

Susanne Markgren and Tiffany Eatman Allen survey librarians and industry experts to explore options for librarians who seek careers outside the library. There are plenty of careers that draw on library skills; job seekers just need to know how to obtain them. The authors of the new book Career Q&A: A Librarian's Real-Life, Practical Guide to Managing a Successful Career show information professionals how to assess their strengths and sell their skills, as well as where to look for alternative job opportunities.

ALTERNATIVE JOBS: THE NONTRADITIONAL CAREER PATH

Susanne Markgren and Tiffany Eatman Allen

Dear Q&A: If I wanted to use my MLS outside libraries, do you have any recommendations about where I should look? Are there other places and industries that value the skills I've honed in my library work?

The word *librarian* implies someone who works in a library or someone who works with books. If you tell someone you are a librarian, they ask you what library, and then they tell you how lucky you must be to read books all day. Because that is what we do, right? Because *library* is right in our title, it defines our role, our career, and our profession. But in today's technology-focused, information-laden workplaces, is it more accurate to call us information professionals? Do we need the library (literally or symbolically) to define what we do? Do we need to work in a building full of books to be librarians?

In the *Atlas of New Librarianship*, R. David Lankes writes, "I have long contended that a room full of books is simply a closet but that an empty room with a librarian in it is a library."¹ Perhaps we

have been classifying ourselves too rigidly, and we should allow our roles, our degrees, our titles, and our profession a little room to expand, grow, and diversify. After all, many of us have graduated with *information* degrees, and many of us have already assimilated seamlessly into roles in other industries.

We know that librarians are good at finding information, researching and synthesizing data, organizing and classifying materials, maintaining and preserving items, providing access to resources, and educating others about how to use systems and tools. We should also know that we don't need to work in libraries to be information professionals, and we don't need to be called a *librarian* to do the work of one. It's no surprise that library (or information) skills are used, sought after, and valued in other professions and that the skills we learn in graduate school and while working in libraries can help us obtain nontraditional professional positions both within and outside libraries. We have many opportunities beyond a traditional, typical librarian job in a traditional, typical library.

The Information Field

The iSchools organization addresses the changing information profession: "The information field is the rapidly evolving profession of our time. Just as business careers and MBAs became de rigueur in the industrial age, information professionals are now in high demand, as businesses and society grapple with the challenges and opportunities of the digital age."²

The skills we are known for—finding, evaluating, synthesizing, classifying, and providing access to information—are all skills that

are useful, and even desired, in many different professions—earning them their reputation as “transferable skills.” They can include skills in customer service, technology, writing, management, communications, research, teaching, languages, and marketing, to name just a few. Transferable skills can help you get jobs in libraries when you have little or no library experience, and they can help you get jobs outside libraries.

In *Library Journal*'s 2011 placement survey for library school graduates, 18.3 percent of placements were in sectors outside library and information science (LIS). These graduates found jobs in a variety of roles in nonprofit agencies (17.3 percent), private industry (30 percent), and other areas, including law, finance, and retail (52.7 percent). “Finding employment outside of the LIS professions became a delicate balancing act for many. Besides jobs in nonprofits and private industry, the graduating class also found employment in an array of ‘other’ agencies but often using the skills learned during their master’s degree programs.” Some of these jobs fell into the following areas: software engineering, user interface design, digital asset management, analytics, grant writing, fundraising, government, biotech firms, advertising, marketing, television, higher education, hospitals, and publishing.³

Exploring Options

G. Kim Dority, author of Rethinking Information Work and LIS Career Sourcebook, illuminates the challenge of choosing a career direction in library science:

There are so many directions to take your library science career that part of the challenge is figuring out which of those directions to pursue first. However, sometimes it helps to frame the

choices as categories of options. From librarian to independent information professional, these may include:

- *Traditional library jobs: Working within facilities-based librarianship, such as becoming a school librarian, public librarian, or campus-based academic librarian (although it's increasingly the case that few types of librarianship can any longer be thought of as "traditional")*
- *Merging nontraditional with traditional: Doing nontraditional things within a traditional library setting (perhaps creating unique outreach programs for the local small-business community)*
- *Librarian with a twist: Performing traditional library roles but within an organization whose mission is not librarianship or education (the traditional special library role)*
- *Going special within special: Doing nontraditional types of librarian work within traditional special libraries (e.g., designing and running the company intranet)*
- *Becoming part of the ops team: Doing these nontraditional activities embedded in operational units rather than in a designated organization library (for example, being the researcher on a business-development team)*
- *Supporting the cause: Doing library-focused activities outside of but for libraries and librarians (think vendors, bibliographic utilities, etc.)*

- *Bridging: Building on skills honed in a library-based job to bridge those skills into a new, nonlibrary role (for example, shifting your reference librarian skills to competitive intelligence or prospect research)*
- *Making it up: Creating your own job, either within a library or for a nonlibrary organization*
- *Going solo: Going independent, or doing any of the activities that fall within these categories on a freelance, contract, or project basis—an increasingly popular information professional path⁴*

The definition of “alternative jobs for librarians” is broad and varied and can encompass a variety of different roles, settings, and industries. An alternative career might involve a traditional librarian job in a nontraditional setting, working in a nontraditional role within a library setting, or something else entirely. The types of industries that hire and use the skills of information professionals are too many to name—and in reality, they could be any industry in any setting. As library schools continue to graduate more and more information professionals, and as librarians nearing or at retirement age continue to work longer and longer in their jobs, those who are searching for jobs may need to look outside libraries and outside traditional roles in order to find employment. That’s OK, and even kind of exciting. We think that a good motto to live by when job seeking is “Keep an open mind, and cast a wide net.”

You may already know that you want to do something different or something out of the ordinary. Maybe you have a dream of starting your own business; pursuing more education; or becoming a

teacher, writer, consultant, or designer. Maybe you find yourself unsatisfied, unsupported, or unengaged in your current position and feel an urge to move on to something else. Perhaps it was always your plan to use your degree in a nontraditional setting or role. Maybe something (a job offer, a concept, or a desire to try something different) serendipitously fell into your lap. Perhaps you've been looking for a job for a while and have been unable to secure a librarian position within a library. Whatever scenario describes your situation, it is always a good idea to keep an open mind when it comes to jobs. Know what you are good at and what you really enjoy doing, which means that you will need to assess your skills and goals, seek different places to search for jobs, and be able to revise and rework your application materials for different types of industries.

Assessing Strengths

In What's the Alternative? Career Options for Librarians and Info Pros, Rachel Singer Gordon provides wise advice for assessing your job strengths:

Once you have a general picture of what you want in your career, think about the skills, talents, and knowledge you already possess that can help you get to that point. Finding new ways to use and develop the skills you have acquired as an information professional (as well as those you've picked up through previous careers, education, or interests) is essential from the moment you begin to contemplate an alternative path. Skills and strengths that may be tangential or even unused in your current job may

grow to become integral to your new career; those that you think of only in the library context can be reframed and used in other contexts. This can sometimes be as simple as changing the language you use to describe what you do.⁵

How to Get Started

Before you make the move toward an alternative career, take some time to examine, or re-examine, your goals, assess your skills and your strengths, and categorize your assets. Your skills, strengths, and assets include any that will support you in your career move, as well as your personal interests (things you love doing), which will add to your motivation. Also evaluate your weaknesses; they help you determine the skills, experience, knowledge, and contacts you need to acquire.

Talk to some people who have successfully made the move into alternative positions or nontraditional industries and ventured into unknown waters. Gain as much insight and information as you can about the particular professions and industries that interest you, and start thinking about how you can market yourself to them.

As always, you should revise and change your materials for every single job application. Each job is unique. As always, you need to make it clear to potential employers that you want *their* job, not just a job. When applying for jobs outside libraries, seek examples of resumes for specific industries and roles. Carefully read their requirements for application materials, which may be completely different from those you are accustomed to and those prescribed for librarian positions. You may be used to writing two-page cover letters and sending in a three- to four-page resume or curriculum vitae. These specifications may not work for jobs outside libraries. You

may need to condense and include only highly relevant information. You may want to look at different ways of formatting your resume. Consider a functional resume, which works well with transferable skills and allows you to put your most relevant experience and skills up front.



And the Survey Says ...

Susan L., a research analyst, notes:

I was able to transition successfully from a research librarian to a researcher (outside libraries) and then to an analyst, which I am today, because of four things: 1) Maintaining strong relationships with professionals ... so strong that over the years, those professionals have become good friends. 2) Continually building research and database skills. That means building a reputation that you're the first to know emerging trends, solutions, and tools. People will come to you. 3) Whether at work or play, be helpful where you can add value. That means offering an opinion or advice when asked (when people are ready to hear) and making sure you don't spread yourself too thin by being helpful to every single person in your company. 4) Manage your time. Make sure you have enough juice to last the week. Burning out helps no one. Rather it's detrimental to your health and can cast a shadow on your ability to perform.

Finding an Alternative Job

Even if *librarian* is part of the job title or if the position is located in a library, certain jobs may not be listed in the usual librarian job-seeking sites, publications, or email lists. You will need to broaden

your search and seek more job ads. Use the mega job sites such as Monster.com, SimplyHired.com, and CareerBuilder.com. These sites categorize their job listings into broad areas or industries such as information technology, research, government, marketing, healthcare, publishing, customer service, and education, which you can use to help you narrow your search. You should also look at online newspaper ads, trade publications and websites, and association sites that list job ads in other industries. If you don't know where a certain industry may be posting its jobs, contact a human resources department at a specific company and ask. Certain companies may post in only a few places, so be relentless in your search.

When searching for alternative jobs, you may need to think outside the box and outside the librarian mind-set. Other companies or industries may use unfamiliar terminology in their job titles and descriptions. Try searching with skill-based keywords and ones that you may already have listed on your resume. Here are examples:

- Assessment
- Classification
- Content management
- Design
- Development
- Instruction
- Marketing
- Metadata
- Outreach
- Project development
- Research
- Systems
- Taxonomy
- Training

- User experience
- Writing



LEAVING A 20-YEAR CAREER TO PURSUE A STARTUP BUSINESS

Pam Sessoms, LibraryH3lp

Vendor. I've struggled with that word. Vendors are the people you can't trust, the ones who are only out for your library's money. Right?

I am here to tell you that it's not always like that. My husband, Eric, is a brilliant programmer, and he (quite unexpectedly) sat up and declared that he'd help me solve a particularly nasty technical problem involving chat and IM reference services back in 2008. This particular problem wasn't really practical to solve within an actual library at the time: too few programmers with the chops and time to focus on the problem; too much political risk; too few ways to handle the inevitable sustainability questions (i.e., how are we going to pay for the care and feeding of this beast?).

So away we went, building and growing a thing called LibraryH3lp (libraryh3lp.com). From 2008 to 2011, he coded while I tested, did troubleshooting, documented, and offered user support on the side, at the same time keeping a full-time librarian job. LibraryH3lp made a lot of librarians and patrons pretty happy, with more than 300 libraries using the product. What about the sustainability question? Our effort was a mostly accidental startup just seeking to solve a technical problem, so Eric didn't have a grant or investors or anything like that. He decided to charge a minimal but fair fee in exchange for a good product. *Scandalous!* Who does that these days?! And he built LibraryH3lp from the ground up for openness and good interoperability with other systems.

By the end of 2011, I was pretty tired—honestly, I was approaching a nervous breakdown. I loved my “real librarian” job. I worked with brilliant colleagues amid a sea of incredible resources. But I also loved working on LibraryH3lp. Having raised that puppy from birth and having used it extensively in real practice, I was pretty much uniquely qualified to work on it and shape its continued development.

In the end, I made the difficult decision to leave my “real job” and pursue LibraryH3lp full-time. So here I am. As of this writing, I’ve been away from the university for about 6 months. I miss my colleagues and all that goes with working as part of a team in one of the best research libraries in the world. But I also love working from home and listening to my dog snore. I don’t miss the daily commute. I don’t miss the paperwork. I really adore having to rely on my alarm clock much less. Now that I’m doing LibraryH3lp full-time, I handle a lot of day-to-day business things, such as billing and invoicing. Surprisingly, I enjoy that sort of thing, for now, anyway. It’s methodical, almost meditative, in its routine.

Then there is the measure of unpredictability. Just a couple of weeks ago, the library reference world was rocked by the announcement that Google had acquired Meebo, used by many libraries for chat reference services, and would be shutting down nearly all of Meebo’s services in 1 month. I think I’ve worked about 16 hours a day since that announcement. At least two other, much larger companies have announced new chat reference products, and this has been one of my first tastes of real private-market competition. But I guess that is life as a vendor, and it is true that competition creates better products.

Some of the challenges that libraries face are difficult to solve from inside the library for logistical and financial reasons, and these may be better tackled from the private sphere of the library ecosystem. But libraries have created some amazing services and infrastructure by building on their cooperative spirit and very

strong political and technical ties to each other. The very notion of interlibrary loan still simply thrills me, as do the ideas behind things such as single copy and large scale digitization.

In summary, I love my new work and the flexibility of self-employment. Granted, it is not as stable and secure, but I love change and learning new things all the time. I have not been in my new role for long enough to really begin to understand the interplay between open technical systems, the free market, and existing library systems. But moving ahead, I hope tiny little inroads can be made so that library companies can become a bit more like the libraries we serve.

Selling My Degree to People Outside Libraries

When looking for jobs outside the library profession, for alternative roles within libraries, or for roles that do not require an MLS (or equivalent), you might need to do more prep work, change your game plan, and display a little extra savvy. You may need to convince potential employers that your skills, experience, and degree are right for the job, whatever that job may be. You may need to answer questions about why you don't want to work in libraries or at least in a traditional librarian position. You may need to change people's perceptions of librarianship and the information profession. You may need to talk about how your degree is exactly what is needed for the job at hand. When interviewing, the most important things to remember are to be approachable and professional, express enthusiasm, ask questions, and show confidence. You need to believe that you can successfully use your skills, experience, and degree in nontraditional, alternative positions.



And the Survey Says ...

We asked, If you were to look for a position in which you could use your skills and your MLS degree outside a library, what would it be (or what area would it be in)? Here are the most popular responses we received:

- *Archivist*
- *Bookstore owner*
- *Career counselor*
- *College recruiter*
- *Communications*
- *Competitive intelligence*
- *Computer applications*
- *Concierge*
- *Consultant*
- *Corporate marketing researcher*
- *Data management/analysis*
- *Ecommerce*
- *Editor*
- *Education/educational technology*
- *Entrepreneur*
- *Event planning*
- *Fact checker*
- *Financial management*
- *Fundraising*
- *GIS/informatics*
- *Grant writing*
- *Historic preservation*
- *Human resources*
- *Independent info broker*
- *Indexing*
- *Interface design*
- *Knowledge manager*
- *Library interior design*
- *Marketing*
- *Medical research*
- *Paralegal*
- *Policy research*
- *Product development*
- *Public relations*
- *Publishing*
- *Real estate broker*
- *Records management*
- *Reporter*
- *Researcher*
- *Social work*
- *Taxonomist*
- *Think tank*
- *Trainer*
- *Video production*
- *Web content management*
- *Website designer*
- *Writer*

Going Back to Libraries

After some time in an alternative career or work outside libraries (by choice or by necessity), you may think about moving back into a

more traditional position. Don't assume that your work outside libraries means that you don't have the skills, experience, and motivation that library employers are looking for. In fact, your unique skills, honed outside the LIS sector, might just be the tipping factor that lands you a job in a library. Let's face it, diversification is a growing trend, and the right experience (no matter where it was acquired) is a precious commodity. In any organization, people want to hire the best candidate, the one who most closely matches the needs of the position and the organization. It will be your job as that candidate to educate those making the hiring decision and to show that your skills, although gained in a different environment, will transfer to their organization and make you the best qualified candidate. So take the time to assess your skills and then translate them into the language of the job you want. Revise your application materials and be prepared to discuss how your skills and your experience closely match the needs of the organization. Most important, believe that you can transition out of, and back into, libraries because your skills and your education are valued.



TAKING THE ALTERNATIVE PATH

Carrie Netzer Wajda, new business librarian at Y&R, New York, NY

In library school, there can be a lot of pressure to choose a particular track (academic vs. corporate vs. public libraries) before you even gain any real-world experience working in libraries. I graduated from my MLIS program with 8 years of paraprofessional experience and an iron determination to find a research-oriented tenure-track librarian position. I immediately plunged into a subject master's degree program and pursued

every academic opportunity that might lead to the kind of role I coveted.

Yet just 5 months after the ink had dried on my second master's diploma, I quit my academic librarian job to start a freelance writing and research business. After 5 years of postgraduate, professional-level academic library experience, that tenure-track research role seemed as remote a career possibility as ever. I was burned out from teaching too many classes, long commutes to distant jobs, bureaucracy, and low pay. I figured it couldn't be that hard to earn something close to my library salary with freelance work, and if I wasn't going to make a lot of money, I might as well focus on the kind of work I enjoyed: research and writing.

And it worked! Although no one at library school ever mentioned such a possibility, there is plenty of freelance work out there for librarians. While running a business isn't easy, it's no harder than dragging oneself to a disappointing job every day. But you have to treat it like a business to be successful, which means doing many things they don't teach in library school: marketing of your skills, project management, and client management.

The arrival of my first child made my burgeoning freelance career extremely challenging to manage, so when a part-time permanent role with an advertising firm became available, I applied. While I had never worked in advertising or any other kind of corporate library, I had written for marketers, and my teaching experience was a natural fit for the global training sessions I now conduct. But the most important reason I got the job was my ability to apply my skills in different contexts. Focus on developing skill sets—especially technical skills and the "soft" skills of people management—and you'll find that those purported barriers between librarian career paths largely disappear.

Here are my tips for transitioning between careers:

- Employers worth working for hire *skills* as much as they do *direct job experience*. If a potential employer is too

hidebound to consider your skills just because you acquired them in a different context, that employer is probably going to be inflexible in other ways as well. (You still have to make the case that your skills really are transferable, of course.)

- A well-written job description helps you identify what an employer is looking for. If you can't tell from the job description, then the employer may not really know what he or she wants in a candidate.
- A great resume and cover letter are essential for getting your foot in the door, but at the interview, it's all about you. No matter how good you are on paper, it's what you do and how you present yourself in the interview that will determine whether you get the job.
- Look for part-time, freelance, or even unpaid opportunities that will help you develop and expand your skills. Even small projects can have a big impact on your career, but select your projects wisely for maximum impact on your marketability.
- Don't limit your career options prematurely. Think about what you enjoy doing on a day-to-day basis, and look for career opportunities that match your interests, wherever you may find them.
- Be patient and flexible. Most people don't have linear careers, and careers develop over decades. What's right for you can change with time, and that's OK.

Endnotes

1. R. David Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship* (Boston: MIT Press, 2011), 16.
2. "The Information Field," *iSchools*, accessed July 10, 2013, ischools.org/about/the-information-field.
3. Stephanie L. Maatta, "Placements & Salaries 2012: Types of Placements," *Library Journal*, October 15, 2012, accessed July 10, 2013, lj.libraryjournal.com/2012/10/placements-and-salaries/2012-survey/types-of-placements.

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5. Rachel Singer Gordon, *What's the Alternative? Career Options for Librarians and Info Pros* (Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc., 2008), 12.

About the Authors

Susanne Markgren is the digital services librarian at Purchase College, State University of New York. Previously, she worked in public libraries, a theater library, a government library, a seminary library, a university library system, and a medical school library. Susanne has held responsibilities (some concurrently) in interlibrary loan, reserves, access services, cataloging, reference and instruction, web development, and systems and electronic resources. She is a past president of the Greater New York Metropolitan Chapter of the Association of College and Research Libraries and continues to serve on the executive board. She received her BA from the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire and her MLIS from the University of Texas at Austin. In her spare time (or because she just might be insane), she is completing a master of fine arts, teaching a for-credit information literacy class, coordinating a mentoring program, serving as a mentor, writing a career column, helping to plan conferences, designing logos and websites, trying to figure out this 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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