

## **The Adventure of Guiding Your Own Professional Development in a Developing Country - How and Why I Became a Head of Library with no Previous Library Experience**

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### **Abstract:**

*Quality of library services is closely related to user satisfaction and experience, and as one of the basic pillars of service quality is the personnel - their education, training, experience, certification, it is necessary for the institution to employ resources and efforts to maximize their potential. Providing opportunities for professional growth and development to library and information professionals significantly raises the quality and effectiveness of library and information services. In my personal experience, the responsibility of the learner has proved to be the key element for enhancing knowledge and skills in the library field. Being employed at the position of librarian in an academic library just after graduating from university and with no prior professional experience in librarianship, I had to learn about the job from scratch. It had been quite an adventure to navigate my own professional development and try to create, as well as maintain, strong links to the library and information field in global frames. Today, enriched with experience from the Jay Jordan IFLA/OCLC Fellowship, the Junior Faculty Development Program, International Librarians Network participation, and from other valuable contacts and experience exchanges, I share my apprehensions with my colleagues, but I never stop addressing my emerging competency gaps and learning new things with zeal. That does not only help me do my job better, but it also adds value to my institution, the society I work in, and to our profession.*

**Keywords:** continuing professional development, CPDWLS's Guidelines, the learner, developing countries

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## Introduction

Libraries, in general, provide services and they strive to achieve the highest quality of user-centered services possible. However, quality of services is much more difficult to define than quality of products or goods. This mainly comes as a result of the unique characteristics services possess, such as intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability of delivery and consumption of service, and perishability, as well as of their interactive nature. The benefits and the value library services bring to patrons (users) are the core, however the service delivery process itself is what makes a difference regarding the patrons' ultimate experience with a service.

In this interactive process between the service provider (the library) and the user, there is a mediator – the information professional, i.e. the librarian, which means that how users perceive library services depends to a higher extent on a human factor. Quality of services is closely related to user satisfaction and experience, so it can be concluded that one of the basic pillars of library service quality is the personnel. It is the library staff, with their education, training, experience, and certification that represent the institution's most important asset. Because of that, it is every institution's duty to examine demands and needs, provide carefully planned learning opportunities for the employees, and monitor their development on a regular basis. The library and information professionals, on their part, by exploiting opportunities for professional growth and development significantly, raise the overall quality and effectiveness of library and information services.

### **Quality of Service through Continual Learning and Education: the IFLA CPDWLS's Guidelines for Continuing Professional Development**

The dynamic environment in which libraries exist urges them to constantly change and transform in order to adapt to new trends and continue to stay relevant. New technologies bring different user demands, requiring library and information professionals to continuously update the services they provide. For the libraries to stay competitive on the market, it is often necessary to predict user needs far in advance. And, to be able to recognize the ever-changing customer expectations as to meet them or, preferably, exceed them, library staff need to possess relevant knowledge and skills.

Among the experts and professionals from the LIS field, there is a consensus on the necessity of continuous professional development of library staff. Multiple important documents issued by professional library associations around the world (IFLA<sup>1,2</sup>, ALA<sup>3,4</sup>, ALIA<sup>5</sup>, etc.) talk

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<sup>1</sup> Koontz, C. & Gubbin, B. (Eds.) (2010). *IFLA public library service guidelines* (2d ed). Berlin: De Gruyter/Saur.

<sup>2</sup> International Federation of Library Associations. *Continuing Professional Development & Workplace Learning* (2016). *IFLA Guidelines for Continuing Professional Development: Principles and Best Practices*. Available at: <https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/cpdwl/guidelines/ifla-guidelines-for-continuing-professional-development.pdf> (Accessed June 7, 2019)

<sup>3</sup> American Library Association (April 19, 2007). *Education and Continuous Learning*. Available at: <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/missionhistory/keyactionareas/educationaction/educationcontinuing> (Accessed June 7, 2019)

<sup>4</sup> American Library Association (2017). *American Library Association Strategic Directions*. Available at: [http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org/aboutala/files/content/cro/getinvolved/Strategic-Directions-2017\\_Update.pdf](http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org/aboutala/files/content/cro/getinvolved/Strategic-Directions-2017_Update.pdf) (Accessed June 7, 2019)

<sup>5</sup> Australian Library and Information Association (2009). *Professional development for library and information professionals*. Available at: [www.alia.org.au/about-alia/policies-standards-and-guidelines/professional-development-library-and-information-professionals](http://www.alia.org.au/about-alia/policies-standards-and-guidelines/professional-development-library-and-information-professionals) (Accessed June 7, 2019)

about professional development and how fundamental it is for library and information professionals to continuously develop new skills and enhance their professional knowledge. One of the most focused on this topic is certainly *IFLA Continuing Professional Development: Principles and Best Practices*<sup>6</sup>, prepared and published by the Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning Section of IFLA. The so-called *quality guidelines* developed and presented in this important document systemize all the factors responsible for and contributing to “development and maintenance of the expertise of staff”<sup>7</sup>. Starting from the role of the learner as a principal bearer of the responsibility for his/her ongoing learning and professional development, the guidelines further explain the roles the employer, professional associations and other bodies involved in library development, LIS formal education programs, and training providers have in the development of library personnel.

It is not by chance that the CPDWL’s *Continuing Professional Development: Principles and Best Practices* commences with the indispensable role the information professionals have as individuals. The statement of the *IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and Information Workers* that it is the information professionals who shall “strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing their knowledge and skills” serves as the fundament for explaining the specific role library and information workers play in their own professional upgrade<sup>8</sup>. Having in mind that organizational change starts with the individual, it is the most logical way to begin with the power of the learner.

The publication thoroughly presents the most important aspects of successful professional development for library and information workers, provides best practice information and leads to helpful resources on the topic. The text makes it clear that the road to excellence needs to start with a self-assessment, taking in consideration the competencies required for the current or the desired position. Self-assessment along with regular performance assessment by superiors should point out the competency gaps that would have to be addressed in the professional development process. Based on the determined needs and competency gaps, a personal learning plan should contain identified learning objectives connected to the available learning opportunities. What is stressed as important here is the alignment of the learning goals of the individual learner with the organization’s goals for excellent service and the contribution that the learner brings to the profession.

### **My Personal Professional Development Experience in a Developing Country**

Developing countries usually have to battle on a number of fields in their societies. Struggling economies have a plenitude of issues regarding funding and resources, so they need to prioritize. Most commonly, culture is the field which suffers the most when it comes to distribution of financial resources and attention. As libraries are predominantly public (non-for-profit) institutions, funded by national and/or local governments, in such a constellation, they receive a marginalized position – not only in sense of funding, but also in the sense of other types of promotion and support. With scarce financial and technical

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<sup>6</sup> International Federation of Library Associations. Continuing Professional Development & Workplace Learning, Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> International Federation of Library Associations (2012). *IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and other Information Workers* (full version). Available at: [www.ifla.org/news/ifla-code-of-ethics-for-librarians-and-other-information-workers-full-version](http://www.ifla.org/news/ifla-code-of-ethics-for-librarians-and-other-information-workers-full-version) (Accessed June 7, 2019)

resources and support, libraries in developing countries operate in a “survival mode”, without being able to plan their activities on a long-term.

Receiving fewer opportunities for promotions, libraries oftentimes find it difficult to attract highly skilled personnel or to provide regular trainings and educational opportunities for their professional staff members. This leads to the fact that well-trained and appropriately educated human resources necessary for successful operation of libraries – in order to deliver their mission and properly serve their communities – are more frequently exceptions, rather than the rule.

Commonly, the employer is not able to invest in personnel development and growth, and national professional associations also underfunded, do not have the capacity to provide trainings or develop standards that should be accepted nationwide as minimum requirements. Situation can differ from one developing country to another, but more often similar challenges are evident, leaving the individual even more responsible for his/her professional development and continual learning. The absence of motivating factors and insufficient support of the other drivers determined in the CPD Guidelines - the employer, educators, trainer and professional associations – puts the primary focus on the individual and requires strong zeal for personal professional development.

In my personal experience as a librarian in a developing country, the responsibility of the learner has proven to be the key element for enhancing knowledge and skills in the library field. Being employed in the position of librarian in an academic library just after graduating from university and with no prior professional experience in librarianship, I had to learn about the job from scratch. Ironically, I was appointed head of library shared by two faculties from day one, which meant that my initial training was going to come from a colleague who was my subordinate. To make things clear, there was absolutely nothing illegal or strange about my employment in the position – I fulfilled all the requirements, I passed the IT skills and English language tests, and I had two interviews with the faculty board. There was simply no law (and there is still no law) that would require a person to have a LIS degree in order to become a librarian – undergraduate diploma in philology or philosophy was commonly a prerequisite at that time.

The ministry responsible for the university (faculty) and school libraries in North Macedonia is the Ministry of Education and Science, and the public and national libraries are under the Ministry of Culture. The only mutual reference point remains the Law on Libraries, although it is far more relevant to the public and the two national libraries. This fact creates numerous disproportions between the library and information professionals working in these two different sectors – to begin with the organization of work, through professional titles, to salaries. So, as a result of the insignificant inter-institutional and inter-sectoral collaboration among the rest, especially when it comes to faculty (college) libraries, planned and coordinated programs for professional development of library staff are non-existent.

In my first year in the position, on my own initiative, I attended two courses for librarians offered on a continuous basis at the National and Academic Library in Skopje – the basics of technical, formal, and content processing of library materials, and cataloging of monographic and serial publications. I needed to start with the very basics of librarianship and that was the only option available. Then, the next year, I won a full scholarship for part-time graduate studies in LIS at the University of Zadar in Croatia, funded by the Institute of Information Sciences from Maribor, Slovenia. It turned out to be an extraordinary experience which

broadened my professional horizon and helped me understand my profession and my mission at work. This academic program proved to be largely beneficial for my performance at work, as it gave me the theoretical framework I needed, and I could now understand the rationale behind the everyday tasks I performed. I was finally able to see the bigger picture, which motivated me to seek further similar opportunities.

Another important professional development opportunity arose in 2008, when I applied for the Junior Faculty Development Program fellowship<sup>9</sup> offered by the Bureau for Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State. Luckily, I was selected to participate as a visiting scholar at the LIS Department of the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa, USA. During the spring semester, I attended five of the courses offered at the graduate LIS program at the Department in 2009 as a visitor. Fortunately for me, the LIS program had been undergoing the process of reaccreditation by the American Library Association at that period, and I could not only experience the procedure, but also take part in it. It was a unique opportunity for me to learn about the role a professional association is supposed to have, and about the quality aspects one LIS graduate program should address to become accredited. The fellowship offered me a valuable insight into the USA LIS formal education, and I could compare and contrast the formal LIS education programs in my country and the region with the ones in the USA. After the visit, I disseminated my comprehensions through various presentations to colleagues at official gatherings, aiming at informing them about the possibilities and good practices.

These two academic experiences had a big influence of my professional profile. They both empowered me to take an active part in professional boards at the national library association, contribute ideas and insights, and disseminate the gained knowledge. Then, in 2013, I received an extraordinary possibility to learn more - I was selected to participate in the Jay Jordan IFLA/OCLC Early Career Development Fellowship Program<sup>10</sup> for librarians and information professionals. During four intensive weeks, my co-fellows and I - a total of five librarians from five different developing countries around the world – received instructions and education on trending issues in the library field, had first-hand experience with information technologies related to librarianship, and learned a great deal about the global cooperation idea this organization actualizes. During this intensive process of professional upgrade, we were fortunate enough to learn from the leaders in our field. In the course of that one week in The Hague, the Netherlands, and three in OCLC's seat in Ohio, USA, we communicated with eminent professionals who were more than willing to share their observations and insights from the practice with us. It was for this program that I created my first professional development plan as one of the program requirements. That professional development plan traced the road for my own future regular reassessment of my learning needs and planning based on determined knowledge gaps. The program did not end with our coming home. By completion of the program, our professional network became even larger as we were included in family of the program alumni. It made me feel obliged to encourage other early professionals in my country to apply for future rounds of IFLA/OCLC Fellowship Program and learn from the best.

On “the home field”, besides being an active member of the two national library associations – the Library Association of North Macedonia and the Association for Library Development and Innovation (InnovaLib), and one of the founders of the latter, I never missed a chance for

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<sup>9</sup> Junior Faculty Development Program. <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/junior-faculty-development-program>

<sup>10</sup> IFLA/OCLC Early Career Development Fellowship Programme. <https://www.ifla.org/funds-grants-awards>

enhancing my skills and expanding my professional network. I tend to use every opportunity for collaboration with colleagues in my country and abroad, working toward IFLA's vision for building partnerships and creating a global united library field, with the power to improve societies by making them literate, informed and participative.<sup>11</sup>

A step in that direction was my involvement with the International Librarian Network (ILN). Contributing as a librarian and country representative for North Macedonia, I could exchange experience with colleagues from different countries around the world, and learn how other professionals deal with everyday challenges at work as well as what opportunities they use to expand their knowledge in the field. In this peer mentoring program, I could witness the drive for continuous improvement that librarians have in common and their commitment to our shared goals and values. The vigorous discussions with the colleagues lead to ideas for projects which were meant to build bridges between the theory and the practice in library practice in North Macedonia. A combination of InnoLib Association's modest resources, our members' international networks, and enthusiasm was used on several occasions so professionals and experts from the country and abroad could present information and knowledge at gatherings on different topics, such as: IFLA's activities, library advocacy, successful digitization projects around the world, and important library programs for youth. In this manner, a professional organization with poor funding found a way to contribute to providing learning opportunities for library and information professionals in the country and inspire innovation in our libraries. Learners, me included, according to their needs, could choose to participate in various events free of charge.

In all of these cases, my employer was being supportive - it allowed my absence from work and strongly encouraged my willingness to progress. However, if these programs had not offered fully covered participation, travel, and accommodation costs, or be free of charge, I would not have been able to take advantage of them. This represents the main problem, as there are hardly any regular additional funds that a library and information professional could apply for and support his/her professional development plan.

## **Conclusion**

Regardless of the context and development level of country, the library and information professional, i.e. the learner, plays the key role in their professional learning and development. It is primarily the learner's responsibility to constantly improve his/her skills as well as to proactively seek for opportunities for relevant and high-quality continuous education. However, knowing that the quality of library service with all its complexity depends on the abilities and professionalism of its human resources, the employer and all the other important players in the professional development system should jointly employ resources and efforts to maximize their potential. This is important because in order for this system - determined by users' needs and professional norms - to perform properly, devoted engagement of all the parties is required.

To successfully reach the professional development goals, all the critical factors mentioned in the CWLPD's guidelines should work together and in coordination. Otherwise, the professional development process would be just an adventure instead of a properly planned and organized process. Sporadic trainings bring long-term benefits for neither the learner nor

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<sup>11</sup> International Federation of Library Associations (2018). *IFLA Global Vision Report*. Available at: <https://www.ifla.org/globalvision/report> (Accessed June 7, 2019)

the organization – only planned and appropriately guided development programs are able to contribute to obtaining competent and professional library staff.

When in the (immediate) environment chances for on-the-job trainings and professional skills development programs are rather small, librarians and information workers should continue actively searching further and broader, or even try to create opportunities by their own. If those learning and training options are selected on the basis of well-analyzed learning needs and performance assessment results, if they are addressing determined competency gaps, the other actors in the continuing professional development would additionally help completing the puzzle of excellence in library service.

In my case, it was mainly the international training, learning, or networking providers that helped me re-engineer myself professionally, on my own initiative. Embracing these unique possibilities helped me do my job better, which positively influenced not only our patrons and my institution, but myself also. Further, through actively participating in professional organizations, I was able to contribute ideas that led to the creation of opportunities from which my colleagues and I benefited. I can only imagine how much more efficient this process would have been if there had been guidance and support from the rest of the professional development actors too.

Professional development is a progressive process and what we, the library and information professionals, who are primarily in charge of our professional development, should do is to always strive for excellence and accept no average version of ourselves.

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