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Development of Mid-Career Librarians

Cory Tucker¹

ABSTRACT: This article addresses what challenges are faced by the mid-career librarian and discusses what challenges these librarians face during their career path. The article also analyzes how mid-career librarians can deal with these challenges through career development and planning using self evaluation and assessment.

KEYWORDS: Mid-career librarian, Career Planning, Career Path

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INTRODUCTION

While thinking about being a mid-career librarian and analyzing one's career path, I came across a passage in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* where the Cheshire cat tells young Alice, "If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there." Confusing? Maybe, but the quote illustrates an important point when it comes to choosing a career path. Planning is a crucial aspect of career development for librarians.

The mid-career librarian, in my mind, can be a person working in libraries between eight and fifteen years and has worked for their current employer for over five years. At this stage in their work-life, the person may be faced with the possibility of career impatience, stagnation with their current job, need of professional growth, or need for achievement (Sterns & Subich, 2002). Mid-career is a perfect time for self assessment and renewal. Whatever the case may be, the mid-career librarian is faced with many difficult decisions from changing jobs or careers, engaging in development activities, moving to administration and pursuing promotions. These can be further complicated by other issues including current work environment, job market conditions, and balancing work and family, particularly when children may be involved (Sterns & Subich, 2002).

This article will take a look at the mid-career librarian and discuss what challenges the person may face in their career path. In addition, it will analyze how the person can deal with these challenges through career development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a few articles that touch on the topic of mid-career librarians. Reid (2005) acknowledges the difficulties faced by mid-career librarians and offers suggestions to help people re-energize themselves and survive in a constantly changing work environment. Among the suggestions given by Reid are self-assessment, matching you personality to your job and organization, and changing careers. Another article co-authored by Broady-Preston and Bell discusses the establishment of a distance learning program to help mid-career librarians acquire the skills and academic credentials to complete in a changing marketplace. Their article is a case study on the effectiveness of the program and also measured the attitudes of professionals in library and information science. A third article that is useful for mid-career librarians was written by Harhai (2002) and reviews thirteen popular career self-help books.

Although not specifically related to mid-career librarians, there is another article dealing with career development in librarianship. The article discusses results from the Library and Information Commission report on cross-sectoral mobility in the library and information services (LIS) profession (Dalton, Mynott, and Schoolbred, 2000). This study (conducted by researchers at the University of Central England in Birmingham) was created to look at the barrier to career development within the LIS profession, specifically targeting professionals moving to different sectors of the profession. The issues discussed by the authors include the following: professional segregation, employment strategies, self-confidence, training and professional support. In an article published in 2004, Jacobsen provides a case study of graduates from the UCLA Graduate School of Library and Information Science. The article discusses the results of a survey of the class of 1988 and how their careers have progressed. Jacobsen offers insights on

career development, moving jobs, dealing with office politics and changing technology, salaries, mentoring, and service in associations.

Outside of librarianship, there are articles about mid-career professionals and development that may be useful for librarians at this stage in their career. Power and Rothausen (2003) propose a model of mid-career development for individuals who are proactively managing their own careers. The model directs workers to define their work, identify its future requirements, and select a developmental direction. Three levels of midcareer development are also proposed: job oriented, work maintenance, and work growth. This new structure allows midcareer individuals to maintain or grow their employment security, income, and career satisfaction in an environment of increasing mobility and salary compression. The model is a useful tool for mid-career professionals as it touches on the economic and labor market concerns that influence one's career path and decisions.

Another article that is not related to mid-career librarianship specifically but might be nonetheless of interest is Montgomery's (2002) discussion about plateauing and long-term career satisfaction. Montgomery discusses the idea of career plateaus and provides a definition for the following three types of plateauing: structural plateauing, which occurs when an employee has reached the highest level one can obtain within an organization; content plateauing, when an employee has mastered their work and there is nothing left to learn; and life plateauing, which is characterized by little fulfillment in any area of life. This article provides possible ways to deal with plateaus.

SELF ASSESSMENT

The mid-career is a point where a person may reexamine and reevaluate personal values and attitude, career goals, and progress (Carney, Wells & Streufert, 1981). In order to help make an informed decision at this critical time in one's career, it is important to conduct a self assessment both on a personal and professional level. Self assessment allows individuals to chart their progress, learning, and development to see how they are progressing on both a personal and professional level. Conducting such evaluations will help individuals identify appropriate development opportunities, including staying in their current positions, making a lateral move, or accepting positions with more responsibility. Self assessment allows an individual to analyze the stages in their career and see how these stages have affected their development and goals (London & Stumpf, 1982). A couple of interesting exercises can be found on the allbusiness.com Web site (<http://www.allbusiness.com/human-resources/careers-career-path/12068.html>). One exercise involves writing down what you have enjoyed about your career in one column and, in another column, writing down what you could have done without. The exercise can help mid-career professionals identify what has been satisfying and what has not been satisfying thus far. Another recommended exercise consists of writing down your short-term and long-term goals in order to identify career priorities. This exercise can help you compare earlier to current goals, enabling you to see how these priorities may have changed. A final exercise is to create your ideal job description. This exercise can help with finding what job duties you prefer and what skill sets you will need to enhance.

Personal Growth

Obviously it is important to analyze your personal growth and development. As

you go through your life cycle and career path, you may develop new interests or desire new personal and professional challenges. As you change as an individual, you should evaluate how your job fits with your personal interests. It may be helpful for you to identify specific interests or skills that you cannot pursue in your current position. Once these interests have been identified, you can begin searching for both internal and external opportunities to achieve these goals. Such an evaluation may result in an internal move within your current organization, a move to another organization, or a career change.

Professional Growth

Professional growth can be analyzed by looking at your past, present, and future career path. According to Carney, Wells, and Streufert (1981), there are several stages in career decisions and the mid-career librarian tends to be in the re-evaluation stage. The person in this stage may begin to examine more closely whether the job is fulfilling his or her expectations. The person may want to re-evaluate goals and alternatives. During this re-evaluation stage, it is a good idea to analyze your entire career path, from past to present to future.

Past Career

When analyzing one's career, a good place to start is with your past career as a librarian. Upon entering librarianship, you had an idea of what job you wanted and you established specific goals for the first five years of your career. A simple question to ask is: did you meet all of the goals you established? If not, are these goals still applicable for your career? What events did you experience that may have altered your career path? How did these events and decisions affect your career path?

Current Career

Once you have delved into your past career as a librarian, it is important to look at yourself in your current position. What are you doing now? Are you happy with your job and workplace environment? What skills have you obtained in your current position? How will these skills help you in another job? How have your goals and aspirations changed? Are you still motivated to perform your job? Do the organization's goals and beliefs match your own?

Future Career

How have your values changed? Do you want more responsibility? Do you want to be a leader?

ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

When analyzing your career path, it is important to chart the course of your career within your current organization (Carney, 1981). Schein's model charts growth within an organization inwardly, vertically, and horizontally. According to Schein's model, inward growth does not involve a visible change in position, nor development of new skills; instead, this growth is measured in terms of interpersonal relationships. The next form of growth in this model is vertical, representing movement up the career ladder. Finally, the last measurement of growth is horizontal, which encompasses a rotation across a series of functions within an organization. This usually involves exposing employees to different facets of an organization. This model is helpful for an individual because it provides a picture of how one has experienced growth and professional development within an organization and may provide valuable insight into whether a person is ready for change or satisfied in their current environment.

One of the items related to the organization, and a major individual career path issue, is your development as a professional librarian. When looking at your current position, identify skills or interests that you have not achieved or fulfilled. Organizations should provide development opportunities. Thus, it is appropriate to ask yourself: are my needs being met? In this self and career assessment, it is vital to have a clear picture of where you are personally and professionally, what you want to do with your personal and professional career, and how you can achieve these personal and professional aspirations.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Once you have conducted your personal and professional evaluations, you can identify specific goals and explore ways to achieve these goals. Whatever the career path you have chosen, there may be additional skills or opportunities you need to consider to meet your goals. These may include professional development opportunities, leadership and management training, and mentoring.

Professional Development

Depending on the career path you choose, you may need to take continuing education classes through universities or professional organizations. Continuing education may also be an option through self-training. If you happen to choose the path to administration and management, you may be required to obtain another master's degree, MBA, or a PhD. In instances where a person is moving laterally in their existing organization, there are several library organizations (or divisions or sections within organizations) that can help build the necessary skills. For example, if a subject librarian would like to move into collection development or management, they can join the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services (ALCTS), a division of the

American Library Association. ALCTS offers online classes, webinars, and conference presentations and discussions. A possible option for professional development at the mid-career stage is sabbatical or other types of leave (Hubbard, 2002).

Leadership

No matter what path you take, as a mid-career librarian, you will most likely be looked upon for direction and leadership within your organization or at your new organization. Some people are natural born leaders and others are not. However, there are opportunities to learn how to be a leader. One option is to learn from existing leaders in your organization. Sit down with these people and discuss various aspects of leadership and obtain their advice. Another option is to research articles and books available on this topic. There are also numerous leadership institutes, such as the ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute. A good listing of leadership training programs and institutes is available in a 2004 article by Mason and Wetherbee. Most regional and state associations have annual leadership institutes that can be extremely beneficial. Another way to develop leadership skills is taking on specific roles and projects in the workplace. One study indicates that a major influence on leadership development is an individual's ability to cope with job variety, responsibility, new tasks, and unfamiliar situations (Mason & Wetherbee, 2004).

Administration/Management

For a mid-career librarian, taking on management or administrative responsibilities is quite common. A person at this stage in their career may become a department head, division head, or other type of manager. This step in the career path can be a big change, especially for those people who have not previously supervised

others. Supervision and management responsibilities bring new challenges and require the incorporation of a new skill set. Just as some people are not natural leaders, some people are not natural managers. Like leadership, management skills can be learned in various ways, such as through workshops, continuing education, or through professional organizations. Another option is to speak with people in management positions and attempt to learn as much from them as possible. There are many books published on the topic of becoming a manager that may be helpful as well.

Mentoring

As a mid-career librarian, you probably have had a mentor guiding you professionally along your career path. At this point in your career, you might be ready to become a mentor. Being a mentor can be rewarding in that you can pass along your knowledge, support, and experiences to another librarian who is just beginning his or her career. Mentoring may take place within an institution or within a professional association or organization.

CONCLUSION

Reaching the mid-career point in the profession of librarianship can be a tumultuous time due to personal and professional changes. Although this can be a difficult phase in one's career path, there are several options available to deal with the various issues of a mid-career professional. It is important to carefully weigh your options and assess both your career and personal lives in order to choose the appropriate path to take for your future.

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