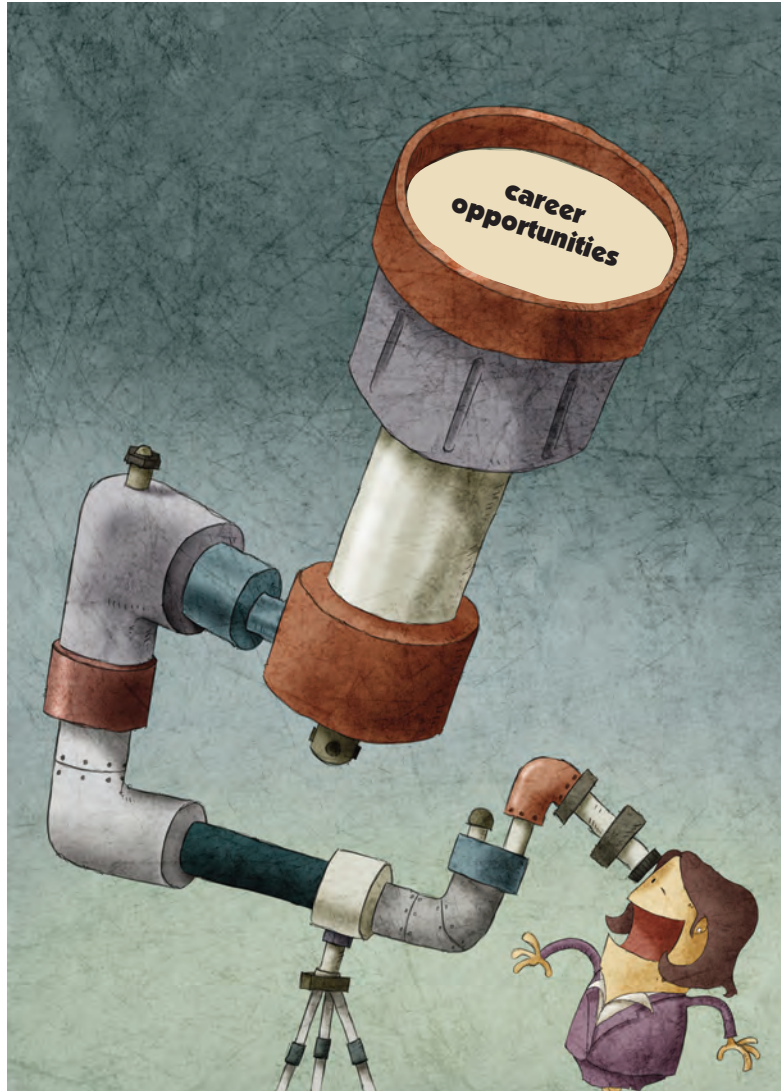


# Career Management from the Trenches

Some suggestions from the AALL Economic Status Committee

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During the 2012 AALL Annual Meeting in Boston, the Economic Status of Law Librarians Committee met to discuss its goals. Every person on the committee, which consists of academic, firm, and court librarians from all levels of responsibility, has a story about his or her career, whether there are regrets about not pursuing opportunities or successes in negotiating improved pay and benefits. Together, we decided to share our collective experiences with colleagues in this article.

According to Wikipedia, “Career Management is the combination of structured planning and the active management choice of one’s own professional career. The outcome of successful career management should include personal fulfillment, work/life balance, goal achievement, and financial security.”

As a starting point, each committee member provided a journal entry relating a story or two from his or her own experiences with career management. And from these journal entries, five pieces of advice emerged:

- Develop yourself.
- Become invaluable.
- Toot your own horn.
- Negotiate salary and benefits.
- Stay motivated.

To sum up our collective advice: *stay alert to opportunities and take initiative!*

## Develop Yourself

Career management starts with you. Take time to develop your soft and hard skills. Soft skills relate to communication and leadership while hard skills relate to technical knowledge or an ability to organize and complete projects.

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For soft skills, take time to assess your own personal communication style and strengths. Strengths may relate to your personal disposition, conversation style, and approach to getting work done. Some of us are extroverts who work best by talking things out while others are more introverted and may prefer to develop ideas on our own. Neither style is preferable; the key is to know your style and be prepared to stretch or adjust depending on how others operate. If you are not sure of your style and strengths, there are a number of books to help you explore, including *Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow* by Tom Rath and Barry Conchie.

In addition to self-reflection, get feedback from others. Don’t be shy. Ask for informal thoughts from your peers and colleagues, and solicit thoughts from mentors and managers. This may help you identify strengths that you do not see. And it may give you something to think about in terms of opportunities for improvement. Take time to reflect on what others say, especially when it does not match what you think of yourself.

A mismatch in perception may suggest that you are not being your most authentic self at work. Find ways to be yourself while effectively communicating your ideas.

Reading motivational books will also help you learn more about navigating your career. Safari Books Online, which many libraries license, offers a variety of self-help books on motivation, communication, and other aspects of career management. There are many other resources to help you get inspired, as well. For example, one member of the committee likes to follow the Harvard Business Review on Twitter for quick tips on leadership and teamwork. Beyond reading books and blogs, take advantage of career workshops. Many universities offer courses in leadership and negotiating difficult situations. Firms may also have such courses, but they may not be offered regularly or to those not at a management level. However, if you want something, ask, whether that means talking to your supervisor, human resources, or a colleague who may offer guidance. One committee member works at a firm that offered a course on project management after a librarian said she thought it would be helpful for firm staff in all areas. And finally, there are formal leadership trainings available, like the AALL Leadership Academy and the AALL Management Institute.

Seek out opportunities to meet others and to participate in professional organizations. Take time in your career to network, including getting to know colleagues with different skills and experiences. AALL is great, but consider other groups (including regional ones) that may grow your knowledge and network. For example, one member of the committee joined a local chapter of the American Society for Information Science and Technology to meet information professionals from a nearby university with strong technical skills.

Take time to cultivate mentoring relationships. Most mentoring is informal, happens among peers, and can arise in small moments, like exchanging ideas with a colleague while waiting for the elevator. These relationships can also be formal, with scheduled coffee meetings designed to help you develop knowledge or a specific skill. A natural mentor is often someone you identify with and whose opinion you trust. Trust helps when hearing constructive criticism. Any mentor must be prepared to help you grow by sharing all types of feedback.

And, of course, take time to develop your hard skills. Seek out opportunities to team up (and even lead) small projects. There likely are small opportunities in the workplace—

especially since most employers are eager for staff to develop skills and contribute. Overall, committee members stressed the importance of not being too shy or lacking confidence in your ideas. Sometimes you may hear “no,” and sometimes you may hear “yes.” The important thing is to pay attention to all the ways you can contribute to the organization and to make the effort.

If you are unsure of how to achieve something, be resourceful in finding learning opportunities. There are a ton of free online resources for self-directed adult learners. Some helpful sources include YouTube, iTunes, the Khan Academy, and the Code Academy. Your institution may license web tutorials, like Lynda.com, for learning about tools and technologies. One member of the committee became certified in the system administration of the management system of one of her library vendors. Another member got started learning about budgets by reading a 1913 book available for free in Google Books (*A Normal Library Budget and its Units of Expense* by Osmund Rhodes Howard Thomson).

Keeping skills current is also about identifying what skills are in demand. For this, it is helpful to peruse current job listings. Pay attention to the description of skills (soft and technical). Certainly, not everyone can learn every skill, so be somewhat strategic in how you develop yourself. Check in with colleagues and mentors to learn what skills may be of most value. And be thoughtful. You may find that you are naturally motivated to pursue some skills and not others.

And when your ambition exceeds your current time or skills, keep an “idea box.” That is, jot down ideas for small and big projects and keep them in a folder along with interesting articles or other points of inspiration. When work slows, take a look at your ideas and think about how to implement them. Supervisors love hearing that something that has lingered for years has suddenly been taken care of. When a new project gets started, go through the box and see if you have related thoughts to contribute to make the project stronger.

Finally, consider sharing your knowledge by leading discussions or trainings at work. Sharing your skills and knowledge is a great way to develop what you know, to contribute, to learn what others know, and to get noticed for your expertise.

## Become Invaluable

Become invaluable by aligning your work to the mission of your library and to the larger organization. Pay attention to what is communicated at all levels of the

library and larger institution. Sometimes there is a tendency to gloss over organizational information that does not directly relate to your work. Be curious about the mission of your institution and the strategic initiatives for achieving organizational goals. And be curious about the larger trends in law schools and law firms. A good way to get started is to note the blogs and books authored by speakers at AALL and other conferences.

Take an interest in the governance of your institution, and learn who is responsible for executing strategic initiatives. Know the key players, and, to the extent feasible, start to build relationships. Getting to know people can happen slowly over time. Look for opportunities to get involved. Your law school or law firm may organize



volunteer opportunities that would allow you to work with others. Join teams or committees that will put you in contact with others. These teams can even be for something seemingly unrelated to your work, like a committee to identify ways to reduce the use of energy or a softball team. Building relationships builds trust, which in turn creates opportunities for contribution.

And, more simply, make friends across the hall. That is, get to know your colleagues in other departments, and volunteer to support faculty or attorneys with whom you don't work directly on a day-to-day basis. A firm librarian and member of the committee pointed out that she attends as many law firm

functions as possible, partly for face time and partly to get a sense of current needs or issues involving the firms' attorneys.

Find ways to offer services that folks might not necessarily think that the library or a librarian can provide. One committee member volunteered to digitize and archive in-house publications for the school's public relations office. Another member volunteered to create a daily newsletter to summarize news stories relevant to the practice areas of her firm. Still another member identified inefficiency in a cross-departmental workflow; she then set out to communicate with her manager and other stakeholders, eventually helping a lot of people save time.

Be alert and seize opportunities to contribute beyond your current job description. Get out of your comfort zone. If you don't take any risks, you're not growing. And remember that opportunities may not always present themselves in a direct way, and rewards may not be immediate. Still, keep contributing and be sure to toot your horn when the time comes.

### Toot Your Own Horn

An important part of career management is getting recognized for your contributions. To do so, it's important to track and communicate your value to managers.

Whether or not your supervisor requires you to compile an annual account of your contributions, we recommend that you keep track and prepare a report on your activities, achievements, and contributions. Keep track of every detail since you don't always know what may be important in promoting your organizational value. You can always pare down later for an official report to your supervisor.

What kinds of things should you track? Consider all of the following: faculty workshops, job talks, hiring committee activities, office parties/receptions, seminars, conferences, training (those you attend and those you provide), major research projects, leadership academies, lectures, charity work, committee memberships (especially those beyond the library that may not be as visible to your library colleagues and administrators), and awards—even peer-to-peer recognition awards. Track even the mundane, including time spent networking with faculty or attorneys at a holiday party or

other informal gatherings. Remember, too, to note when you contribute to your organization's social media platforms, such as via blog posts or on Twitter.

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There are several methods for keeping track. The main thing is to be organized and diligent. Some people keep constant track, taking the time to reflect on work every Friday or Monday. Several committee members describe keeping a draft document in the cloud (like in Dropbox) that they can update from anywhere. Others use a thorough calendaring system to note each activity. If you prefer paper, consider keeping activity printouts, invitations, conference materials, and other materials in a folder. The important thing is to develop a system and then make time to stay on top of it—it gets harder and harder to identify achievements as time passes. And if you have not been diligent, when the time comes, search your calendar, review email folders, check departmental statistics, and talk to your colleagues who may remember projects and contributions that you have forgotten about.

Track major projects, patrons served (as in faculty, attorneys, or staff), and resources used to answer questions, which will help you track your skills, along with the names of the patrons who can become your advocates. Include any feedback or appreciation responses from others, and ask appreciative library users to relay good comments to your reviewers. One member of the committee described building an annual "kudos book," which is a binder to track formal thank yous.

Although it sounds simple, one of the most overlooked aspects of career management is communicating your contributions and accomplishments to managers. Managers are busy and may not always observe or know what you are doing. Or they may not inherently appreciate how what you are doing is contributing to the mission of your library and organization. If you often feel overlooked while your colleagues are getting picked for assignments or more work, consider whether you are waiting to be recognized without helping your managers to recognize you. When you don't effectively communicate your value to your organization, whether it's because you're afraid to speak up or you don't

know your own value, you are hurting your own career success.

## Negotiate Salary and Benefits

Negotiating salaries and asking for a raise is stressful and likely avoided by many in the profession. Still, librarians must be prepared to advocate for themselves and to negotiate. One committee member related her experience of asking for a raise and receiving the response, “You’re due for one, and we have been waiting for you to ask.” Another member took a long-term approach and sought to have her library position reclassified as salaried (exempt) instead of hourly (nonexempt). She did this several months before asking for a raise—and it helped. And another member mentioned talking to someone she trusted at work about her plans to ask for a raise. She learned something helpful about the process and got great moral support.

The raise is very often discretionary, maybe even more than many of us think. A savvy librarian will seek to communicate well with the director over accomplishments. Directors often have the power to find money for star performers. The catch is that librarians need to (1) ask for a raise and (2) find some form of bargaining power. Your personal bargaining power can be anything from demonstrating and communicating your contributions to finding a second position. Don’t take no for an answer, at least not the first time.

Seek to find out why a raise is not possible at that moment. At the very least, asking for a raise may help you learn where you stand in the organization in terms of how you are valued against your peers. And don’t be afraid to keep asking year to year or to make specific proposals; be creative, and consider benefits beyond salary that might improve your happiness, such as asking for professional development and training, a shift in job duties, or flex-time.

Some issues to consider in determining the degree of discretion for a raise may relate to whether the institution is private or public and whether librarians are union members and operating under contract. Directors often have the ability to act as advocates for staff in seeking across-the-board pay increases. One thing is for the director to read the governance plan of the organization (whether law firm or law school). The plan can provide information on the pay structure of the institution as well as the long-term

employment situation. In general, the policy will offer the director information in building a staff-promotion strategy.

Advocate for others as well as yourself. Share recent salary comparisons when raises or other salary matters are being discussed. Use multiple salary surveys. For example, in the academic environment, use the *AALL Salary Survey*, along with the university system benchmarking report, the Association of Research Libraries report, and others. Make a case to weight these salary statistics by institutional characteristics more than geographic location. This will allow recruitment efforts to benefit those already on board. Directors and other administrators should try to make the process as transparent and objective as possible. (Note: law firms look at the ALA Legal Administrators salary survey.)

Again, the best first step toward getting the compensation you feel you deserve is to track your accomplishments and share them with your manager. And then ask, and, in the instance that the answer is “no,” be prepared to ask again and to ask for a rationale that may help you improve the outcome the next time around. Similar to the person who found that the employer was waiting for her to ask, when one committee member asked for a raise, she was told that it had already been proposed that she be given an extra bonus. She was glad she asked, because a one-time bonus is not as beneficial as a raise.

## Stay Motivated

Staying motivated throughout your career is an important part of career management. Motivation can be about keeping yourself positive and it can be about finding solutions to unpleasant career roadblocks.

Many roadblocks are unique to you and your institution. Others, however, are likely shared by your peers in your library and beyond. Communicate in a respectful way with others regarding work frustrations. And consider ways to advocate for yourselves formally or informally. For example, at Cornell University, there is an economic status of librarians committee set up to help librarians advocate for themselves in the formal structure. Sometimes it is just good to share your experience to learn how others have navigated through difficult times. Find peer mentors, and take time to hang out away from the usual settings. This can help you brainstorm how to resolve issues.

A simple way to stay motivated is

to mix things up at work. Consider working on a “fun” project. Try to schedule a variety of tasks for each day so that you can change your frame of reference throughout the day. One committee member suggests that moving from a detail-oriented independent task to a broad-ranging group task refreshes her and increases her focus. Keep the end result in mind. In the broadest terms, we are here to help others. Remember to review priorities and keep high visibility and time-sensitive tasks at the top of your to-do list. Some committee members are involved in after-hours group activities with workmates that are as varied as watercolor painting, yoga, and hiking.

Finally, take that vacation. Working harder and longer is not necessarily smarter. We’ve all heard it before, but it bears repeating that time away from work renews your energy. Likewise, taking care of yourself in other ways, physically and emotionally, translates to improved productivity at work.

## Be Your Own Best Advocate

There is a lot to know about career management. Does anyone do **all** of the things mentioned in this article? Not likely. But knowing about them may help you find what works for you and feel stronger career satisfaction. Develop yourself, contribute, and be your own best advocate! ■

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