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# From Saturday assistant to Chartered Librarian: a case study in career development



Pam Young  
Systems Circulation /  
Riseholme Library Team  
Leader,  
University of Lincoln  
Tel: 01522 895271  
Email: [pyoung@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:pyoung@lincoln.ac.uk)

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*This is an account of how I progressed from Saturday assistant to team leader, at what is now the University of Lincoln. My career progression has not taken a conventional route, and I have tried to provide advice for those who want to change career, develop a library career alongside caring for a family or have chosen an indirect way of entering the library profession.*

Fourteen years ago I was entering the final year of a degree in Humanities at the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside (now the University of Lincoln), having enjoyed the experience of returning to education but with no idea of what I might do next. Although I had done well in my 'O' levels many years previously, I had not been able to continue to 'A' levels due to family circumstances, so I had had a series of mundane shop jobs since leaving school. I felt ready to re-enter education in 1991, and enrolled on an 'Access to Higher Education' course, and followed this with the degree.

At the beginning of my final year in 1994, it suddenly struck me that I really ought to start thinking about my future career. I wanted to put the degree to some use as well as enjoying studying for it. Browsing the local newspaper one evening, I came across a job advertisement for a Saturday assistant at the university library. I had become well acquainted with the library during my studies. I considered it would be an interesting place in which to work, and I had been impressed with the serene atmosphere despite the constant activ-

ity. I mentioned my impression of serenity to the panel at my interview; they fell about laughing!

Despite my concern after the interview that I would be looked on as more suited to comedy than to library work, I was offered the post and I accepted. The job suited me well. I had plenty of time to study, could still drop off and collect my children from school and I thoroughly enjoyed my Saturday mornings shelving and tidying books. Although this was a routine, part-time job, I used the experience to find out more about the library profession, what the various roles entailed and the career paths and qualification routes that staff had undertaken to achieve their positions. I made a point of talking to the library staff and finding out more about how an academic library operates. They also encouraged me to shadow them on the issue and enquiry desks and I found the insight into their work intriguing and inspiring. I graduated in 1995, with the feeling that I would like a career in library work, but unfortunately I had to leave my post as I needed to find a full-time job to help with the household finances. I spent nine months as a dispensing assistant in a pharmacy (interesting, but not fulfilling) and then while browsing the local newspaper one evening I spotted an advertisement in the local paper for a library assistant at the university library – déjà vu! The post was full-time, which was ideal, as by this time my eldest son was ready to take on the responsibility of dropping off and seeing his brother home from school. I applied straight away, managed not to cause hilarity at the interview this time and was offered the post.

There was just one drawback with the post; at interview the Librarian had told me that there had been discussions concerning the closure of the campus, which looked likely. As no concrete decision had been made at that point, however, she was unable to say how long the post might last. I accepted it despite this warning, feeling sure that any amount of experience, no matter how short, would reap benefits. Once in post, I took advantage of opportunities to develop my career prospects when I could. The department was offering a NVQ programme in information and library studies under which I achieved a level 2 qualification. I also applied to undertake in-house training events where possible, and engaged with the progress development scheme. By collecting evidence and submitting a portfolio I was able to improve my grade in two consecutive years. I joined various departmental groups, which gave me the opportunity to contribute to wider departmental activities. By participating in

these additional, voluntary activities, I showed my managers that I was serious about developing a career – working in a library was not just a job. The campus closed four years later and well before then I had made up my mind that an academic library was the place I wanted to be.

During the final year of operations on my campus, the university had launched a new institution in Lincoln. As the time got nearer to my post ending, I was offered a transfer to the new campus. I accepted, but I knew I would have to reduce my hours because of the travelling time, and I was unsure whether the reduction in salary and the increase in transport costs might mean that the post would be unsustainable for me. In a fortuitous development, an opportunity came up at the new campus for a secondment to a more senior post, but it was full-time. I discussed my situation with my line manager, who was extremely supportive, and she suggested I should apply on a jobshare basis. I was unsure of my readiness for the post, as it was quite a step up from my post at the time, but I was able to show that I had taken on responsibility and had experience in a wide range of duties – an advantage of working on a small campus. I had also been very well mentored by the senior staff during my four years there. I was successful, so transferred into the higher position at Lincoln. When an opportunity came up to apply for the permanent position of team leader, I was ready for it, and was successful again.

After having been in this post for a while, I started to think about formalising my commitment to library work. My experience of NVQ had been positive, and I was keen to help others achieve qualifications under the scheme, so I undertook a D32/D33 assessor qualification, and experienced a brief spell as NVQ centre co-ordinator. I continue to find acting as an assessor very rewarding, and have thoroughly enjoyed guiding candidates through their first experiences of recognised library qualifications over the years.

Soon after achieving my D32/D33, I decided to upgrade my professional qualifications by embarking on a masters degree. I chose an MSc (Econ) by distance learning at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth as it gave me the option of setting my own pace of study to a reasonable extent. The degree was challenging but incredibly enjoyable and besides giving me the professional qualification I wanted, it also introduced me to areas of librarianship I had not experienced before. I chose optional study modules in records management and systems development to broaden my

knowledge, and gained a good grounding in all aspects of librarianship. I also ensured that I kept up to date with developments in the sector by reading professional journals (especially *SCONUL Focus!*!), by visiting other libraries and by belonging to professional online discussion groups.

My final goal on the road to becoming a fully fledged librarian was to undertake chartership. I had been thinking about this during my MSc studies, and I registered as soon as I had passed the postgraduate diploma part of my MSc. I found building my portfolio both interesting and challenging, and submitted my application 18 months after registering. I am delighted to have both graduated with my MSc (Econ) and to have been accepted as a chartered member of CILIP in 2008.

What are my tips for achieving career progression? I would encourage anyone thinking about developing their career not to think for too long, but to go for it. Leave your comfort zone and take advantage of any opportunity to gain additional experience, whether it is engaging in a short-term departmental project or accepting the challenge of a secondment to another role. Gain formal professional qualifications, and keep up to date. I have been fortunate to have supportive employers, as I have benefited from their advice and guidance and also with financial support for my studies. I am also indebted to my family for their support in the development of my career. It has taken some time, as I said at the beginning of this piece, fourteen years in all; and I am now a grandmother! However I am extremely happy with the choices I have made. I feel content and satisfied as a librarian, and my only regret is that I couldn't have achieved it sooner.