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## “Mentors and Mentees: Structuring a Professional Relationship” By Heather Carine

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

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.

### **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 Association of Independent Information Professionals' (ALIA) mentoring programme.

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### About the Author

Heather Carine is a Freelance Business Researcher with her own business, Carine Research, based in Adelaide, South Australia. She also serves as the Information Services Manager at Hunt & Hunt, a national law firm. Heather has over ten years experience as a researcher and knowledge management specialist in professional service firms in Australia and London. She holds a Masters Degree in Business (Information Technology) from RMIT University. Heather is a member of the Association of Independent Information Professionals, Australian Law Librarians' Association, Australasian Professional Services Marketing Association and the Australian Library and Information Association. She can be reached at <carineresearch@adam.com.au>.

### 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 mentees 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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### **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.

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.

[Editor's note: A longer version of this article appears in FreePint issue 230 <<http://freepint.com/issues/240507.htm>>.]

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