

Creating Your Career: Minding the Gap

By

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“Mind the Gap”

The phrase “Mind the Gap” is “an announcement that you’ll hear [at] the London Underground subway system when a train arrives at a station. Much more than just a warning about the ‘gap’ between a carriage and the platform, it’s a phrase that has entered popular culture and become synonymous with London. People who have visited England’s capital city say ‘Mind the Gap’ to each other - often accompanied by knowing glances and subtle nods - while the rest of the world wonders what they are [talking] about. (<http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/4761/90349>)

“Mind the gap” can also apply to the gap between your current experience and skills and those you’ll need in the next position you aspire to in your library career.

Creating a Strategic Plan (Dr. J. Michael Pemberton)

A job and a career are quite different. A career spans several years--often one’s entire working life--and implies management or planning. A job is merely what we’re doing today, and little more. Make your choice, then: drift or mastery. Choose drift, and employment turns into one chance, random job after another. Choose mastery, and take charge of--and responsibility for--your career destiny, bringing order to chaos.

How do successful companies make sense of their domain and stay successful? They create and follow strategic plans, so that the company is run by plan, rather than by the idiosyncratic personalities of boards of directors. Begin to think of yourself as chief of strategic planning for “You, Inc.,” and act accordingly. To become your own CEO, you must understand where you are, where you want to go, and how to get there. This becomes the foundation of your strategic plan, a blueprint covering the next four to five years.

If you are in your first professional position as, say, a reference librarian at a liberal arts college (where you are), your mission may be “to become head of reference at a liberal arts college” (where you want to be in four to five years). What remains is the gap - what you need to get there. Minding--and closing--the gap is met primarily through your goals and objectives.

To determine what you need to do to meet your career mission, you should develop a gap analysis to make your plan specific. Identify five to eight current job postings for library reference heads at liberal arts colleges - the type of position that satisfies your mission (to become a head of reference). Make a table showing each required and preferred competency or accomplishment listed in these ads. Make note of which you have and which you do not. The sample exercise below illustrates one way to identify your gaps, and to map out what you need to do (including goals, objectives, and target dates) to get to your desired level.

Mission

My mission is to become the library director at a liberal arts college within five years.

Goals

1. Gain long-range planning experience **Objectives**
 1. Develop action plan to carry out existing long-range plans at present place of employment.
 2. Initiate long range-planning for needed areas at present place of employment (2006-2007).
 3. Read at least two books or other materials pertaining to long-range planning in libraries (2006-2008).

2. Gain experience in facility building/renovation **Objectives**
 1. Become actively involved in planning and managing, to the extent possible, the two renovation/building projects (a three-room renovation and a proposed 5000 square foot building addition) slated for the next year at my current place of employment (2006-2007).
 2. Consult with librarians who have recent experience in planning and building or renovating facilities (2006-2008).

3. Gain more experience in development and fundraising efforts **Objectives**
 1. Work with current supervisor to find experience in development efforts in my current position. (2006-)
 2. Work with the development officers at the institution where I currently work to gain advice and experience in development and fundraising. (2006-)

Relevant associations (or subdivisions) can also be valuable. You may belong to ALA already, but its Library Administration and Management Association (LAMA) might have the best focus for your specific needs. Library directors do fundraising, so LAMA's Fund Raising and Financial Development Section also makes sense. Also make a habit of reading one or more journals or newsletters supporting your direction would be. Within LAMA, a good e-mail discussion list would be LIBADMIN-L. Mentors who have reached the level to which you aspire could prove indispensable.

Next, develop a personalized plan for future education. A relevant master's or doctoral degree program or continuing education (such as regional management seminars) could help close the gap as well. Also think about beginning writing program - in which you might begin modestly with book reviews, then conference presentations, followed by co-authoring articles with well-established practitioners, and then branching out on your own to develop manuscripts for professional journals.

Unique Transitions: Minding the Gap When New Doors Open

Often in librarianship, unforeseen and unplanned career opportunities arise. This presents a unique challenge in "minding the gap." Two librarians who were hired into new positions that were not part of their strategic plan discuss how they "minded the gap" and made successful transitions into positions that unexpectedly came along.

Generalist to Subject Specialist (Peter Fritzler)

I was presented with an unexpected opportunity to serve as the newly-created position of sciences librarian while serving as an outreach librarian at my university. While excited to serve in this new capacity, I was also apprehensive, as I lacked the relevant educational and

professional competencies. Clearly, to be successful I would need to begin closing the gap. I began this process by surveying the library literature and profession for support.

Several resources were immediately beneficial in aiding my transition. First, I joined the Science and Technology Section (STS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). In addition to monitoring the STS journal, *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship*, and the section's e-mail list (STS-L), I began following another key science librarianship journal, *Science and Technology Libraries*. These resources let me begin developing an understanding of the issues and trends currently being discussed among science librarians.

While developing a sense of the current scope of the field and its resources, I also wanted to begin learning about resources that are considered classics within the field. Here, I found the *Guide to Reference and Information Sources in the Zoological Sciences* (2003), *Using the Biological Literature: A Practical Guide* (2002), and *Chemistry Resources in the Electronic Age* (2003), among others, to be extremely useful. Besides these resources I also examine position announcements for science librarians and attend conferences that will enable me to network and develop mentoring relationships with fellow professionals.

While developing an understanding of the field of science librarianship has been important, it has been equally important to develop a basic understanding of science and scientists, because academic science librarianship is founded on the premise of supporting the needs of this community. To cultivate my understanding of the scientific process, I have begun taking science classes and following the scientific literature. Utilizing table-of- contents alert services such as Ingenta and RSS technologies, I have been able to stay abreast of the latest in scientific research being published in leading journals like *Nature*, *Science*, and narrower topical journals like *Estuarine*, *Coastal*, and *Shelf Science*.

The chance to serve as a sciences librarian has changed my professional track considerably, and I hope to continue developing this opportunity into a long-term career path. While many gaps remain to be filled, I am hopeful that the methods above will help me to continue my growth in this field.

Entry-Level Librarian to Coordinator (Anne Pemberton)

Moving from an entry-level public services position into the role of coordinating a program, in this case instructional services, required that I “mind the gap.” I came into the position with plenty of experience in instruction - but no experience managing an instruction program. The main tools I used to help me mind the gap were literature and other professionals.

Articles and books on managing instructional programs were of great help. They provided wonderful tips, suggestions, and resources that helped me transition into a coordinator role. (I'm currently reading the book *Learning to Lead and Manage Information Literacy Instruction*, by Grassian and Kaplowitz.) Literature such as this has helped me develop my leadership skills within my library's instruction program, learn about ways to promote and market the instruction program, and learn how to foster a creative environment for the members of the library's instruction team.

I have also relied heavily on other professionals to help with the transition. I joined instruction-specific lists (such as ILI-L) and ACRL's Instruction Section to learn about other what other professionals are doing in their instruction programs. I make a habit of looking at other libraries' instructional services web sites and contacting the coordinators of those services for ideas and information.

When I attend conferences, I look for sessions that discuss leadership or other relevant topics. I also spend a great deal of time talking to the librarians who provide instruction at my library. They have wonderful ideas about instruction. Using the literature and seeking input from other librarians has helped me make a successful transition into the position of Instructional Services Coordinator.

Helpful Resources

Blair, Gary Ryan. "Creating a Personal Strategic Plan!"
<http://www.successreview.com/GRBarticle01.htm> (accessed May 22, 2006)

Bridges, William. *Creating You & Co: Learn to Think Like the CEO of Your Own Career*. London: Nicholas Brealey, 1997.

Lockwood, Gary. "Your Personal Strategic Plan."
<http://www.bizsuccess.com/articles/persplan.htm> (accessed May 22, 2006)

Morrissey, George L. *Creating Your Future: Personal Strategic Planning for Professionals*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992.