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Recommended Citation

Jim Hambleton & Louis Calvert, *Unplanned Career Paths: The Role of Serendipity (Part 2)*, 10 Trends L. Libr. Mgmt. & Tech. 3 (1999).

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Unplanned Career Paths: The Role of Serendipity (Part 2)

By JIM HAMBLETON, Texas Wesleyan & LOIS CALVERT, Colorado Supreme Court

Several years ago a colleague wrote about career planning. His article was filled with fine ideas about how to map out a career. As both authors are at the point where our careers are about two-thirds over, we thought we would write about how careers really work out.

What's It like Working in a Court/Government Library?

Lois

The Colorado Supreme Court Library serves the courts, but it is also open to the public. As we are in downtown Denver, the "public" includes every imaginable kind of person, and some you would never think up on your own. The *pro se* patron is a growth industry, and they are beginning to define this library more and more. Some have legitimate cases, some are trying to find creative ways to beat a traffic ticket, and some are just mad at the world. The clientele is much more varied than in either the academic or law firm setting, which is one of the things that makes the job interesting.

We are funded through docket fees from the appellate courts. The good news is that we don't have to ask for a legislative appropriation each year. The bad news is that it is a little like working on commission. We never are sure exactly how much money we have until it is collected. Once we get the money, however, it is ours. We don't deal with line items, and if we have a surplus at the end of the year it goes into a reserve account that we can spend at a later time. This year we are purchasing an online system, and we are very glad to have some money in reserve.

I report directly to the Supreme Court through one of the justices, and so far it has been a very easy relationship. Libraries are not their specialty, and for the most part they rely on me to tell them what we need. I'm sure it helps that we don't have to ask for money.

Jim

The State Law Library in Texas was created by statute, so the governing structure, budgetary process, and even an enumeration of the patrons whom the library is to serve is carefully laid out. The governing board is made up of a justice from each of the two high courts in Texas, plus a representative from the attorney general's office. The law library has not been a hotbed of controversy, and fortunately the board rarely met when I was director. The only distinct board meeting I remember was when I had a disagreement with one judge about the funding of some of the sets of books in his chambers. The board met and sided with me rather than with the judge.

Working with the Texas Legislature on the State Law Library's budget was a different matter. The State Law Library is an independent state agency, and I had to make my budget pitches to the financing committees of the Texas legislature. Things were great during the mid-'80s when oil was \$40 a barrel. With the economic downturn in the late '80s and money being tighter, budget presentations to the Texas House and Senate finance committees became more of a challenge. We got into a long discussion once about the Law Library's subscribing to the *New York Times*, which was seen by some Texas legislators as a waste of money. In any kind of public, government-funded library, one is bound to run up against testy board members at some time or another. The challenge is to balance the politics without making your library an issue.

Serving a variety of patrons in a public law library also can be challenging. In the State Law Library, patrons run from the justices of the Supreme Court to *pro se* patrons who are trying to get the income tax declared unconstitutional. And on days when the Supreme Court holds oral argument, anxious attorneys pace back and forth, making everyone nervous.

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What's It like Working for an Information Vendor?

Lois

Libraries are where I have spent my professional life, but I wouldn't trade my three years with LEXIS. It was fascinating to see the library world from the "other side" and to realize what the motivations are for a vendor. I also know much more about what the options are when I am negotiating a contract, which has been particularly helpful in my current job. Sales classes may seem irrelevant in libraries, but very rarely does a month go by when you aren't selling an idea to a dean, a partner, or a justice, and having a few tricks up your sleeve never hurts. It also was an opportunity to get to know many library colleagues whom I would not have known otherwise, and to look at other law schools. The experience with firms was invaluable when I was working in the firms later. And then there were all those frequent flier miles, which I used for a trip to Africa. That is a fringe benefit you don't get in library jobs.

Jim

Working for an information vendor can be a relief from some of the stresses of working in a law library. Gone are the funding woes, the demanding students, and the obstreperous partners, *pro ses*, or professors. Of course, in their place one has a corporate culture that must be dealt with, management reports, and bottom-line-driven decisions.

The value of working for an information vendor, though, helps one understand some of the decisions that are made that affect law librarians. Ever wonder why prices for some volumes are so high? Factor in editorial costs, publishing costs, and worldwide sales of only 1,000 units, and simple economics results in some of these high prices.

What's It like to Move from One Job to Another?

Lois

It is inevitable that you will feel disoriented for a while. It is much easier, of course, if it is you who makes the decision. If you are laid off and forced to leave, there are the additional elements of shock, anger, and rejection to handle. And the rest of life goes on outside of work. About three months after

I was laid off, my mother died. It was a dreadful year, and my performance at the new job suffered.

The best thing and the worst thing about a new job is that nothing is automatic. If you want a pencil you have to ask for it. The people are all new, as are the procedures. But that is also part of the fun. Not only do you provide new blood to the new place, but you also get new blood. When you have been in a job for a long time you start thinking that there is only one way to do things. Surprise! Figuring out what the new library needs broadens your experience and makes you more flexible in other areas of your life as well.

Jim

Starting a new position, for whatever reason, means remaining open to new people and new procedures. While it may not be evident, almost every procedure in a library has a historical reason for being. The challenge is to take the time to understand why something is done the way that it is, then evaluate whether the underlying basis still is valid. People often do things "because that's the way it's always been done" without comprehending the underlying reason for the existing procedure. But if the underlying reason still is valid, procedures shouldn't be changed haphazardly.

While procedures may vary, the underlying mission of almost any type of law library is the same: to meet the legal information needs of its primary clientele. The differences come in the definition of the primary clientele, and the ways in which its legal information needs are met. In public law libraries, for example, books may be preferred over expensive online services. In law firms, on the other hand, where office space costs many dollars per square foot, an online service probably makes more sense, especially when it has the potential of being billed out to clients. Understanding the culture of the parent organization and the mission of the law library within that organization is key to making a successful transition to a new position.

How Do I Plan My Career in Law Librarianship?

Jim

There is an old adage that if you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans. What you can plan is preparation for the changes that will occur during your career.

First, continue to educate yourself. That may mean a huge commitment, like attending law school, or just simply attending workshops to develop and enhance the skill set you already have. Also, try to keep fresh in the position you already have. Be open to new procedures or new ways of handling routine tasks.

Get involved in the professional activities of the law library associations of which you are a member. Volunteer to speak on a program. The first time is scary, but it's a great opportunity to research a topic to bring yourself up to date and then share that information with your professional colleagues.

At some point you may see an advertisement for a position that is enticing. When is it time to stay or when is it time to leave? A good rule of thumb is never turn down a job before it is offered. That is, apply for a position that you might take, interview, and then if the position is offered, decide at that time whether to accept the position. Considerations would include geography, potential for skill enhancement, or simply the fact that it feels like time for a change.

One consideration, of course, is salary, but that should not be keystone reason for either staying in a position or accepting a new one. Few of us "do it for the money," but the realities of family obligations and other commitments certainly make salary a consideration. If you are content in your position, staying fresh, and continuing to be challenged, what's to be gained by changing? On the flip side, if you cannot stand the people you work with and dread going into the office each day, why stay? Life's too short to be miserable.

Of course, sometimes one doesn't have a choice. You may be asked to move on, or as happened to me, your position may be eliminated, and then you are out of a job. When this happens, remember that law librarians have a transferable skill set, and there probably is a good match out there somewhere for you. It's traumatic to have to find another position under these conditions, but studies have shown that most people who are laid off end up in better situations than those they left.

Lois

On this one I'm going to defer to Jim. He has said everything I would have, and more. Stay flexible, and assume that change is a good thing. There is no realistic way to plan for a thirty- to forty-year career. I'm sure there is a happy medium between staying forever and moving too often, but it isn't always possible to find it. Four jobs in nine years was

stressful, especially after twenty years in one place. The situation in law libraries is completely different now than it was when I started, and will be completely different again in five or ten or twenty or thirty years. Jim's statement that life is too short to be miserable is certainly true, but it is also too short to be bored or to just be doing it for the money. We all have more options than we think we have.

What's the Best Kind of Law Library in Which to Work?

Lois

Which is best? It depends on what you are looking for, and what the situation is in the particular place at the particular time. A good boss, a good staff, doing the things you like and being able to delegate the things you don't, enough money, both for the library and for yourself, and support from the parent organization are what makes work rewarding. It's fun to teach a student to do research, to find a statute for a *pro se* patron, or to hand the partner the answer to his obscure question. It's also fun to install a new online system or to find ways to have more patrons this year than last year. It's not fun to cancel subscriptions for lack of money or to be told that your job has just been terminated.

Personal factors also enter in, of course. Do you need to be in a specific city or can you move? Do you want to deal with the public? Is it important to you to be the boss? These are questions no one can answer for you. But the bottom line is that the Pacific Reporters look the same everywhere, and professors, partners, and justices have more similarities than differences.

Jim

Each kind of law library has its advantages and disadvantages. Academic law libraries often offer a flexible work environment. Law firm libraries offer the excitement of real clients and real cases, where help from the library actually can affect the client's (and thus the firm's) success. And public law libraries offer a bit of each of these facets. Which is more fun? It's hard to say, because, at their core, they're all the same: putting people with legal information.

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