

Career Q&A

**A Librarian's
Real-Life,
Practical Guide to
Managing a Successful Career**

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THE BEGINNING: GETTING STARTED OR GETTING GOING

Dear Q&A: I'm on the market. For a job, that is. What do I need to know before I get started? And how can I find a job I love?

“Getting started” can mean different things to different people at different stages of their careers. It may mean getting restarted in a new role or new workplace, starting again after an absence from the profession, starting on the next step of one’s career, or starting fresh after graduating from library school. No matter where you may be in your professional life, getting started is an exciting yet often frightening process that requires planning, motivation, and patience.

Setting Goals

Regardless of what’s next for you in your professional life—around the corner, down the road, or in the distant future—it is always a

good idea to have solid, written-out, well-defined goals. This is true even if those goals are always changing or end up getting pushed out the window by something else entirely. Having goals helps propel you from one place to the next, one role to the next, and one level to the next. Achieving your goals can help keep you motivated and satisfied in your career choices and give you momentum to do more. As Stephen Covey says about the habits of highly effective people, “Your life doesn’t just *happen*. Whether you know it or not, it is carefully designed by you. The choices, after all, are yours ... Just remember that every moment, every situation, provides a new choice. And in doing so, it gives you a perfect opportunity to do things differently to produce more positive results.”¹

Even if you have no plans of leaving your wonderful job or no desire to move up in your career (or if there is no moving up to be had), you can still start something new. Identify something that you’ve been excited about learning, something that uses your unique set of skills and expertise, or something that will introduce you to new people and new opportunities. Librarians have many outlets, choices, and different ways to start anew.

How can you organize your goals? Start by making a simple list of what you want to achieve in your career. Be as specific or as broad as you like. Once you have a list, organize it into short- and long-term goals. Then create a list of things you need to do in order to achieve your goals. This list might include steps such as taking classes, getting an additional degree or certification, acquiring specific experiences, or overcoming anxieties or fears. Your list will probably be longer and more detailed for your long-range goals. For instance, if you aspire to be a library director, you will need to put in the time, gain supervisory and budgeting experience, attain another degree or certification, and so on.

This is a working list, so add to or edit it on a regular basis, and reward yourself when you make steps toward your goals. Share your list, or parts of your list, with colleagues. Get feedback, ideas, and

support from those you know. By sharing your goals with others, you are making those goals real, giving them power, and putting more pressure on yourself to actually achieve them. (See Chapter 11 for more information on career planning and goal setting.)

Sample Career Goals Template

Career Goals (in priority order)	Measurements	Steps to Take	Time Frame
Goal 1: Create an online portfolio or a professional web presence.	Gather feedback from colleagues and data from website analytics and statistical tools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Find out about potential (and free) tools to use. - Learn basic HTML skills (take a class if needed). - Gather/digitize/organize materials to put online. - Start building my portfolio. 	1 month
Goal 2: Start a mentoring program for new librarians at my library.	Gather ongoing feedback from participants and formal assessment at the end of the program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Write down mission and goals, and plan for the program. - Get feedback, buy-in, and support from director and colleagues and potential mentors. - Develop an assessment tool. 	3 months
Goal 3: Complete a second master's degree in order to move into a higher position.	Enroll in a degree program, and complete one class per semester and one each summer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Get support from my family. - Get support from my employer (flextime and/or financial support). - Acquire/identify funds to pay for classes and materials. 	4–5 years

Whether we are fresh out of library school or long-term veterans of the profession, the No. 1 goal for many of us is finding a job. And not just any job, but a job that we like; that we enjoy doing; that we can grow in, learn from, and feel proud of; and that will enhance our skill sets and propel our careers. But the process of finding a job can be a long and difficult journey. Before beginning any job search, start by doing some prep work. Ask yourself questions such as, Am I geographically mobile? Where would I like to live? What type of jobs will I apply for? What types of libraries do I want to work in? What types of people do I want to work with? Am I flexible with my hours? How much money do I need to survive in XYZ city? How important is professional development? Where do I want to be in 5 or 10 years? What is my time frame for securing a job? Would I take a nonlibrarian position? Would I take

a part-time or temporary position? Would I consider a job outside of libraries? How do I define myself professionally?

The answers to these questions will assist you in visualizing and formalizing your professional goals, which will make your job search easier and help guide you in your path toward a successful career.

Searching for a Job

Among the many career-related questions we receive from librarians, the most common ones are, How do I find a job? and Why *can't* I find a job? To these questions, we have many answers, and we'll outline some of them in this chapter. Each person has a unique set of experiences and skills, and each job is different. Ideally, you will want to find the right job at the right time for you. When you apply and interview for a position, you will want to sell yourself as the right person for *that particular job*. Also, keep in mind that most people don't find their dream job right away. The path to your dream job will most likely involve several jobs, roles, levels, and locations.

Geographic Mobility or Lack Thereof

Being able to move for a job, or being geographically mobile, will open up your job search. This makes it much easier to find jobs that interest you and are the right fit. If you are able to move for a job, here are a few tips:

- *Be choosy.* Find a place or area that you actually like, or a city where you want to live. Your original plan might be to move and work someplace for a year or two and then move back or move somewhere else. However, even if you have no intention of staying permanently, keep in mind that something may end up keeping you there longer than you had planned. Do your homework on the area, and you'll have a better chance of getting the job. Employers want to know that a candidate really wants to live in their

area. You need to sell yourself and your skills for the job, but you also need to sell your interest in the location.

- *Use your connections.* Do you have friends, relatives, colleagues, or online connections who live in, or are familiar with, an area you might want to move to? You never know what kind of support, tips, advice, referrals, introductions, and recommendations you may get from these contacts. They can influence your job search and perhaps offer incentives for moving to the area.
- *Don't spend a ton of (your own) money.* When offered interviews in different cities, states, provinces, or countries, ask about reimbursement of travel expenses or about alternatives to travel, such as conducting the interview via an online video tool. For final interviews, however, most employers will want to meet you in person; likewise, you will want to meet them in person and physically explore the library, its collections, and the geographical area to make sure you will fit into a specific environment before you make the decision to move. When it comes to interviewing in person, some institutions will cover travel expenses to bring you in for an interview, but others will not. If you are considering interviewing with an institution that does not pay for travel and lodging, figure out how much the travel will cost you and think about how much you want the job and want to move to that specific area. Then weigh your options, keeping in mind that you will most likely go on many interviews before you get a job offer.

If you are *not* geographically mobile, remember that as you chart your course, every step builds on the next. When you take a job in a new place, you are starting fresh on a new adventure. When you stay put, your path has already begun. You need to arm yourself with the familiar: experiences, skills, and people you know. As you move along your career path in a given location, always assume that employers know one another; you might be surprised at how small

the library world is, even in the biggest of cities. You will also need more patience because there will be fewer job openings when you are geographically constrained. Here are some tips for nonmobile job seekers:

- *Take advantage of your existing professional relationships.* This can include library school professors, colleagues, or supervisors from student jobs or past jobs, and people you interact with on committees, working groups, or other types of networks. Stay connected with these people and let them know you are looking for a job. They can serve as references and may be able to review your professional materials, refer you for a job, and offer valuable advice about local libraries and employers.
- *Seek out local internships or volunteer opportunities at a library in your area,* preferably one where you could see yourself working. Since it might take time to find a job, you can get experience and make connections at the same time.
- *Join local associations and groups as soon as you can.* Get involved in professional development opportunities in your area. Not only will you connect with others in your community who may be able to help you find a job or serve as references, but you are building skills and keeping yourself motivated and active as a professional.



THOUGHTS ON STARTING A NEW JOB

Richard A. Murray, metadata librarian at Duke University Libraries and assistant editor of LIScareer.com

Accepting a job offer may be the most exciting part of a job search, but it's not the end; it's just the beginning. I've worked at

the Association of Research Libraries during my 16 years in the profession, and I've learned that what you do during your first 6 months in a position is just as important as what you did while you were trying to get the job.

My first library job was a paraprofessional position that I stumbled into accidentally. Libraries had never occurred to me as a place I could actually work, and I saw the job as a way to pay the bills until I figured out what I actually wanted to do. I knew nothing when I started that job. By the time I started my second position, I'd earned an MLS while working full-time and knew a lot more, but probably not as much as I thought I did. And by the time I started my current job a few years later, I'd figured out that nobody knew everything, that sometimes I actually did know more about certain things than anybody else did, and that, to a large extent, we all make it up as we go along. That last part was simultaneously a liberating and terrifying realization. Along the way, I learned something new while starting each new job—some things the easy way and some the hard way—and here are a few things I wish somebody had told me early on.

It can be tempting, especially in your first professional position, to charge in with guns blazing and try to implement all the big ideas you have right away. You may see things during your first few months—or maybe even during your interview—that you want to change immediately. Resist that urge. Unless you're working in a single-person operation, you will have co-workers, many of whom have probably been in the profession longer than you have, and it's likely they won't appreciate it if you come charging in like a bull in a china shop and start turning everything upside down (even if they agree that those changes need to happen). Start building relationships, find out what your new colleagues feel is working and not working, and try to get others on board with changes before you start making them. Remember, you don't know everything, and you probably don't know as much as you

think you do. That's OK. Try to minimize how much of your not-knowing-stuff you inflict on your new colleagues.

As you're establishing yourself in your new job, listen more than you talk. Look around to see who is well liked and who makes things happen in the organization, and try to figure out what they're doing that others respond well to. Introduce yourself to the power players and try to form relationships with them.

Every office, no matter how peaceful or amiable, has politics. The larger the organization, the more complicated the web of relationships will be. There are probably people who don't like each other. They may have invested many years in not liking each other, and they may try to get you to take sides in their feud. Don't get drawn into the morass. They've been fighting with each other for a long time without you, and they can continue without you. Remember that it is possible to be friends with two people who don't like each other.

It's likely there will be a rumor mill at your new job. Unless it's really toxic and out of control, this is not necessarily a bad thing. You can learn a lot about the organization by listening to what your colleagues are saying about it. Take it all with a grain of salt, but keep your ears open. You can stay plugged into the grapevine without contributing to it. You don't want to earn a reputation as someone who spreads gossip, but that doesn't mean you can't listen to it.

That's the negative side of interpersonal relationships in the office. There's a positive side, too. Librarianship is a diverse profession full of interesting, intelligent, genuinely nice people. I hope you'll be working with some of them in your new job. Take the time to get to know your new colleagues, including those outside your department with whom you may not work directly (yet). Eat lunch with them in the staff lounge from time to time. It will help you observe the way they interact, find out what is important to them, and also make some friends. It will also make them feel as if you're interested in them and are making an effort to

become part of the team. This is especially important if you've relocated for the job and don't know many people in the community. Your new colleagues will probably be happy to answer your questions about the area. Discussing topics such as local restaurants, places to walk your dog, or fun day trips is an easy way to start making friends.

The first few months in any new job are stressful, but they should also be exciting, unpredictable, and fun. This is, after all, what you worked so hard to achieve. Take time to enjoy it, gain new experiences, and build positive relationships with your new colleagues, patrons, and community. And don't worry, you won't be the new kid forever—somebody newer will probably get hired for some other position before long, and then you'll get to be the veteran who shows them the ropes.

Getting a Job With Little or No Library Experience

The best way to get a job is to have (or have had) a job. This is the classic dilemma: You can't get a job without experience, and you can't get experience without a job. Most job ads say "experience required" or "experience preferred." It's no secret: Employers prefer candidates with prior experience working in a library, even for entry-level jobs. Ideally, you would try to get this experience before or during library school. This is where we jump up and down and yell "Experience, experience, experience!"

Working in a library before or during library school can be beneficial in many ways, not just in terms of acquiring experience to put on your resume, but also in figuring out what type of library you would like to work in or what type of career path you would like to pursue. (Or the reverse: learning what type of library or role you definitely do not want to pursue!) Having this knowledge ahead of time will help you focus your education and your job

search and will help you tailor your experience and skills to the specific job you want.

Lack of experience, or lack of the right experience, is often one of the main reasons you may not be getting a job. If you've never worked in a library before, you can volunteer, intern, or look for a part-time or paraprofessional position. Here are some suggestions:

- *Find a local library and ask about volunteering.* Be prepared with an up-to-date resume and know what hours you can work. Volunteers usually cannot be picky about what tasks they do, but if you let the people in charge know that you are interested in learning about specific things, they may allow you to do more after they see the quality of your work.
- *Intern.* If you're still in school or are a recent grad, talk to your library school about opportunities. Even if you have graduated, you still might be able to do an "unofficial" internship. These positions may be paid or unpaid and are usually more clearly defined than volunteer positions; you'll work on a specific job or task for a limited amount of time. Alternatively, contact a local library on your own and ask about possible internships. Again, be prepared. Let them know about your area of interest and your skills, and offer to be of assistance on any special or ongoing projects.
- *Apply for a part-time or paraprofessional job.* If you don't have *any* library experience but you need to pay the bills, and you find a good (paying) job that helps you acquire the experience you need to find an MLS position later on, go for it. However, we typically don't recommend that people with library degrees apply for positions that don't require the MLS; taking a nondegree position is potentially harmful to your career trajectory, as it sometimes raises red flags for potential employers and makes it more difficult to find a professional position later on.

Starting Again After an Absence

Everyone's situation is different, and many factors influence the decision to seek a new job or stay put. Ideally, we should all be happy in our workplace, keep learning new things, work in a supportive environment, find mentors, and get a paycheck. We wish this for all of you, but we also understand that at times, life throws curve balls. Situations can change, and you may find yourself out of work or working outside of a library for a time.

Starting over can be a challenge for anyone, and especially for those who have been out of the workforce for many years. Not only do you need to update your materials, you also need to update yourself. Your library degree and past experience do not expire, but skills can become outdated quickly in today's libraries. Employers want to hire candidates who are current and who are aware of recent trends, issues, and projects.

When you apply for positions, you will need to address your absence from the profession. Be prepared to do so, both in your cover letters and during interviews. Be honest and open in a professional manner, without sharing too much personal information. One person who wrote to "Career Q&A With the Library Career People" asked for help getting back into the workforce after an absence. She was "very aware that I cannot mention cancer ... or motherhood" in my cover letter. We responded sympathetically, and said that, in fact, she should mention both. Illness and parenthood are two of the most common reasons people leave the workforce. Overcoming an illness and becoming a parent are two huge accomplishments—and should be seen as such.

Gaps in your resume will stand out. If these gaps are not addressed, they will hurt your chances of getting a job. Unexplained gaps leave a potential employer wondering what you were doing during those times. So, explain yourself first, before they start to wonder. Be eloquent, be convincing, and make whoever reads your

cover letter believe that you are ready to re-enter the workforce. Here are some things to consider while getting your materials, and yourself, up-to-date:

- *Stay connected.* You don't want to come off as waking up from a deep sleep. Stay aware of what's going on in the professional world, and show that you can and want to stay current with the news and literature. Follow influential people on Twitter, join professional discussion groups on LinkedIn, and develop a professional online identity.
- *Volunteer.* If possible, try to get some current library experience to make yourself more hireable. The easiest way to do this is to volunteer. Ask local libraries or related institutions whether they need assistance with specific projects.
- *Take classes.* Many online and on-campus courses are offered by library schools, associations, universities, and technology companies. Think about taking a few to get up-to-date with new technologies or to learn about new concepts or trends in the profession.
- *Consider and use transferable skills.* Don't discount the experience you've acquired during your absence from the workforce or experience from other jobs and roles that can translate into librarianship.
- *Have impeccable application materials (resume and cover letter).* Make sure your materials are professional and polished. You need to shine and stand out in every way possible.
- *Be confident and positive.*

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People:²

Habit 1: Be Proactive

Habit 2: Begin with the End in Mind

Habit 3: Put First Things First

Habit 4: Think Win-Win

Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood

Habit 6: Synergize

Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw

You're Hired! Now What?

So, you got the job. What happens now?

The First Day

Most of your first day will be spent getting to know people at work, getting paperwork done, and getting ready for work—not actually working. Remember that it's OK, and even expected, for you to ask questions. You'll also be meeting many new people on your first day and learning a lot of new names. In between meetings, if you can jot down names, responsibilities, and a brief note about the person (e.g., *John Smith, acquisitions, wears nice ties, is super friendly*), you'll have a much better chance of remembering details down the road.

The First Week

The first week is a time for you to get to know your work environment, the larger (parent) institution, and your colleagues a little better. Use this week to get to know the people you are going to be working with and to create relationships with people who will help you as you advance in your new role. Try to meet with people on an individual basis and ask them questions about their jobs, their goals,

and their expectations of working with you. You will learn a lot about the workflow in the library, and you will make friends in the process. Also, use your new colleagues as sources of local information for neighborhood eateries, shops, and events. Set up lunch dates to get to know them better.

While you're meeting new people in your library, find out who else, outside your library and even outside your institution, might be good for you to meet. They may include people in the information technology department or librarians or library staff members in related libraries or consortia. Find out from your supervisor and your colleagues whom you should contact and start a list of names. While the first week is your chance to ask lots of questions and get to know the people you will be working with and for, it is also a time to impress others with your enthusiasm and eagerness to be a part of the team. Making a good first impression will benefit you in the future.

The First Month

The first month is when you really get to know the ins and outs of your role in the library and what is required of you. As you dive into your job responsibilities and get into the rhythm of the work environment, remember that you are still new and still in a trial or probationary period. Don't be afraid to ask for feedback from your supervisor and assistance from your colleagues, if needed. If you filled an existing position, collect and go through materials left behind by the previous person (e.g., files, papers, projects, notes). If you are in a newly created position, you'll need to work closely with your supervisor to develop goals that will fulfill the needs of the library and integrate this new position seamlessly into the team. Organize all your materials and your office space. Save everything at this point, because you don't know what you might need in the future.

The first month is also a good time for you to become involved in committees, associations, and groups, both those that interest you and ones that will assist you in your job. Ask about worthwhile groups or committees to join. You should also join online communities and subscribe to library-related blogs and email lists—places to learn new things and keep up-to-date on new resources and new technology.

You will certainly feel energized as you start your new job, and you might even feel like charging forward and getting things done quickly. Before you do, make sure you're not stepping on any toes, that you're not changing the workflow, and that you're not excluding others in the process. Many new librarians are hired as “change agents,” with the expectation that they will motivate other staff members and bring in new ideas. Such change can be a very positive thing for a stale work environment, but it needs to be done gradually, and it requires clear goals, communication, support from management, and buy-in from the staff. Whether you are stepping into someone else's shoes or starting out in a newly created position, learn what is expected of you—and set your own job-specific and career-related goals for your first month, first year, and beyond.

Sticking to Your Goals

It's easy to tell people to set goals and work hard toward achieving them, but doing so isn't a simple process. Achieving your goals involves planning, reflection, and introspection—as well as setbacks and frustration. When you plan your career path and think about what you want to achieve and where you want to end up, you need to consider other life goals as well, such as your family, location, personality, and abilities. It's kind of like writing a book: You need to figure out what you want to include, attempt to organize and

make sense of the various parts, gather external data and information, and start writing. And don't forget to give yourself a deadline. Panic may set it: Who are you to plan out your life and have such lofty aspirations, to think you can achieve your dreams? Our advice is to own it, live it, learn from your failures or setbacks, and keep going.

So what are you waiting for? Go. Get started already.

Endnotes

1. Stephen Covey, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," accessed July 10, 2013, www.stephencovey.com/7habits/7habits.php.
2. Ibid.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Twitter thing, remodeling a house, raising three kids ... and still wondering, what's next?

Tiffany Eatman Allen is the director of Library Human Resources at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. She has worked in libraries for more years than she's willing to admit, including in the catalog department of an academic library, the library of a pharmaceutical company, and a private biomedical research foundation library. This adventure all started with a job in the City and Regional Planning Library as an undergraduate student employee. She received her BA and MLS from the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. In addition to her on-the-job responsibilities, she recently completed a term as president of the human resources section of the American Library Association's Library Leadership and Management Association. She continues to mentor and coach current School of Information and Library Science students, write a career column, and cheer for her two boys (soccer or basketball, depending on the season). In her free time (as if!), she enjoys spending time with friends and family, wine tasting, supporting local agriculture, wine tasting, cooking, and wine tasting.

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