academic libraries was based on three points where the people involved had to be prepared to take a considerable risk. I had to take the risk of moving from a field where my credentials were established, and I was aware of the steps for career progression into an area that I really knew very little about. My family and I had to take the financial risk of me moving from a relatively well-paying job, to six months with no income while I started studying, and then a year working half-time in an entry-level library position that basically covered my daughter's day-care costs and not much more. Finally, a few months ago, my managers at the library took a risk on employing me as a subject librarian in the science team when I had a limited amount of experience working in academic libraries (although a lot of experience in working with researchers and post-grad students). For some people who don't have the level of support I did, that could be just a few too many levels of risk when considering the career switch.

The library literature discusses sourcing library staff from backgrounds in IT, teaching, business and research in order to broaden the skills base of the library profession. However, there is very little awareness of the role of academic librarian as a possible career prospect for researchers in science. I attended several symposia on alternate post-PhD careers during the time I worked at CRIs, and it was never brought up as an option. I think this is an area where our professional organisation could investigate improving promotion and awareness, not just in science, but in all the fields of research.

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