

Alice Crawford. "Getting Back In: Returning to Libraries after a Career Break." *Impact* (Journal of the CILIP Career Development Group) (December 2007), pp.73-75

2007 has been a memorable year for me. It has been the year I returned to professional librarianship after a career break which began with maternity leave in 1994, and the decision to take time to be at home with my two children until they were well established in primary school.

The struggle of 'getting back in' must be familiar to many professionally qualified librarians, and the story of my experiences might be of interest to others who have either travelled this road themselves or who may be contemplating taking a career break in the future.

I qualified as a librarian in 1982, chartered in 1985, and worked as an assistant librarian at Glasgow University Library till 1989. When my husband's career took us to St Andrews that year, I found myself in a small university town with no professional library jobs to apply for in either the academic or public sector, and I realised I would have to use my qualifications to apply for posts in other fields. I was fortunate enough in due course to be taken on as a senior administrative assistant at Dundee University, and enjoyed several years of interesting and varied university admin. work, initially in the Faculty of Law, and then in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

The busiest and most exhausting stage of my career so far has been of course, as every mother has discovered before me, the years during which I concentrated on bringing up two small children, pureeing baby-food, changing nappies and quality-testing what felt like all the swing-parks in North-East Fife! This stage past, however, and with the toddlers metamorphosed into confidently uniformed primary-school veterans, I realised it was time to venture again into the world of work.

My search for flexible hours and part-time employment took me first to St Andrews University where I found my degrees in English Literature qualified me for the post of teaching assistant in the School of English. Working a few hours a week teaching first

and second-year undergraduates and evening-degree students reassured me my brain could easily be coaxed back into gear, and I enjoyed the intellectual demands of dialogue with bright students. When the post of part-time library assistant in the Special Collections Department of the University Library was advertised a couple of years later, however, I was ready to take on the more regular hours this offered, and return to the library world where my first qualifications had taken me.

In applying for this job I was in the interesting position of being over-qualified on paper and under-qualified in terms of recent experience – a challenge many returners must confront. I think the approach must be to emphasise one's willingness to take on work at any level in order to 'get back in,' and so in due course to qualify oneself with the 'new experience' necessary to apply later for more senior posts. I am enormously grateful to the interviewing panel at St Andrews who recognised my enthusiasm, my genuine willingness to become the 'gofer' again and work at a junior level in a context where I had previously been a boss. In offering me the job they provided that crucial opening which let me back into librarianship.

It would have to be said that they took a risk. I might have proved a disgruntled and critical co-worker, someone constantly resentful of a perceived loss of status. I hope they will confirm it was not so! I was simply delighted to have returned to the library world in any capacity, and worked hard at being a biddable and efficient library assistant. I fetched and shelved books, stuck labels on spines, passed interesting enquiries on to those in the 'inner offices,' and tidied book bays, relishing all the time the irony of the fact that, having just learned how to shoulder the biggest human responsibility of all – that of bringing up a child – I was now employed in a position where I was required to pass much lesser day-to-day work responsibilities to others in higher managerial echelons. Having been in my university admin. days a Faculty Admissions Officer who could decide which applicants were to receive offers of places through UCAS, I was now the library assistant who simply fetched old UCAS forms from student files in the University Archives.

The welcome corollary of this, however, was that I was being given the chance to re-learn my library-skills fast. I had returned to a world buzzing with email, where information professionals now functioned primarily in the parallel universe of an internet which had barely existed when I had stepped aside into motherhood in 1994. I had

engaged with the new information technology before my return to work by taking the European Computer Driving Licence, but now I was able to accelerate off into the internet realms and explore lots more possibilities, learning from those around me. As a librarian in the late 1980s, I had conducted online database searches for academics, using search strategies and interrogation languages they did not know. Now everyone did their own searches, and databases were available to all in the academic community. I had to adapt to this new world, adjusting my perceptions of what a professional librarian's job now involved.

In doing so I rediscovered an enthusiasm for librarianship which had lain dormant during my time out. I reactivated my Charter and registered for Revalidation. I joined CILIP interest groups and resumed reading the professional press. I seized opportunities to go on training courses, aware not only that I would be developing my skills, but that they would feature usefully on my CV. I learned about WebCT and Course Genie. I found out how to update the Special Collections web-pages and create a virtual exhibition for display there. I signed up for a rare-books cataloguing course, became a UC&R Scottish Committee member, went to CILIP events locally, and wrote about all these activities for the Library newsletter – I needed people to know I was there! My library assistant's post became my re-training ground – I felt like a mature, but re-energized graduate-trainee – and when, against significant odds, the professional post of Academic Liaison Librarian at St Andrews University Library eventually became available, I was ready to apply for it.

Starting the job in January this year, I feel I have at last properly returned to librarianship, stepping back on to the academic-related ladder at precisely the level I left it in 1994. I have had to work very hard to do so, having 'lost' several years to full-time motherhood and several more to university teaching and administration. In an interesting way, however, these 'lost' years have really had a positive rather than a negative impact on the course of my career so far. Librarianship has changed significantly in recent years, and the skills I acquired in the 'non-library' stages of my life have turned out to have a relevance I would not have predicted. Teaching features prominently in my role as Academic Liaison Librarian, and I draw daily on my experience as a teaching assistant, where I learned to stand confidently in front of a class, to communicate information clearly, to facilitate the flow of discussion amongst groups of students, and to enthuse them about what they were studying. My time as a university administrator, when I

worked closely with Deans and other senior members of the Secretariat, has made the liaison component of my new job surprisingly easy – I know how a university works and how to communicate effectively with academics in their world.

Looking back, I realise that I have had to adapt constantly to changing circumstances, and that the ability to do this is critical to anyone's management of a career. No job stands still whether you stay in it from the moment you graduate to the point of retirement, or whether you check in and out, juggling home and work responsibilities as life at its different stages dictates. In the battle to 'get back in' you have to use the skills you would have used anyway to advance your career had you not stepped out of it in the first place. You need to keep your knowledge up to date – train and re-train as frequently as possible. Read the literature in your field and keep in touch with professional contacts. Be flexible, be humble – be prepared to take low-level opportunities which offer to open the door for you – and once inside, be keen, be noticed and above all be grateful!

I have had a great deal of simple good luck in my struggle to return to a professional post, and am deeply thankful for all the colleagues and referees along the way who have helped to make it happen. If you are about to set out on this road yourself, I wish you lots of the same good luck!

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