

Title: Working across cultures

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Background

The invitation to write this article coincided with my move from Australia to Canada to accept the position of a senior leadership position as Dean of the University of Saskatchewan Library. This career move came after many years of work experience in Australian universities that included leadership and management positions in university administrations and academic libraries.

The article is a mix of career reflections and personal observations about the decision-making process of changing employers and countries. It also covers initial impressions of moving, living and working in another country, context and culture. It explores selected issues (some personal and some professional) and addresses the broader question of what factors impact such a move, such as environmental factors that are likely to make an overseas appointment an attractive and challenging career alternative.

As such, this takes for granted that the broad knowledge, skills and abilities of librarians who are educated, trained and experienced in the Australian context are 'transportable' to other countries, contexts and cultures in the 21st century.

The global world of work in the 21st Century

Progressively we live, learn and work in a global context. In recent years Australian politicians have made much about the so-called 'brain-drain' and the movement of senior academic library practitioners to leadership positions overseas (including the United Kingdom and Canada). This has heightened awareness and speculation about overseas career opportunities for librarians and library administrators.

While there is a growing trend for Australians to work overseas, a recent report commissioned by the Federal Government's Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) and undertaken by the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University (Birrell, Rapson and Smith, 2006), highlighted a substantial and increasing contribution from the international movement of skilled workers to Australia.

The report shows that 16,278 Australian professionals left Australia in 2004-05, while 18,111 people in the professions arrived as visitors to Australia. These comings and goings are roughly equal and so in numerical terms at least, the brain-drain from resident losses is similar to the brain-gain from visitor movements. Accordingly, reports of a brain-drain within the Australian economy may have been exaggerated.

The other interesting finding from this report is that a surprisingly small percentage of tertiary-educated Australians are overseas. Just three per cent of Australia's 3.6 million people with degrees were expatriates in other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. This compares with 32 per cent of Irish graduates, 32 per cent of New Zealanders with degrees, and 17 per cent of British who are tertiary educated.

Australia's library labour market

We have all heard the phrase about the world being a small place. For the Australian library profession, especially those who work in academic libraries and higher

institutions more generally, this is certainly so. Although we have all heard the phrase about the world being a small place, the Australian library profession, especially those who work in academic libraries and higher education institutions more generally, this is certainly so.. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) on Australia's library labour market and the membership listing for the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) help put this into perspective. The 2006 membership listing for the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), a peak body for Australian academic libraries, represented by the chief librarians of Australian university libraries lists 40 member institutions, including universities from every Australian state and territory.

According to a report, published in January 2006 by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) (Teece, 2006), the vital ABS statistics from Australia's total workforce of almost 10 million employees for the Australian library workforce component, is as follows:

- The library workforce numbers nearly 29,000, including 13,000 librarians; 7,300 library assistants; 5,000 library technicians; and 3,500 archivists or intelligence professionals.
- Working in a library is ranked as a "medium sized occupation."
- Librarians are markedly older than the average for Australian occupations and the library workforce is rapidly aging: 60% are 45 or older, compared to 35% in the total workforce. 86% are 35 or more, compared to 55% in the total workforce. Only 14% are under 35, compared to 42 per cent in the total workforce. The median age is 46.
- The rate of librarian retirement in Australia is much higher than the rate of new entrants into the profession. For example, one quarter of professional and paraprofessional library staff is over the age of 55, which is more than double (11%) of the national workforce.
- Australian Librarians are paid relatively well when compared with the workforce as a whole. Librarians earn 119% of the Australian average wage and library technicians earn 75%.
- Librarians have a higher than average proportion of part-time workers among their ranks, with 37% working part-time and 63% working full time.
- Library work in Australia is highly feminised: 89% of employed librarians and more than 97% of library technicians are women. Among all librarians, about 52% are women working fulltime; 37% are women working part time; men working fulltime account for nearly 11%. There are very few part time males.
- Librarians are spread across a range of industry sectors: 36% work in cultural and recreation services; 24% in education; 17% in government administration and defence; nine per cent in property and business services; and five per cent in health and community services.
- Geographically, New South Wales has 41% of the workforce, Victoria 22%, Queensland 12%, the Australian Capital Territory six per cent, Western Australia nine per cent, South Australia six per cent and Tasmania and the Northern Territory each has two per cent.
- Unemployment among librarians is low at two per cent compared to the Australian average of five per cent. Overall job growth has been positive over the past five years [two per cent per year], especially in the past two years.
- Job prospects are rated 'average' for librarians and library technicians, 'good' for archivists and intelligence professionals and 'below average' for library assistants.

- Library workers rank in the seventh decile for 'employment in growth industries'. This means an above average proportion works in sectors estimated to grow strongly in the foreseeable future.

Why work overseas...motivational factors

Given the relative good shape of the Australian sector, at least in terms of salary, employment levels and job growth, the obvious question is: why work overseas? Decisions by individuals to work overseas will necessarily be determined by an array of personal and professional motivations, well beyond the employment characteristics of particular professions/industries and employment markets, though these do provide useful background and context.

For some, just the opportunity to experience everyday life and work in another country, context and culture may be attractive enough to motivate a move to a different employer and country. In my case, this was partly true. Past positive experiences when visiting Canada helped to set a context for my decision to move. Canada, like Australia, is a large and diverse country, whose history and development has been influenced by distance, isolation and a sense of 'can do' and relative independence of thought and action. Canada and Australia share some common heritage through their membership in the British Commonwealth and their shared experiences of democratic processes of government. These factors helped to create a sense of safety and comfort; while some things would be different, others would be common..

I have to admit that while I was looking for a career move, I was not looking overseas. The opportunity presented itself, as did, in turn, the attraction of an overseas experience that eventually became a factor in my thinking,.

For me, the challenge to work successfully and confidently in professional practice in another context and workplace culture was also a motivating factor. Australia's workplace context and the culture of Australian university campuses have changed fundamentally during the last decade under the Howard Government. The higher education landscape post-1996 is littered with memorable moments and movements in public policy, all of which extracted a price from individuals in workplaces. Those who lived and worked through the institutional impacts of the 'Vannote cuts of 1996', the various quality initiatives and the Nelson era of so-called "higher education reforms", will understand this point. There is a certain attraction to returning to professional practice, where matters of service delivery, resource development and the quality of client interaction with the Library's collections and its staff are what matters, rather than reporting to governments on compliance or otherwise with legislative requirements and/or government policy.

This factor became an attraction for me only after I was aware of the opportunity to work overseas. It was not a prime motivating factor which caused me to be responsive to a change employers and country.

Consequently, when presented with the opportunity to change employers and move country, different workplace contexts and cultures became one of the challenges and motivating factors. For example, the public policy and industrial context for Canadian universities is very different from those of their Australian counterparts. The challenge and opportunity to work in a Library that has a collegial environment, with high levels of unionization, provides a unique experience.

Australia long ago abandoned the practice of classifying librarians as academics/faculty and the notion that rank is attached to the individual librarian and not to the position the librarian holds, now seems foreign to most Australian practitioners (perhaps with the exception of one remaining Victorian institution and some very long serving librarians). The background and impact of this decision within Australian academic libraries is well beyond the scope of this paper, except to say that it warrants mention as the different context for librarians as faculty in Canada and the opportunity to work and lead in such an environment, was a motivating factor to accepting a senior leadership position in an academic library where scholarship and research is not only valued but are an expected part of the job and where the guarantee of tenure within the collegium provides some certainty for the later stages of one's career.

Other motivational factors - the three employment drivers

At a more personal and professional level, questions of job readiness, job fit and satisfaction and, organisational culture fit were more fundamental in my decision to change employers. However, these questions came into sharp focus when the change also involved moving country, culture and context.

These questions, related and interconnected, are probably fundamental to any career move but for me they were fundamental and strong motivational factors. The key questions for employee and employer alike are:

- Can I/they do the job?
- Do I/they want the job?
- Will I/they 'fit' the emerging organisational culture?

These three major employment drivers (for individuals and employers alike) come into play when individuals make a particular decision to change employer and when prospective employers makes a decision about who to employ.

The decision making processes which underpin the process of answering these three questions is complex because it involves not only the analysis of factual information but also involves some processing of emotions and the understanding of an individual's perceptions about these questions.

Individuals being what they are, not all three questions would rank equally when career and employment decisions are made. Individuals may give a different ranking or weighting to some of the questions.

Generally all three broad themes would tend to rank equally in any career decision about employment options. However, I suspect that as one progresses through to managerial ranks to leadership positions, issues around the culture of the employing organisation might rank slightly above the other two – a matter which will be discussed later in this paper.

'Do I want the job?'

The answer to this question is likely to be driven by a number of competing factors and will vary among and between individuals. For some this might come down to lifestyle considerations, family responsibilities, financial considerations (including salary and conditions of employment), and preparedness to relocate. Individuals will place different emphasis on their personal assessment of these factors. A move overseas, while desirable and potentially exciting on the surface, may prove to be impractical for some, depending on their current circumstances and responsibilities.

The span of duties, levels of autonomy and other role expectations will also be part of the answer to this question. For example, the University of Saskatchewan was quite explicit in its advertisement for a Dean of the Library – the first ever Canadian academic library to appoint at this level. The institution made a conscious decision to seek a dean (not a library director) and this had attractions and was important to me in answering the question: Do I want the job?

“Can I do the job?”

In the course of a professional career, individuals acquire a mix of knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to ensure a satisfactory performance in library roles. Initial education and training, ongoing professional development, retraining and life experience contribute to the mix. Career decisions along the way become important components, if not in the present, then in the future.

Australian academic librarianship does not have a strong tradition of higher degree studies. By comparison, the North American experience mandates entry level to the profession at the Master level. So the answer to this question regarding one's capability to do the job is often dictated by decisions made earlier in one's career. In my case the move to a new employer and country would have been most unlikely without my earlier decision to pursue and obtain doctoral qualifications, even though this decision was probably not critical if I continued my career within Australia.

One of the challenges when answering this question for oneself and for an overseas selection panel is comparability across systems, institutions and contexts. For example, is managing a budget in Australia the same as managing a budget in Canada - probably so. However, is experience and success in fund-raising and donor relationships the same – I suspect not, given that the context is different. Is managing and leading a large staff team the same? Maybe yes or maybe no. Some things will be the same but the context may be so significantly different that it will be difficult to judge if all knowledge, skills and abilities will be transportable.

How Search Committees/Selection Panels make such assessments are perhaps best known to them alone but regardless, these are all significant considerations when moving employers and countries.

“Will I fit the emerging organisational culture?”

Organizational culture has been described as the ‘personality of the organization’ and it often manifests itself in the assumptions, values, norms and tangible signs (artifacts) of the organization's members and their behaviors.

The answer to the question of will I/they fit the emerging organizational culture is a critical one. In a world of constant change it may often be difficult to get any real sense of what the culture of the organization is. Hence, the emphasis on the ‘emerging’ component of the culture fit. There are some key indicators around emerging organizational cultures, which are worthy of consideration when thinking about changing employers and countries. For example, what is the organization's mission, vision and values statement saying about the organization (do they have one?, what are the key leaders currently saying and doing and how does it sit with you?) Perhaps more importantly is the track record of the organization in delivering the reality (not just the rhetoric) of the values they articulate. This is where the fact finding and the decision-making about a move of employer and country gets to the pointy-end. It is also the point where a level of personal engagement becomes necessary rather than just fact-finding and reviewing documentation. Talking with people and using one's professional networks becomes critical at this stage.

In my case, finding the answer to this question and being comfortable that I had the true picture was helped enormously by a very well-organized site visit, which was part of the recruitment process. It was an exhausting experiencing, involving over 27 hours of international air travel for each of the forward and return journey, a week of meetings, presentations, discussions, a formal interview and a lot of preparatory ground-work in advance (and continuing to fulfill the requirements of a very demanding current job). This part of the process of deciding to move employer and country should not be undertaken lightly! In my case, the process was very public and very open and gave both me and my perspective employer the change to address the question around "fit" with organizational culture. As I write this part of the article some eight months into my change of employer and country, I am extremely pleased to report my assessment of my fit with the emerging organizational culture was correct.

Miscellaneous impacts

Regardless of the motivational factors impacting the choices individuals make about their careers, there are some emerging environments and contextual factors, which make moving to a new employer and a new country more accessible than ever before.

Primary among them is the impact of information and communication technology (ICT). The way people interact, learn and work has been radically changed by modern and emerging forms of electronic communication and the internet and libraries world-wide have been at that forefront of that revolution. Academic libraries have been the leaders in the adoption of new systems, processes and technologies and have been active in their professional participation in networks, e-research and e-collaborations. Librarians are experienced users of the Internet for collaboration across international boundaries.

New technologies have helped to break down traditional boundaries and barriers between locations and communities. Technology has changed our communication patterns, hastened the pace at which information is exchanged and brought us closer together by reducing the impact of time zones and making it possible to 'do business, twenty-four by seven'. In turn these impacts have freed-up the employment market and made it easier to plan, manage and transact the business of moving from one employer to another and one country to another.

For example, an increasing amount of recruitment is being done across the Internet. While job postings on the Internet have been common for sometime, there is a growing tendency for information about job vacancies to be shared between and across professional networks through list serves and personal email. The rise of the Search Firms (or Head-hunters) and the expanded role they are now playing in recruitment, especially for senior library leadership positions, further highlights the importance and value of professional networks as firms seek a competitive edge by identifying new and potentially different candidates.

New technologies make it possible to move some way down the recruitment process before the need for any face-to-face communication, with the use of teleconferencing and video links opening up all kinds of possibilities. Significant amounts of the recruitment process, including the exchange of key documentation is now possible through the Internet.

Additionally, the amount of country and background information now available through the Internet is truly amazing. For example, information about immigration requirements, how to move yourself, your belongings and your family pet from country to country is now available quickly and easily. The quality and the quantity of information available through the Australian Government website are particularly extensive and easy to access.

The business of moving from one country to another is complex. Examples of how technology helped in my case included the entire process of gathering of quotes and developing the removal plan with the Canadian-based removal company, including right up to the stage of the removal truck arriving at the front door to pack and load household belongs (and the family pet dog) for shipment to Canada, was transacted by email.

Further on in the moving process, ICT makes keeping in touch with family and friends across the globe both cost effective and efficient. It also helps to maintain your country perspective. For example, Internet access allows me to connect with Australian newspapers and news services - 24 hours a day, seven days per week. This means being able to keep up-to-date with happenings in Australia, from an Australian perspective. It also gives you an Australian perspective on world events. For example, the situation in the Middle East, while reported in Canada, received a different news focus through the Australian media.

Getting practical

Moving employer and country may not be for everyone. If it is for you, the following advice might be helpful. Be practical and realistic in your expectation. For example, when I assumed my new employer would provide me with a car because that is how it is in Australia, I was told that 'not even the University President has a car provided'! Finalising the employment conditions may take some time as variations between employers and countries will be different and assessing the comparative advantages/disadvantages may be complex. There are some good economic advisory tools (such as cross-country, cross-city, cost-of-living comparisons) available to help in this respect.

Also, be patient about the proper processes regarding the immediate change of leaving your current employer and your country. Treat it as a process, which you start and progressively work through. Realise that you are dependant upon others to complete the process and the paperwork necessary for a change of employer and a change of country. Write a list of everything you need to do, keep it in one place (I had a moving book), tick it off and don't leave your current employer and/or your country before you have done everything on the list.

Make sure you have:

- Personal documentation (original and certified copies), not just your passport, with you when you move. Carry documents with you and do not allocate them to your removalist to ship. Assembling (or reassembling) these from a distance can be time consuming and expensive.
- Essential account numbers and passwords. In an age of digital communication, remember the advice about writing down such numbers; but also remember you will be acquiring a whole new range of numbers. Although you think you will remember them all, chances are that you will not, particularly given all that is happening in your life.
- Clear and accurate information about your status and entitlements with your new employer and in your new country.

- Put all your personal affairs in order before you leave your country. Be sure you have made your wishes known in respect to your personal affairs.
- Left someone in your country of origin authorised to deal with your affairs and to be a point of contact.
- Appropriate, robust and mobile communication technologies in place as they become critical practical and emotional supports for staying in touch and transacting business.
- A world-clock with you and that you leave one with your immediate family and contacts.
- Some memories/souvenirs or special objects of home with you, even if you do not think you will need them, as it maybe sometime before you are reunited with your household belongings.
- Learn some basic facts about your new employer and your new country, especially about the area where you plan to live.

Emerging personal impressions

No amount of research, dreaming or speculation ever really prepares one for the transition from one employer to another, let alone from one country to another. While there will be many things familiar, there will also be a vast array of new experiences and new contexts. There will be days when this is exciting and exhilarating. At other times, such experiences will be down-right draining on your emotions.

Some highlights and/or memorable moments for me follow.

Shortly after my arrival in Canada, I attended a joint meeting of the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), held in the national capital of Ottawa. The meeting coincided with the visit to Canada by Australian Prime Minister, John Howard and his wife, Janette. Ottawa's streets around Parliament House were filled with Australian and Canadian flags. The professional meeting was held in the same hotel where the Prime Minister (and his entourage) was staying. It was very interesting to see how my new country viewed my home country and its leader.

Combined CARL and ARL have a membership which includes the top research libraries in Canada and the United States of America (USA) and there were over 150 delegates in attendance at the Ottawa meeting. While the meeting provided very useful context, it also reinforced for me early on, that the issues of academic librarianship are global issues. I recall thinking to myself during a quiet moment in the meeting, if I closed my eyes and ignored the accents, I could be at a CAUL meeting where issues around scholarly communication, e-learning, copyright and public policy and consortium purchasing were high on the discussion agenda. While context was somewhat different, the broader issues are the same.

Among other earlier experiences are several around the power and use of language, especially in different locations and contexts. What you may take for granted may well be foreign or misunderstood by others. Again, context is critical. For example over the years I have attended many University Convocation ceremonies as graduations are one of the key milestones in the lifecycle of any student and any University. Indeed, in my immediate past position graduations (and many other student services) were part of my Portfolio responsibilities. I have always tried to attend and participate in graduations and I hope to continue the practice in Canada. At my first ceremony, exactly one month after my arrival in country, I rose, as instructed by the Master of Ceremonies for the singing (and signing) of the National Anthem, complete with live orchestra and lead singer. I rose, removed my head gear

as dedicated by protocol and prepared to sing “Advance Australia Fair”, only to hear the words and sound of “Oh Canada” – a timely and sobering reminder that I was a long way from home.

Hearing new words being used for the first time is also a reminder that while we may all think we speak the Queen’s English we do use language (and some words, in particular) in different ways. I quickly realised when confronted by blank looks from Library staff that my use of the word ‘fortnight’ was not appropriate, mainly because no-one knew what I was talking about. Just as we get paid monthly here, was all I could think in reply.

Summer in Australia has always been a special time – the smell of freshly mown lawn, cricket in the back yard, summer sports on TV and hot weather. While Canada is not big on cricket it plays other sports, such as hockey and curling, to the same level of intensity and with similar levels of passion and patriotism. However, learning new sports’ rules, while experiencing summer smells and weather in July (as opposed to December) took some getting use to. At the time of writing I am awaiting my first white Christmas.

Learning to work, manage and lead in the context of a different employer, in a different country and with very different labour relations and industrial context has been a real learning-curve. Three separate collective agreements covering a library staff of approximately 160 is interesting and very different from the Australian context. Coming to fully understand the various collegial processes associated with staff reviews for tenure, probation and salary increments may take a little time, patience and practice.

Concluding comments

The move to Canada is my first-time experience of living and working for an extended period outside of Australia. The early drafts of this article were prepared before the move and the completed article finalised after some four months with the new employer, in the new country. As such it had been very difficult to pin-down the final focus for the article, which, at times, has been a bit of a moving landscape, due to the sheer size and scale of the whole experience.

It has been a huge and positive experience thus far and I am pleased to say, at this stage, a move of employer and country is one I would recommend to others.

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