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Third Time’s the Charm: Choosing a Career in Librarianship

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by Paula McMullen

While many come to librarianship from other careers, I made my third major career change to the profession after a somewhat arduous process. I made myself the subject of a formal assessment process while completing a certificate program in career counseling.

One of the first things we learned in the career counseling program is that most people take essentially an opportunistic path to their various jobs and careers, e.g., you know someone who does something that sounds sort of interesting, or someone knows someone else who needs someone... It’s often a very generic process and is, in fact, why so many people end up doing jobs that are not a good match for their temperament, interests, and skills. I quickly realized that I was one of those people who had more or less stumbled into my previous careers.

Accidental Careers

In my case, I became a psychologist because friends of my parents, who were psychologists, thought I would be good at it. So I abandoned my original plan of getting a Ph.D. in Germany after finishing my B.A. I took a year of post-graduate psychology courses that allowed me to compete successfully for a slot in a Ph.D. program in clinical psychology, and I was on my way.

Several years into that career, traumatic events in my personal life served as the catalyst that brought me to the realization that I was not suited to dealing with other people’s problems as the source of my income. I felt, at that point, that I wanted to do something as different as possible — so I got an MBA. It was certainly different in some ways, but inevitably linked back to my former counseling life. I used the MBA to move into the human resources area, working for a health maintenance organization; I was once again in the role of a helper. When I began to feel intellectually stifled, I started looking around again and enrolled in the certificate program for career development.

By this time, those near and dear to me were beginning to think I was going to be the proverbial perpetual student! I needed to get organized and make some purposeful decisions.

Self Analysis

The career development program involved learning about the whole person, the world of work, and the interaction between the two. Doing a good career assessment is a multi-faceted process, and many would argue that it should be a lifelong one. I decided to be my own guinea pig.

To assess myself, I used a number of standardized paper and pencil tools, such as the Career Ability Placement Survey, the COPS and Strong Interest Inventories, the California Psychological Inventory, the Career Assessment Inventory, and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. I also worked with several less formal tools such as proxity charts from What Color Is Your Parachute and "dependable strengths" writing exercises. These attempts to identify your temperament, interests, values, skills, etc., and, in some cases, to align these with patterns typical of certain occupations. It wasn’t until I saw the Strong profile with "librarian" way out in the lead that I considered it as a possible career choice.

One should never rely on a single measure, and so it was important that the other tools were at least fairly consistent. A consistent note in my careers had been to be a helper. I had always needed a lot of intellectual stimulation and my ambitions lay in personal competence. It all seemed to fit. Mind you, I was not exactly keen to undertake yet another graduate course of study and so I set out to determine whether or not the MLS was really a necessary qualification. This leads to the second major aspect of this process, assessing the workplace.

Workplace Analysis

I read job descriptions, employment projections and biographies (e.g., in the Occupational Outlook Handbook), gathered information about requirements and salaries for jobs from classified ads, and talked to people actually doing library work. By networking, I interviewed a reference librarian in a large public library (a friend’s mother), a special librarian (at my current employer, an HMO), and two people from a large academic library in cataloguing and automation...
(names provided by the woman who cut my hair!). This part of the process confirmed that an additional degree in library science was pretty critical in gaining access to the kinds of jobs I wanted to do. It also confirmed that this was a career path that would be a good match for me.

The decision making was hardly over at that point, because it was now obvious that the generic term "librarian" could be translated into a variety of actual job duties and settings. During my MLIS program, I explored the various work of technical services and reference, as well as public, special and academic library settings. Consistent with my past careers, I gravitated toward the more service-oriented role of reference. Consistent with my love of continual intellectual challenge, I gravitated toward the world of academic libraries.

And here I am, working as a reference librarian in a mid-sized research university. I can honestly say, it feels like a great match for me; I really love most of the work I do most of the time. As I learned in the career counseling program: That's the goal!

Change Is the Only Constant

What wasn't — and perhaps couldn't be — anticipated, was how dramatically the work of librarians would change even over the short two and a half years that I took to complete my degree. The descriptions of library work I read in my initial decision-making process said little about computers, and nothing about the World Wide Web. Knowing how to create web pages or teach in an electronic classroom became desired and expected skills practically overnight. However, the essence of the work remains the same, and I can adapt to the medium. As William Bridges, the author of Transitions, said in a lecture I attended (I paraphrase here): "If you don't want to continually change and learn in your job, you were probably born at the wrong time."

If you don't want to change and learn, you certainly wouldn't want to be a librarian! I recommend this road of self-assessment and work exploration to anyone choosing or modifying a career. What I would do differently is to include questions and reading about future trends for the profession in my information gathering. In today's world of work, the conventional wisdom is more true than ever... change is the only constant.

Paula McMillen is a social science reference librarian at Oregon State University. After getting her MLIS — her 4th graduate degree — her friends gave her a license plate holder that said, "She who dies with the most degrees wins!"

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