

Taking Charge of your LIS Career: Personal Strategies, Institutional Programs, Strong Libraries
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Becoming the entrepreneur librarian: building skills, networks and experiences abroad

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Abstract:

This paper explores how a librarian who is working abroad can improve and develop key skills in emerging technologies and subject specialties in today's global environment. Traditionally librarians needed to attend conferences on-site to learn important trends in the field of librarianship; however, with today's global technology, it is now possible to attend webinars, virtual conferences and training sessions to gain new skills and contacts all online and free. Today librarians can and must be entrepreneurs in pursuing their own learning interests and goals beyond traditional approaches. This paper is a reflection of one U.S. librarian's experience in crafting a successful professional development strategy where he utilized various tools and resources from online courses to webinars to remain relevant and up-to-date while working abroad. Librarians must be proactive to craft their own professional development strategy in order to maintain important skills needed in today's global environment.

Keywords: expatriate librarians, continuing professional development, online courses.

Introduction

Working abroad can be a challenge for any librarian interested in maintaining professional development, technological skills, contacts and networks. For librarians who are working abroad, that is, expatriate librarians, it may be said that it is a unique opportunity to work in a library located in a foreign country. There is a great deal of learning that occurs when one works abroad: acquiring new language skills and interacting in multicultural landscapes can be viewed as either obstacles or opportunities for career growth.

One challenge for U.S. expatriate librarians is that they may not have easy access to the major library conferences in North America. Conferences such as the American Library Association (ALA), Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL), Special Libraries Association (SLA), the Linked Open Data in Libraries, Archives and Museums (LODLAM) summit, and the Library Orientation Exchange (LOEX), regularly take place throughout the United States and expatriate librarians may not be able to attend. In addition to access, cost is often a major issue that may discourage librarians from participating in conferences in other countries. Collectively, these factors may prevent librarians from seeking professional development opportunities due to the nature of their workplace.

There have however been growing numbers of programs, webinars, workshops and similar events recently happening in the virtual world. These have allowed librarians to stay connected with their peers from across the world as well as to learn new skills, trends, and ideas in their respective fields of interests. As a result of these numerous and affordable resources, librarians may have many options to choose from; sometimes however there is a plethora of online resources that can be overwhelming.

The other issue with online learning is access to appropriate but costly technologies and the Internet. Depending on where the expatriate librarian is based, there may be poor Internet connections, restricted Internet access or the unavailability of specific technologies such as a computer, microphone, webcam, software and such like. A combination of these factors may make the situation extremely difficult for expatriate librarians who are trying to gain professional development skills remotely.

Personal narrative

As one of the reference and research services librarians in New York University Shanghai (NYU Shanghai), the newest portal campus of the New York University global network, located in the People's Republic of China, it was possible for me to continue developing key skills and experiences in digital and data services to support the community of researchers and students in this University since November 2013. Working in this global network university also made it possible to cultivate new contacts and networks within NYU and to build the services and resources in this new library. A self-crafted professional development program was necessary for many purposes, to learn new skills and to stay abreast of new technologies and trends in academic librarianship.

Designing this professional development program was doing something more than just for a "job." It was a commitment to self-investment, to develop new knowledge in using an array of sophisticated resources and tools in order to remain competitive for other future opportunities. Such opportunities might be new job prospects, collaborative or solo projects, or roles that would permit continued advancement and career path excellence, by expanding skills, knowledge, experiences and networks while working abroad. A very proactive personal approach to learning was not difficult to maintain, apart from factors such as time zone differences and access to technological tools and services.

The time zone difference was also difficult to adjust to in the beginning since most webinars took place during the evening. Initially I had stayed up late to participate in these workshops but later I found out that most webinars are archived and become accessible later. Active participate in the discussion would be difficult, however. Some webinars took place in the early

morning in U.S Eastern Standard Time (EST), which made it possible to participate in the evening since the time difference between Shanghai and New York is about 12 hours. I adapted to this format and it worked out well.

In addition, with some governments today attempting to restrict online access, there may be a need to obtain a “virtual private network” (VPN) that would allow Internet users to bypass any online firewalls or restrictions. This can speed up Internet access as well. The VPN works as if a computer or a network-enabled device is connected to a private network where data can be sent or received across a shared network.

This paper reflects the author’s experiences in crafting a professional development program while working abroad. The benefits and challenges in seeking learning and networking opportunities while working in a foreign country are described. As described earlier, many people may find it difficult to gain such access to resources but it is possible if one is proactive and creative in developing a learning program.

Why professional development

Professional development is important for information professionals who want to expand their skills, knowledge and experiences in order to perform to their potential in their existing organizations or to further their careers. Professional development is a form of continual or lifelong learning that many information-related organizations such as the Special Libraries Association (SLA) and the Medical Library Association (MLA) emphasize as a core competency for professionals in the field.

The American Library Association (ALA) provides solid reasons for attending ALA conferences: librarians can become more “valuable” to their institutions when attendees learn about innovative services or trends to support their clients and bring back these ideas to implement. Librarians can also meet with vendors, specialists, and other librarians to discuss ideas or share resources. These reasons are valid for those who can afford to attend on-site conferences. However, attending a conference can also be time consuming or overwhelming (or underwhelming), depending on how the conference is organized. This is also not the only method for a librarian to pursue professional development activities.

In an article in *Library Journal*, LaGuardia (2014a) summarizes what librarians are doing for professional development and also what managers expect their librarians to be doing for professional development, based on a series of interviews and surveys. LaGuardia (2014a) also notes that librarians are taking classes in different areas such as data, project and information managements; learning a new language, web development, or information architecture; some are also presenting at conferences; performing committee work or publishing articles. Overall, there is a range of activities that can fall under the category of professional development.

For expatriate librarians, it is critical to actively pursue professional development goals so that they can acquire appropriate skills and experiences that may not be offered in their current environment. For example, if an expatriate librarian works in a remote part of the world, there may not be conference opportunities or activities in which the librarian can participate. It is already a challenge for librarians to learn about and adapt to the cultures or languages of their host countries. Fortunately there are many learning opportunities to pursue through the virtual

world, but this approach requires strategizing or prioritizing what to learn and how to seek out entrepreneurial opportunities for career advancement.

For the present author professional development is important for both work and career goals. Professional development leads to a full understanding of how and where the library or information world is heading, and also supports critical thinking about the “big picture” of the profession. Finding and implementing innovative solutions or creative approaches to user support through reference, research, digital or instructional services are often exciting and challenging learning experiences; the role of a generalist librarian allows the author to pursue different research, professional and academic interests and currently to support scholars who are pursuing research in digital scholarship, digital humanities or data science projects, some of which are growing areas in the academic landscape. The field of data science in particular is new personally, and there are also many scholars who would like to engage in digital humanities research and digital scholarship projects, a familiar but learning and research growth area.

Instead of attending conferences in digital or data services, the creation of a personal professional development program of participation in webinars and MOOCs, and through Skype or Google Hangout made it possible to tap into colleagues with expertise from NYU in New York and NYU Abu Dhabi (another NYU portal campus, located in the United Arab Emirates), for advice and training. These activities can be time consuming since they require a firm commitment of personal online presence and time zone differences can create a problem. Most of the online learning takes place in the evening since Shanghai is 12 hours ahead of New York and 4 hours ahead of Abu Dhabi. Pursuing a professional development strategy of this kind is a form of self-investment. These programs are free and are available.

Webinars: attending, creating or presenting

From time to time on many listservs, associations, caucuses, sections, discussion groups and vendors share news of or promote upcoming webinars or virtual conferences on a variety of professional topics. Some require affordable fees and others are completely free. Timing for participation can be difficult: difference in time zones mean they are often scheduled in the middle of the night or early in the morning; most of these webinars are archived for attendees or subscribers. These are helpful ways to learn more remotely about professional topics, ranging from the use of 3D printers in libraries to new open access tools. These sites may include edWeb, Booklist, OCLC WebJunction, and TED Education, to name a few.

Steve Hargadon, founder and director of the Learning Revolution Project (2015) has created, promoted and managed several leading online conferences that the author attended in the past year: these include Library 2.0, Global Education and Gaming in Education among others. They bring together attendees from all over the world into an online platform hosted by Blackboard, the online learning management system, and allow participants to connect with one another through various topics over several hours or a few days. Most important is the fact that these online conferences are free because they are sponsored by education-based organizations and associations where information professionals can join and present their current projects in these outlets.

One major benefit in sharing projects or ideas in the virtual world is receiving feedback. Although online participation may not be as effective as in-person, it is however a simple matter of convenience for librarians who cannot find time to attend. By getting feedback from

members around the world, I have been able to refine and enhance projects I have worked on recently. One can also get feedback if work is shared through blogs, social network sites like Twitter or Facebook, and most recently WeChat, a popular mobile social media app in China.

During the past year several projects were developed and presented by the author: one was on creating a virtual reference tool using “WeChat” and another focused on teaching information literacy to first year Chinese students in an American university. Although they were not directly related to digital scholarship or data services, these projects provided remote access opportunities for professional growth and networking with professionals who have similar interests.

In addition to participation in webinars and online conferences, online consultations were also initiated with specialists within the global network university from New York. Meeting online with colleagues who are experts in using and teaching sophisticated quantitative research tools such as SAS, STATA, SPSS and qualitative ones like ATLAS.ti, NVivo, and Qualtrics resulted in a personal understanding of the basics of each program. The great advantage of a global network university is that these consultations are mutually beneficial for both parties, through interaction with colleagues and knowledge of new tools. Establishing this network resulted in availability of support from data services if further help in these areas was needed, and connections with colleagues whom the author could rarely meet in person. The only challenge of maintaining professional development was scheduling online consultations with these experts because of the time zone differences.

Librarians who do not have access to online tools can obtain trial versions by contacting the vendors, and learn in this way to utilize these resources if they want to pursue these skills. Vendors also offer online training sessions, and they demonstrate new features or techniques in using their latest products.

There are similar tools that are open access. For example, “R” is a free programming language that utilizes statistical computing and graphics. Anyone can download “R” and learn to carry out statistical analysis. “R” can be as powerful as SAS, STATA or SPSS depending on the research project. If there is no access to an expert or specialist, one can also explore online videos on YouTube.com or other online tutorials such as a LibGuide, a content management system that might explain how to use these tools effectively. For example, if one were having trouble understanding how to use “R,” the results of an online search for “R” and “LibGuide” would offer several LibGuides, some with very detailed directions and instructions that have been created by librarians to serve as research or instruction guides, These are also sources for new ideas for creating personal online tutorials.

Teaching the use of tools to others or applying them to current research projects reinforces understanding of how to utilize tools and also requires a lesson plan for teaching purposes. For his professional development portfolio, the author typically scheduled meetings with colleagues from New York to ask questions about his current work. He practised using these online tools during the semester and shared thoughts with faculty who may want to use the tools for their teaching or research purposes; this was found to be an excellent approach to establishing professional relationships and opportunities with other colleagues who have similar interests.

Personal development through online learning: from MOOCs to digital projects

Today as more and more online courses are launched into the virtual world, some offer certificates for completion with little to no cost. These online courses, including “mass online open courses” (MOOCs), come in an array of disciplines taught by leading experts at a numbers of universities. They may be delivered using course management systems such as Khan Academy, Udacity and Coursera. Expatriate librarians who are interested in becoming subject specialists in history, computer science, anthropology, art history, literature or aspects of many professional disciplines may want to participate in such MOOCs to gain knowledge. One advantage of participation is that there are other people from around the world studying the same content as well, so this is a very effective way to connect with others who share similar academic interests.

As part of a personal professional development strategy, I have taken online courses in geospatial intelligence, foundations of virtual teaching, and stoichiometry; these opportunities have led to the development of further special interest in geographic information system (GIS), data sciences and pedagogies in online teaching. Although not an expert in GIS after taking one MOOC class, the course has given me greater confidence and a deeper understanding of GIS tools, theories and resources. Since my position and career goals include developing data skills, MOOC experiences have led to further opportunities to pursue other projects or to support a faculty member who is interested in integrating GIS components into a research project.

One challenge of an online class is managing a schedule: it is easy to fall behind in readings, assignments, quizzes and other online projects, and patience, project management skills and curiosity are required to complete courses. Creating personal goals and asking why these courses are helpful may strengthen motivation. Although these courses were not initially part of a professional development strategy I realize since taking them that they can be effective free learning resources and foster lifelong learning regardless of geographic location.

Aside from taking online classes or webinars, expatriate librarians can also read the latest articles from various free web sites. These include *Library Journal*, *College and Research Libraries News*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Metropolitan New York Library Council*, and *I Need a Library Job (INALJ)*. These sites offer advice in career development, ideas on library programming, emerging technologies or applications or research trends in the field. Google Scholar is a free website that indexes full texts of scholarly literature published in various formats and disciplines and is an interesting tool to seek out new journal articles on a variety of topics. Google Scholar has made it possible to keep up to date with the latest developments in digital scholarship services, digital humanities or data sciences since updates can be sent when an article has appeared. In Shanghai, I was also able to access databases and journals from NYU since we share access, and Google Scholar is connected to NYU databases. The downside of Google Scholar is that not all articles are under an open access licence and these articles are available in an indexed only format for readers who are not affiliated to subscriber research libraries. In the site, users can create a profile or digital archive and collect articles that they would like to read into their accounts – this is one way to manage professional and scholarly reading.

Professionals also use social media tools to obtain the latest information in their fields. Twitter, blogs and Academia.edu can be utilized for professional development purposes and for staying up to date. However, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of using and managing social media tools for professional development since people have different preferences and varying levels of experiences in using these resources, and judge its quality and usefulness accordingly.

Digital humanities

One helpful approach to developing a deeper understanding of digital humanities is to explore digital humanities projects on the web and entrepreneurial librarians could seek out these resources as learning opportunities. Many digital humanities projects emerge from collaborations between libraries and research institutes and between librarians and teaching faculty. One can find such projects online, for example in DHCommons (2015) where many digital projects that are open source are listed. Users can access these resources regardless of location and discover different objects and texts, maps, newspapers, manuscripts, diaries, archives, menus, post cards, photographs, prints, posters, artworks, letters, rare books, and other ephemera.

Adams and Gunn (2012) have published an article entitled “Digital humanities: where to start” in which the authors list projects, associations and collaborations that have grown within digital humanities. This article provides an excellent starting point from which to explore different avenues of digital scholarship. As part of a personal professional development curriculum, I have offered feedback on some of these sites to the creators, and even participated in some projects.

Some digital humanities projects in fact embed “crowdsourcing” from online participants, where anyone can contribute to the sites with input such as transcription, translation or tagging. This is a new level of online community engagement that has been very successful and has allowed people to learn about these objects through various activities. By participating in these crowdsourcing sites, I have learned more about the applications and usefulness of a digital humanities project. This interaction has also given rise to several ideas about collaborating with a colleague in creating such sites in the future, and digital engagement of this kind of can also be seen as a form of professional development.

Conclusion: personal reflection

With so many learning tools now readily available on the Internet, it is possible for information professionals to gain skills and knowledge regardless of geographical location and this paper is a reflection of one librarian’s professional development strategy while working abroad. Thanks to today’s emerging technologies, there are unlimited ways to build, create and customize one’s professional interests beyond attending conferences on site. Most important is to recognise that building a professional development program for one’s own career requires time, patience and curiosity. Reading online articles about librarianship and attending webinars to learn about innovative services or resources may not be enough. One needs to have a strong desire and interest to stay relevant, innovative and knowledgeable in the field of librarianship because one can work in a library abroad but never cultivate new skills or experiences. Many of the activities described earlier can enhance career development: as stated by Tara Murray, “Professional development activities can help information professionals shift their attitudes by

providing examples of new ways of working and assuring information professionals that their skills are still valued and they will continue to be relevant, though their work may change over time” (Murray 2014, 712).

Librarians can and should be entrepreneurs in capitalizing on widely and readily available online resources including online courses from MOOCs to training sites where librarians can rapidly develop essential technological skills. However, this requires access to the Internet with a stable connection and working in countries where access to information is highly restricted can impose challenges in all levels. These kinds of disruptions and issues may occur throughout one’s professional development program but they should not deter anyone from gaining new skills and perspectives in the information world. From using “R” programming to Google Scholar, one needs to be creative to find ways to support learning initiatives through various levels of online engagements.

Finally, librarians need to stay connected to people who are experts and can facilitate new learning opportunities and engagements; by connecting to other professionals who have advanced knowledge or technical skills in areas of qualitative or quantitative research, librarians can continue thriving in an online learning environment and can tap into these networks for support. The most important factor for developing one’s own professional development program is “self-investment.” Expatriate librarians must invest in themselves to ensure that what they do and learn will significantly enhance their career prospects and ensure that they remain informed about new trends, tools, resources and scholarships that occur in the field of librarianship.

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