

## "Mentors and Mentees: Structuring a Professional Relationship"

By Heather Carine



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[The following article is based on a presentation given by Heather Carine to the Australian Law Librarians' Association (South Australian Branch) on 5 March 2007.]

In the past year, I have been both a mentee and have become a mentor. My long-distance mentor helped me to make the change from being a full-time information services manager to becoming a freelance researcher. In turn, I am using my corporate library experience to help a colleague from a public library work towards some of her professional goals.

The opportunity to learn from my mentor and to share my knowledge with my mentee has been an enriching experience. It's a pleasure to share with the FreePint community some insights into what to expect if you are considering becoming involved in a mentoring arrangement. For confidentiality, many of my examples will be generic, rather than drawn from specific discussions with my mentee.

### Why seek out a mentor?

Mentoring brings together an experienced practitioner, and importantly, a mentee who is ready and willing to benefit from this exchange to enrich their professional journey, according to the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) Mentoring Programme in South Australia <<http://www.alia.org.au/groups/mentoringsa/mentor.html>>.

Being mentored is a very personal experience - you may not list your mentoring arrangement on your CV,

and it's unlikely that someone would recommend you to a mentor.

Occasionally, you may see a mentoring programme being offered, and if you feel that you are ready and willing to learn from an experienced mentor from your profession, you will know it's time.

In my case, I had been contemplating setting up as a freelance researcher for a few years, but there were too many perceived hurdles to make the switch. A freelance career seemed too risky, too isolating and too far from my current research skills base.

In September 2005, I read in FreePint "Mentoring Independent Information Professionals: A Case Study", by Amelia Kassel <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/290905.htm>>, outlining her mentoring programme for people wanting to develop their skills as independent information professionals (or freelance researchers). The opportunity to be mentored was perfect for me, and I was certainly ready and willing to be guided by a researcher as experienced and well-regarded as Amelia. Her mentoring programme opened up for me not only an avenue to move into a freelance research career, but also, a greater understanding of mentoring. In turn, my experience as a mentee led me to becoming a mentor in the Australian Library and Information Association's (ALIA) mentoring programme.

### Mentee benefits

The programme suggests that mentees may gain the following benefits from mentoring:

- Expanding your knowledge and understanding of library skills and practice. A mentor can help with going back to basics and discussing the foundations that underpin your profession.

For example, a few years into their career, a mentee can be focused on, or frustrated with, their current role and unsure of where it is leading. A mentor can share their experience on how they have been able to build on their library and professional skills to develop their career and their role in their profession.

- Support with change and difficulties. A mentor, who is likely to be from a different specialty in the library field, can assist with some tips for managing change by sharing their experience on how they have steered through their challenging work environment.

My law librarian colleagues are dealing with the changing expectations of the community, clients and lawyers that can make working in the legal environment challenging. A mentor from a different field, such as an academic library environment, will be able to share what they have learned from working in an equally challenging and rapidly changing environment.

- Building professional contacts for wider networking and for reducing isolation. Whilst it's unlikely that a mentee will seek a mentor as a means of building a network of contacts, the mentoring programme is a means of bringing librarians together from different environments.

For example, law librarians have many opportunities to seek support or advice from their law colleagues. However, for some confidential issues, such as career guidance, they may seek the support from a wider pool, which is what a programme such as the ALIA mentorship programme is ideal for.

- Honest and constructive feedback. Your feedback will be from someone who doesn't know your work situation personally, but can offer some guidance and suggestions on the issues that the mentee is facing.
- Increased self-confidence. Hopefully, with your new skills and perspective, greater self-confidence will be an outcome from your mentoring experience.



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### Structuring an arrangement

The mentoring arrangement can take all sorts of shapes and sizes. The ALIA mentoring programme I mentor in is the more typical arrangement organised by a professional association. Experienced practitioners and potential mentees are linked up based on their skills and expectations. Whilst the mentors and mentees may come from various areas in the library and information world, we are all based in South Australia. Most of the mentoring will be face to face, and the mentoring is voluntary.

By contrast, my mentoring arrangement with Amelia Kassel was a private arrangement. Amelia is a freelance researcher with over 20 years experience with her own business, MarketingBase. Part of Amelia's business is mentoring fee-paying mentees, who are based around the world. In our case, Amelia is based in California, I am based in Adelaide, South Australia, and we communicated regularly via email.

Learning from a mentor is quite a different experience to anything that I had encountered, particularly in comparison to the academic environment. Group learning has a set curriculum, but mentoring is tailored to fit the needs of the mentee. The mentor and mentee are paired together to fit the mentee's aims. The focus of discussion and frequency of contact is then tailored to the mentee's objectives, interests and availability. Each meeting is a conversation, based less on teaching concepts and more on sharing of experiences that help to guide the mentee.

### Maximising the experience

ALIA suggest that mentees gain the most from the mentoring relationship by:

- Defining their aspirations and goals, and expressing them clearly to your mentor
- Being willing to confront challenges and accept feedback
- Communicating regularly and openly with their mentor.

Without a clear idea of what the mentee expects from the mentoring arrangement, and keeping in regular contact, the momentum can wax and wane.

Whilst I was clear in what I was seeking from my mentor, I will admit that there were times during the year when I felt that I wanted Amelia to set some deadlines, and to push me along. It was through reflecting on the mentoring year that I came to appreciate that imposed deadlines were less important than learning self-discipline.

It's a telling difference between mentoring and teaching (or coaching). The mentee determines what they want to learn or gain from the mentoring arrangement. They take responsibility for keeping the momentum going by actively following up on points that are discussed and regularly communicating with their mentor.

After all, as librarians we are more than capable of tracking down career guidance and/or change-management resources and reading them at our leisure. A mentor isn't a substitute for doing your own professional reading; it's an opportunity to build and discuss your ideas with an experienced practitioner, whose judgment and opinion you trust and respect.

My experience as a mentee has been invaluable, and has certainly been an enormous help in preparing me for the next stage of my career. I couldn't have asked for more from a mentoring experience

#### Why become a mentor?

As mentioned, it was my positive experience as a mentee that led me to put myself forward as a mentor in the ALIA mentoring programme. I also wanted to give back to my profession and library community by sharing some of the insights that I have gained from my 20 years of professional work experience.

Being a mentor can be as beneficial for the mentor as it is for the mentee. For a mentor, the benefits can include:

- \* Personal satisfaction in sharing their experience, knowledge and skills
- Being exposed to new ideas and interests
- The new opportunities for challenge
- The opportunity to reflect on their own practices.

It's worth being mindful of the fact that there are many people trained in career counselling who could assist your mentee, but they may not have the skills and experience in the library profession that the mentee seeks. Given that mentors aren't trained career counsellors, the ALIA programme offers some helpful tips for the mentor to assist their mentee develop their skills or career changes, such as:

- Reinforcing the strengths of the mentee
- Discussing mistakes and lessons learnt - these can relate to both the mentor and the mentee



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- Sharing your skills and knowledge about professional activities
- Assisting in solving work-related problems by listening and providing support, rather than by imposing your own solutions
- Being open to new ideas.

### Setting the structure

In practice, the ALIA programme suggests structuring the mentoring arrangement along the lines of these milestones:

First meeting. Meet to discuss respective roles to start to understand what the mentee is seeking from the mentoring arrangements, and to establish where, when and for how long you will meet in future.

Second meeting. Start to focus on what your mentee is aiming for - what she is hoping to achieve over the next 12 months. For example, look at two to three key goals and work with ways to achieve those goals. A formal mentoring agreement can be used to outline how the mentoring arrangement will work, frequency of meetings and desired outcomes.

Further meetings. Review the progress the mentee is making towards meeting her goals, and discuss any issues that come up.

It's important to remember that mentoring isn't coaching and that the mentee sets the agenda and their degree of involvement.

Either side of mentoring can be a rewarding and rich learning experience. It was an honour to be personally guided through significant changes in my career; and it's an equally rewarding experience to assist a fellow librarian to develop their role in our profession.

### Related FreePint links:

- "Mentoring Independent Information Professionals: A Case Study" By Amelia Kassel  
<<http://www.freepint.com/issues/290905.htm>>
- "Information industry mentoring?" Bar discussion  
<<http://www.freepint.com/go/b33018>>

### Related links:

- ALIA Mentoring Program (SA)  
<<http://www.alia.org.au/groups/mentoring/sa/>>