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2011

Watch that first step

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Publication Details

McKenzie, C. 2011, 'Watch that first step', *Incite*, vol. 32, no. 9, pp. 10.

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Abstract

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Keywords

watch, that, first, step

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

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WATCH THAT FIRST STEP

Clare McKenzie shares her first steps to establish a personal network and a professionally satisfying career.

I'm a career change librarian, with almost twenty years work experience behind me in areas as diverse as project management, policy development and customer service. Over those years I tended to just 'let my job happen', viewing it as little more than a way to pay the bills and as a consequence was never really engaged in a career. As a late comer to the library profession, I have had two choices: continue to just let my job happen or be proactive about making a professionally satisfying career for myself. Happily, I chose the second option.

Almost from the moment I finished my degree, I have been actively seeking networks and professional development opportunities both at work and beyond, guessing (correctly as it turned out) that this would be the quickest way to get up to speed on professional issues and trends.

Joining ALIA's New Generation Advisory Committee (NGAC) was the first (and probably best) proactive step I took. As a new professional working in a single person library I knew that while the position offered me plenty of opportunities to learn new skills, it also meant that I would have to work hard not to become isolated, and that I needed to find ways to connect with other professionals, exchange ideas and learn from those more experienced than myself. Since I didn't really know any other librarians, it seemed the easiest course of action would be to seek out an established group.

Quite apart from the direct professional association with other NGAC members, it was through them that I began to develop a personal learning network (PLN) on Twitter. At first, I just followed my fellow NGAC-ers, then I gradually began to branch out, following some of their networks, dipping a tentative toe into the 'reply' and 'retweet' waters and slowly picking up a following of my own.

Someone in that wider network suggested blogging every day for a month in June and I decided to get involved, even though I was afraid I wouldn't really have enough to say. I made a decision to blog about professional issues only and suffered many agonies of indecision and moments of self-doubt during that month but was always encouraged and supported to continue writing by the comments of others and the links back to my blog. I expanded my PLN further during this exercise and felt like I was old friends with some of the participants by the end of the month. I also began to feel like I had a sense of where the profession is heading, who the influencers are, where the cutting edge activities are happening and, most importantly, that I could be part of it.

By the time the *ALIA Access* conference came around in September 2010, I was well established in this network of contacts and had a lot of fun over the four days putting faces and names to twitter handles. As a result, I believe I had a much more enriching experience at the conference than if I had just gone on my own. Reaching out and engaging with other people is a good way to process and synthesise the conference proceedings. I came back with

more networks, more ideas and the goal to try and present at the next ALIA Biennial Conference.

In my current role as an outreach librarian, stepping up and out is central to the job. We are the point of contact for academics and higher degree research students at the university and actively promote the research support services the library offers. All the time I have put in networking, teleconferencing with NGAC members, chairing meetings and taking minutes, drafting and redrafting blog posts, presenting at ALIA events and learning to be confident in my own abilities will come into its own in this role.

I honestly believe that if I had not taken that first (somewhat scary) step into networking I would not have had the confidence to apply for this job, let alone carry it out. Sometimes you can have a lucky break, but as US President Thomas Jefferson once said, "I find the harder I work, the more luck I seem to have".

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