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A Change Would Do You Good: Cross-Sector Perspectives

By Rebecca Katz, DC Office of Public Records; Kayla Harris, University of Dayton;
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The various sectors of archives and related professions can diverge from each other in priorities, strategies, constituencies, and resource availability. Individuals changing positions across these sectors have an opportunity to bring skills learned in their previous field(s) to transform the work being done in archives and related institutions. Cross-sector experiences also provide an opportunity to reflect on how such transitions transformed an individual's outlook on the profession as a whole and his or her role within it. Even much of the recently renewed interest in the unity among libraries, archives, and museums (LAMs) focuses on institutions and not on the *individual* professionals working in these areas.

At the 2018 MAC Annual Meeting in Chicago, a lightning round panel of eight archivists presented their lessons learned about transitioning from outside and within the LAM sector. Keeping with the conference theme, “Blurring Boundaries, Crossing Lines,” the presenters shared their experiences moving across several different areas, including local and state government, corporate archives, museums, local historical societies, and academic special collections. Despite varied job titles and responsibilities, common themes emerged during this session about backgrounds and skill sets that enhance each archivist's current work. Session feedback asked for more information about *how* the panelists transitioned to serve as a guide for others attempting to do the same.

Education and Transferable Skills

Unsurprisingly, individuals who have learned archival practice and skills—including appraisal and selection, arrangement and description, outreach and advocacy—in one setting can transfer these skills into new settings. It is critical to remember, however, that experience and knowledge in other professions—records management, object curation and registration, law, education, communications—can add valuable perspectives and additional skills to work in an archives.

Educational background was a point of discussion during and after the session panel. Many archivists in the field have some variation of an MLIS degree and/or an MA degree, but other degrees can be useful too. Individuals who have legal or history backgrounds may be able to provide contextual information that those without that



Employees of a law office “issue spot.” Credit: *The Interior of J. D. Rairdon's Law Office*, Joseph Judd Pennell Photographs collection 1888–1923, Kansas Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, <https://luna.ku.edu/luna/servlet/s/1308rh>

framework of knowledge and practice might miss, either when working in a records management field or when working with archival collections. Individuals with a local history background or who have performed genealogical research can turn these research skills in other directions when working with archival collections to gain contextual information about records creators.

The line between records management and archival practice is a blurry one. Writing and revising retention schedules for government or business records requires the same appraisal skills used when assessing donations of personal papers or literary manuscripts to archives. One of the authors of this article has an employee originally hired as an appraisal archivist who now has primary responsibility for writing retention schedules, though another employee is officially the organization's chief records manager. Experience with retention schedules also translates to developing selection and weeding criteria for micro-appraisal within manuscript collections or personal papers. Records managers must communicate with records creators about primary and secondary uses of their records. Additionally, records managers used to advocating for the importance of good records management may be able to use this skill to advocate for the preservation of records and for other areas of outreach in an archival context.

Museum practices for object registration can differ greatly from archival practices of arrangement and description of manuscript or textual collections. Having knowledge of both can be particularly beneficial for individuals at institutions without museums who find themselves working with three-dimensional objects. This can also benefit individuals working at small institutions that do not, or cannot, distinguish between objects and archival collections, particularly due to staffing available.

Attorneys learn in law school to “issue spot,” or to identify situations that might cause problems. An archivist with legal experience will immediately realize that the collection with Social Security numbers or individually identifiable health information poses significant privacy issues. This archivist will be able to read and understand the laws governing the organization’s records. He or she will be able to draft a deed of gift form that incorporates all of the critical issues of ownership and intellectual property, review agreements with vendors, and identify laws that might affect retention requirements. The archivist with legal training will understand that a request for “any and all documents about subject X” is a discovery request requiring a different type of reference interview and response than an undergraduate’s tentative, “I am writing a paper about the homefront during World War II, and my professor told me to look in the archives.”

Those with teaching experience could transition to a variety of roles, including instruction in academic settings



Teaching students. Credit: Sr. Mary Jean Dorcy, Marian Library Photograph collection, circa 1920–circa 1990. Marian Library, University of Dayton, https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri_photos/43/.

or educational programming in museum settings, as well as teaching with primary sources where this is considered a significant portion of an individual’s work. Former teachers can think about their ability to help students comprehend new ideas or expand their knowledge of topics and turn this pedagogical framework to working in other circumstances. These might include teaching best records management practices or working with donors on improving practices for personal digital archiving.

The ability to effectively communicate is frequently a qualification required for many archival positions, because it is necessary for many areas of archival practice. Confidence and competence in dealing with the press are valuable for advocacy. An archivist with communications experience may best understand that meaningful social media use for the archives is more than just posting interesting tidbits, but instead requires skilled engagement with followers.



Preparing to be effective communicators. Credit: Chapman High School Typewriting Class, Joseph Judd Pennell Photographs collection, 1888–1923, Kansas Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, <https://luna.ku.edu/luna/servlet/s/6ofn23>.

Skills and experience can be transferred from any field, not only those listed here. It is up to the individual to think critically and then “sell” how an archival institution can directly benefit.

Making that Change

Career guidance and self-help books, articles, and websites

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for mid- or late-career transitions in a broad context can be found in abundance. A search on “career changes” in your public library’s catalog can be a simple start with a lot of results. Some additional tools used by the authors and panelists at the MAC Annual Conference are particularly useful for career transitions within the LAM sector.

The word “networking” may strike fear in the heart of many an introvert, but it is essential when considering a career transition, especially in the archival field. Networking is more than cold-calling your friends’ professional contacts for informational interviews (though it can include this as well). It is using Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, or other social media platforms to your advantage. It is blogging, attending conferences, joining professional organizations, and attending your college’s or university’s alumni events. It can even be commenting on a popular workplace blog.¹



Networking together over a meal. Credit: Frank Duff with Group at the Speakers Table, Marian Library Photograph collection, circa 1920–circa 1990. Marian Library, University of Dayton, https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri_photos/5/.

Especially when making a significant career change—from a field outside of LAM to archives, for example—in-

formational interviews are the first step and provide an important view of archives from the inside. Informational interviews are not a backdoor way to get a job, they are for you to get information. The more you understand about the nature of any given job, the better able you will be to make your application. You will be able to express excitement about the specifics of the job in your cover letter and to highlight those transferable skills that you will bring to the position. Networking helps facilitate these interviews.

As a form of virtual networking, social media is a tool that can be used to learn about the field, not (only) to self-promote. Reading or participating in Twitter chats gives insight into issues that archivists encounter in their day-to-day work. Following a range of information professionals is a low-effort, low-barrier way to learn about a variety of workplace settings, as well as to learn about job openings that might not be posted in more traditional places. The Preservation Section of SAA even hosted a Twitter conference in April 2018.²

Face-to-face networking is important too. National conferences can be expensive, especially when attendance can mean taking vacation time from an unrelated job and paying nonmember registration rates. Regional conferences, however, such as the MAC Annual Meeting, are generally more reasonably priced and are always less overwhelming in numbers of attendees and session tracks to explore. Attending regional conferences introduces resources available in that region and can also make new repositories and institutions known to the aspiring archivist. Some individuals are even able to combine virtual and in-person networking. Livetweet at conferences, if you can do so while still paying attention, and people will get to know you. Use Twitter at conferences to put out a call to share a meal, or respond to someone else’s call for an unofficial activity.

If you live in a city with an alumni group, attending alumni events is a good way to meet potential contacts. An important thing to remember about attending these events is that the people attending genuinely want to be of assistance. Talk to everyone; even someone not in archives might have friends who are, or his or her big corporation may have an archives.

Aspiring professionals can get involved in local professional organizations in meaningful ways. One of the authors of this article co-established and cochaired a committee in her local law librarians’ organization while

still in library school. This brought her to the attention of members of the organization, who were then available to provide advice. Ultimately, she went into archives, not law librarianship, but this enhanced a network that could come into play for future career shifts.

All of these modes of networking are intended to prepare the career changer to successfully apply for jobs in archives, including those that may seem somewhat out of the scope of a current position. It is essential, therefore, to incorporate information about transferable skills into job application packages. When you are making a career switch, the hiring manager will look at your application skeptically. Make sure that your cover letter assures the hiring manager that you understand the nature of the job you are applying for and that you have relevant and desirable knowledge, skills, and experience for that job. Do not be shy about describing your transferable skills; hiring managers read a lot of cover letters and resumes, so you should be *explicit* about those skills in your cover letter and how they match the position description.

While you network, research the expectations for resumes or curriculum vitae for the positions you are interested in—a position at an academic library may expect a five-page or longer CV, while a corporate archivist job may require no more than a two-page resume. Tailor your resume or CV to fit the position, and take advantage of resume reviews from colleagues, friends, and those offered through regional and national professional organizations. Highlight your transferable skills, and make it easy for the hiring manager. When describing accomplishments and responsibilities at previous jobs, put accomplishments relevant to archives at the top of the list, even if they are a minor part of the position. If you are moving from a jargon-heavy field, be sure to clarify or remove that jargon from your resume. The hiring manager is unlikely to know what the TLAs in your previous field are and even less likely to look them up.³ Once you have landed a phone or in-person interview, keep those transferable skills in mind. If the interviewer has flexibility in what questions to ask, he or she will certainly be asking why you are looking to change careers or focus.

Changing the direction of a career path is intimidating, but the different perspective you will bring to your new position enhances the entire profession. By focusing on transferable skills, networking, self-promotion, and a confidence in your abilities, it is possible to leverage existing experience into a new role.

Notes

1. Reader “Moonlight Doughnut” likely did not expect, when asking a question about the application for a job, that the manager would be reading her question. The manager did read her question and responded. The manager further indicated that this unintentional networking would reflect favorably upon Moonlight Doughnut’s application. From Ask a Manager, April 13, 2018, <https://www.askaman-ager.org/2018/04/open-thread-april-13-14-2018.html#comment-1943835>.
2. Society of American Archivists, “Preservation Week 2018 Twitter Conference,” <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/preservation-section/preservation-week-2018-twitter-conference>.
3. “Three letter acronyms.” See (or hear) the podcast *Safe for Work*, <https://art19.com/shows/safe-for-work/episodes/5d43cd7f-b764-489a-9f00-c58ef60c2e0b>, from 29:00 through 29:10.

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