Before joining Michigan Publishing, I worked as an Art & Architecture Librarian at the University of Colorado, Boulder. It was in many ways a “traditional” art librarian job. I worked directly with students and faculty in art, architecture, design, and planning as a teaching librarian, a liaison, and as the primary selector for collections in those disciplines. I didn’t work with other subject areas. It was a tenure-track position. My job title was easy to understand, even by folks outside of the library world for the most part. But that’s not the case now. When I tell people my title, I’m often met with a confused look of “So what do you do, exactly?”

In the fall of 2011 I took a newly-created position as a Publishing Services & Outreach Librarian at the University of Michigan. The division I am part of includes: the University of Michigan Press, our institutional repository, the Copyright Office, outreach and instruction duties for scholarly communication, our print-on-demand program and other library-based publishing operations, and a scholarly journals program.

In many respects, I am now a “subject specialist” for scholarly communication in that I have a combination of public services and “collection” duties. However, now it’s a different kind of “collection.” I still do reference and instruction, but instead of focusing on art and architecture, now I spend my time helping students and faculty with questions about publishing, copyright, open access, and other areas of scholarly communication. Instead of managing a large physical collection of books and journals (and their attendant electronic counterparts), and participating in collection development, I find myself working at a different stage in the ecosystem of scholarly communication. A big part of my job right now is getting a new open access publishing imprint off the ground, and eventually acquiring...
titles that will form its list. So I’ve moved from acquisitions and collection development in the librarian sense, to acquisitions in the publishing sense.

Despite the similarities, this is still a fairly significant transition for someone who in grad school was convinced she would be an art librarian. So today I wanted to share some things that might be helpful if you are interested in a similar kind of transition, or are interested in exploring career options beyond the traditional art librarian track. I’m hoping this will be useful for fellow new professionals, as well as mid-career colleagues.

So how do you get there from here? With ARLIS/NA, we have this great support system for finding a job as an “art librarian.” But what about if you’re looking for a job outside of this system? What if, thanks to a difficult job market or the vagaries of life, you need to be creative about your job search? Maybe this is the first time you’ve done this? Or maybe it’s been a while since you’ve been out on the market? Any time you look for a job, you are seeking a balance between all the possible factors in a very complicated equation, including organizational culture, employer type, position type, job duties, location, compensation and benefits, and work/life balance.

Let’s talk about a few strategies for how to maximize the pieces of this equation that are most important to you, regardless of whether you are a new professional entering a difficult job market or perhaps mid-career and looking for a change. You won’t necessarily get everything you want in all the pieces of this equation. Most of us are here because we are or want to be “art librarians.” But “you can’t always get what you want.” And given the current job climate, we need to think carefully and holistically about how to “get what you need.” Take some time to think about which parts of this puzzle are the most important to you, and how they might interact.

Step One: Don’t look for your keys under the streetlight.

Find organizations you are not a member of (SAA, SLA, ACRL, etc.), regional library associations, and look at their job postings regularly to get a feel for what’s out there. We have to go beyond what ARLIS/NA, ArLiSNAP, etc. can show us. In some cases, you might even have to look outside of the “library” world to knowledge management, non-profits, development, and other kinds of organizations. Continue to push yourself out of your comfort zone when it comes to geography, employer types, position types, etc.

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Repeat this process for each of the variables you don't need to keep constant. So for example, if you need to stay in Portland, OR... Yes, keep looking at ARLIS/NA, keep talking to art information professionals in the region. But add the Oregon Library Association, PacNW Library Association, Oregon State Library, regional archivists’ association, HERC, the Nonprofit Association of Oregon.

If you have to keep more than one of those puzzle pieces constant, this becomes even more important. For example, you need to stay in Portland AND you're only interested in positions in an academic library... The more pieces you need to keep constant, the more you need to be willing to take risks and try something different.

Step Two: Use your professional network

Think about how your colleagues, mentors, supervisors fit in that puzzle. Which pieces do they share with the kind of job you are looking for? Do they know about opportunities that are available? If you are a student or new professional, this is a good time to be thinking about the “diversity” of your professional network. As you move forward in your career, it’s a great idea to develop a network that includes individuals who don’t “look like you” (in the sense of both professional and personal identity). You want your network to help take you to new places, not just places you’ve been. How do you expand it? Reach out to people who are in different kinds of jobs, different geographic regions, etc. This conference is a great time to do that kind of work! Take advantage of mentoring opportunities beyond just colleagues and supervisors. Branch out! Most library associations (even small ones) are either starting mentoring programs, or would be able to connect you to a potential mentor. Sometimes all you have to do is ask. Mentoring isn’t something you only need at the beginning of your career! It’s relevant throughout your professional life!

Step Three: Look at the job, not just the job title

When we’re looking at a lot of positions, we tend to skip over things that don’t jump out at us. Read beyond the title to get a better understanding of how you might be a strong candidate for something even if it’s not the title you imagined having. Don’t be afraid to reach out to someone in the organization to learn more. “Preliminary” conversations can
lead to invitations to interview. They can also save you time if you learn something that would lead you not to apply.

Step Four: Learn how to translate your skills and experience into language that is meaningful to the people reading your application materials.

“But you’re an art librarian! How did you sell yourself as scholarly communication librarian?”
It was about translating my professional strengths into language that was meaningful to a library publishing division.

- Art History MA and experience working closely with students and faculty in art, art history, architecture, planning, and design --> Deep understanding of scholarship and practices in a range of humanities disciplines.
- Skills as a teaching librarian --> directly relevant (would just be using them for a different area)
- Collection development and management --> ability to manage large, complex projects (with budgets!) both independently and in collaboration with others
- Many skills were just baseline relevant
  - Ability to work without direct supervision
  - Time management, ability to balance competing demands
  - Experience working with a diverse user population

Every time you write a cover letter, you are selling yourself for a job you don’t have. In my case, this was just a more explicit, extreme example of that.

How does being a publishing professional fit into my “art librarian” career plan? I’m still doing lots of things that made me love being an art librarian, like teaching, working with students and faculty. I haven’t done anything that makes me no longer qualified for an art librarian job. If anything, I now bring something unique and valuable to the table. When I decide to go back on the job market, I’ll have to repeat this process over again. Talk to folks you meet here at the conference. Very few people have a career path that is strictly linear—leading very clearly from point A to point B. Sometimes the detours can take us to really interesting places.

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