How to get ahead in libraries

Case studies

Contents

Introduction 1

Case study 1: Internal job shadowing at the University of Manchester 2

Case study 2: External job secondment at the University of Chichester 5

Case study 3: External job secondment at the Royal Holloway, University of London 8

Case study 4: Internships at WHELF 11

Case study 5: External secondments at Birmingham City University 15

Introduction

The SCONUL Organisational Development Strategy group have been exploring how people move ahead with their careers in libraries and have been carrying out work in a number of areas. They have commissioned a series of webinars looking at how to get into senior leadership roles and also developed this set of case studies.

These case studies are designed to give library leaders some alternative ideas to developing their staff, including secondments, internships and job shadowing. They provide practical advice on setting up such schemes, as well as the benefits and challenges on each approach to give you an honest impression of how each works in practice.

Our case study authors were interviewed by Jo Walley, who also provided the write-up for SCONUL.

Case study 1: Internal job shadowing at the University of Manchester

Introduction

Job shadowing can be a great way for someone to learn more about what a job really entails without the full commitment of working in the role. Sometimes it focuses on talking to the person about their job and what it involves, whilst sometimes it involves actually working in the job for a period of time. Job shadowing can be a very short-term thing (even just a few hours) or could be for a longer period of time. It can help the individual shadowing by teaching them more about a role as well as helping the person providing support as it helps them consider what they do and how, as well as potentially opening them up to considering different ways of doing things (if they are open to feedback from the person shadowing). Job shadowing can be internal or external.

How the opportunity came about

The University of Manchester library had been wanting to support their staff by giving them the opportunity to develop skills in new areas and find out about other areas of work, whether this was to enhance their knowledge and support their current work or give them ideas for future career paths.

The library hosts monthly meetings open to all staff to gather feedback and suggestions for how to support them better, and it was during these meetings that the idea of internal job shadowing came up. Future meetings were used to shape the programme and ensure it was meeting the needs of staff.

Why this approach was chosen

Internal job shadowing was seen as a way to develop staff without having the cost implications of training or conferences, and was a way to develop skills internally. It was also seen as a good way to improve knowledge internally, and to build connections between staff within the organisation. Job shadowing was offered as part of a wider programme of staff development including other opportunities such as training courses, conferences, and secondments. It was part of a broader offer to demonstrate commitment to supporting staff development and improving staff morale which is a key priority for the library.

How it was implemented

The job shadowing scheme was set up with a series of forms for requesting the job shadowing and giving feedback afterwards (from both people involved). It was promoted to staff through the monthly open meetings as well as highlighted on the staff intranet.

One person within the library was responsible for administering the programme, and they managed all aspects of the job shadowing scheme. This involved taking requests, processing paperwork, communicating with both people in advance to set up the shadowing, and getting feedback/evaluation from those involved after the job shadowing had happened. The arrangements were fluid depending on needs in terms of how and when the job shadowing happened (how long, what was involved etc.) but the process was the same for all.

The job shadowing scheme ran in this way for around 5-6 years and each year had around 10-15 people doing job shadowing. The scheme was reviewed by the library senior management team on an annual basis, making sure it was still being used and was working well.

Benefits of the approach

The core benefits of the job shadowing scheme were that staff felt supported and that there was active engagement with their development. Whether or not they took up the opportunity to be involved in job shadowing, just knowing it was there as an option was really appreciated (this was mentioned in staff satisfaction surveys). For those who did take the opportunity, it helped them learn more about a different area and for some consider moving into a new area (job shadowing in an area they might be interested in applying to in future is a great addition to a CV/job application), and helped minimise separation between teams.

Challenges of the approach

The main challenges were relating to the paperwork which for some people put them off applying and doing the job shadowing. It made sense initially as it was a trial and needed to be managed and reviewed, but over time it became less relevant to do so much paperwork. It also relied on one person, and was attached to them rather than the role so when they moved the scheme had much less take up.

Another challenge was some resistance from line managers due to time constraints and pressures. This meant the job shadowing was often relatively short which meant it was predominantly discussions about the work rather than actually doing the work.

It was also much easier to arrange job shadowing when everyone was working in the office - as hybrid working became more common it hasn't been as easy to arrange.

Who might consider this?

Job shadowing is a useful tool for all libraries wanting to support their staff in developing skills and knowledge, and is relatively straight-forward to implement. It would be a particularly useful approach if you are unlikely to have vacancies or secondment opportunities and want to offer internal opportunities for staff to develop and learn more about other areas of work.

Advice for people considering this approach ...

- Have one person responsible for administering and promoting the scheme
- Involve staff in shaping the scheme to ensure it meets their needs and complements other offers
- Make sure to promote the scheme regularly to all staff (e.g. intranet, induction, staff appraisals)

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Case study 2: External job seondment at the University of Chichester

Introduction

Secondments can be a great opportunity to fill temporary positions that become available in order for someone to develop their skills and experience and potentially see if a certain role is something they might be interested in longer term. Secondments can be internal or external, and can be part-time or full-time.

How the opportunity came about

Chichester University library had a vacancy due to a member of staff being on maternity leave. After opening up the post for applications, they received one from a member of staff from a nearby institution who was looking for a secondment opportunity. Following interviews, this was the member of staff who was successful, and they opened up a conversation about doing the role as a secondment.

Both organisations had experience of dealing with external secondments before and were happy for this arrangement to be made, so the successful applicant worked for Chichester University during the secondment period.

Why this approach was chosen

The applicant was looking to develop their skills and experience in a different role (and organisation), though wasn't in a position to leave the security of a permanent position or to relocate. This was a perfect opportunity for them to take on a new role without the risks associated with a part-time, temporary position.

How it was implemented

As both HR departments had experience of external secondments before, they worked together to establish the formal contracts between the two organisations including the terms and conditions (usually the secondee continues to be employed by their original organisation and has all the terms and conditions from that employer, whilst the host organisation pays the original organisation for their salary).

As the organisations are geographically close to each other, the staff within the libraries have worked together before and built a good working relationship (in addition, some staff have moved from one organisation to the other when opportunities have arisen and kept those connections). The managers from both organisations kept in contact for arranging things like annual leave, sick leave and other practical arrangements.

Benefits of the approach

The key benefit for the applicant was developing skills and experience in a different role and a different organisation. It supported their career development and enabled them to be successful in a future application to this role on a permanent basis.

It also gave the opportunity for people at the original organisation to have an internal secondment opportunity as they filled the post.

Challenges of the approach

The main challenge was back fill and what to do when the original post-holder came back wanting reduced hours. This gave the opportunity for the secondee to apply for a permanent position (which they were successful in gaining) although it then led to challenges for their substantive post at the original organisation and meant they needed to reduce their hours.

Who might consider this?

Without them having to move locations or have a very long commute. This option might be useful for organisations who are looking to fill a temporary vacancy such as a maternity cover, especially one where the length of the cover is unknown.

It would be particularly useful for libraries who are located near to other organisations as they may be able to offer an opportunity for someone

Advice for people considering this approach ...

- Be open to considering external secondments for filling temporary vacancies.
- Be open to contacting local institutions when you have a temporary vacancy to fill.
- Be willing to support your staff in working at another local institution on a secondment basis.

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Case study 3: External job secondment at the Royal Holloway, University of London

Introduction

Secondments can be a great opportunity to fill temporary positions that become available in order for someone to develop their skills and experience and potentially see if a certain role is something they might be interested in longer term. Secondments can be internal or external, and can be part-time or full-time.

How the opportunity came about

Royal Holloway University library had a vacancy and due to the timing (new director starting soon, with a potential for structural changes) it made sense to offer this post on a temporary basis whilst things became more settled. After opening up the post for applications, they received one from a member of staff from a nearby institution who was looking for a secondment opportunity. Following interviews, this was the member of staff who was successful, and they opened up a conversation about doing the role as a secondment.

Both organisations were supportive of the secondment though were relatively new to this type of arrangement so it did take a while and a lot of negotiation for the departments to finalise the contract. It was agreed that the member of staff would work on a full-time secondment basis.

Why this approach was chosen

The applicant was looking to develop their skills and experience in a higher level role, though wasn't in a position to leave the security of a permanent position or to relocate. This was a perfect opportunity for them to take on a new role without the risks associated with a temporary position.

How it was implemented

The HR departments worked together to establish the formal contracts between the two organisations including the terms and conditions (usually the secondee continues to be employed by their original organisation and has all the terms and conditions from that employer, whilst the host organisation pays the original organisation for their salary).

The person on secondment was responsible for communicating with their managers from both organisations for arranging things like annual leave, sick leave and other practical arrangements - this was predominantly done by email with both managers copied in.

Benefits of the approach

The key benefit for the applicant was developing skills and experience in a different role and a different organisation, whilst continuing to have the longer-term benefits of continued service with an organisation.

The experience was useful in helping the individual develop new skills, work with different people, and understand better the areas they might like to work in for future.

There were also opportunities for people to do the same at their substantive institution with a long line of people who were able to act up into a higher level post for a temporary period.

Challenges of the approach

Because it was a relatively different approach for both organisations, it was a lot of work for the HR departments to organise the contracts and sort the arrangements (hopefully this would become easier over time now it's been done).

One key challenge, and something that makes this option not always viable, is the cost. The host organisation had to pay VAT on top of the salary (which goes to the original organisation) which meant it was much more expensive than if they had employed them directly. This could be prohibitive for employing someone if there are budgetary constraints.

There were also some minor challenges for the person coming into the post as it was on a temporary basis and can be difficult for them to feel settled and for the teams around them to support them when they know it is only a temporary post (and in this case the line manager of the post was brand new too).

There was also a long line of back-filling at the original organisation, which gave some great opportunities for development but also meant a lot of people were impacted by the uncertainty of the length of the secondment.

Who might consider this?

Whilst this was a good temporary fill for the organisation, this approach is probably better for an organisation where the rest of the structure is more stable - whilst it can be useful for filling a temporary post ahead of potential structural changes, it does need some stability to support the person coming into the secondment i.e. their line manager, their colleagues, their team.

Advice for people considering this approach ...

- Check with your HR department if this is something they have experience with - it can be a long process if not (so start it early!).
- Although not a requirement for a secondment (there is no probation period), it is useful to include an induction and regular reviews for the person on secondment.
- Make sure the person coming into the secondment can be adequately supported by the people around them.

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Case study 4: Internships at WHELF

Introduction

Internships can be a very useful way of giving someone the opportunity to work on something, usually on a project basis, as a way to give them skills and experience. They are often used for those starting out in their careers such as graduates who have an education and are looking for some practical experience to add to their CV. Internships are usually relatively short-term (months) and can be full or part time.

How the opportunity came about

WHELF established a working group looking across the consortium of Welsh Universities at EDI issues. They recognised a need to look at the NSS score for the library question in relation to protected characteristics, and that it would be useful to do so in a consistent way. They spotted an opportunity to develop a temporary (around 6 months), project-based role for someone to take on the project, and developed a business case to do so (using reserve funds from WHELF).

At the time one of the consortia, University of South Wales, had a funded internship scheme (called Springboard) which helped give graduates an opportunity to work on a project to develop their skills and experience whilst also being part of a programme with other interns. WHELF chose to utilise this opportunity to use this programme to help with the recruitment and management of the internship scheme, with the intern working on behalf of the consortium.

Why this approach was chosen

An internship was chosen as it was a discrete project that could be successfully completed by someone who could work across all organisations, rather than someone who was currently based at one organisation. It was a project that needed dedicated resource and this was one way to make sure it would progress. Identifying this as a paid internship for a graduate also gave the opportunity for the individual to develop skills and experience that would be beneficial to their career.

How it was implemented

The Springboard scheme at the University of South Wales was used to recruit the intern, and it was open to all graduates from Welsh Universities. The line manager was the chair of the WHELF EDI working group who was based at Cardiff University, and the successful candidate was also based at Cardiff (though could have been based at any WHELF institution). The Springboard scheme was used to support the induction and training for the intern, as they were part of a broader network of interns and able to utilise the training and networking provided by the scheme.

The project was managed by the Chair of the WHELF EDI group, who supported the intern in their work. The intern worked with all WHELF institutions to successfully complete the project, ensuring that they included all key stakeholders (and data), and maintained consistency across the project.

Benefits of the approach

Having dedicated, focused resource enabled the project to be completed in a timely fashion and ensured a level of consistency of approach that may well not have been achieved if it had been completed by someone based at one institution or a collaborative project with multiple people involved.

There were a number of benefits for the intern too: this project gave them an opportunity to develop skills and experience of a real-life project which was incredibly helpful for their CV and starting their working life. The fact that the project involved working with so many institutions meant they developed skills in stakeholder management, and as it was a specific project with outputs they also developed skills in data analysis, report writing, and presenting the project (including conference presentations). Induction and employability training and coaching was part of the bigger scheme which benefitted and accelerated the transition from student to graduate to early career.

Challenges of the approach

There were a few minor challenges in relation to having an intern employed by one organisation and located in another, as well as being managed by a line manager in another. These were largely technological challenges and were resolved, but meant there were some initial hurdles.

Another challenge was more about the longevity of the project and utilising the outcomes. Once the internship had finished, there was no longer the same level of resource and momentum slowed.

What can we learn?

Having a discrete project really helped ensure this project happened in a timely manner with dedicated resource and a level of consistency across all partners (though one chose not to participate). The development opportunity for the intern was a huge benefit for them in their career development and this could be a good way to support people entering the profession (e.g. library school graduates).

Who might consider this?

This approach would be particularly useful for collaborative projects where it would be helpful to have a consistent approach across all institutions and to have dedicated resource at a project level rather than at one institution. It would also be useful for specific short-term projects that could be utilised to give skills/experience to new graduates.

Advice for people considering this approach ...

- Consider a longer internship to give greater opportunity for learning on all sides (potentially part-time depending on funding and the intern's preferences)
- Think about what you're going to do with outputs and how they will be sustained and momentum kept after the internship has finished

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Case study 5: External secondments at Birmingham City University

Introduction

Secondments can be a great opportunity to fill temporary positions that become available in order for someone to develop their skills and experience and potentially see if a certain role is something they might be interested in longer term. Secondments can be internal or external, and can be part-time or full-time.

How the opportunity came about

Birmingham City University library were implementing a new reading list system, and as part of this wanted to shift how the University viewed and utilised reading lists in the curriculum; they wanted to ensure they were more central to how they teach and how students learn rather than an administrative task. In order to support this cultural shift, they created a new temporary 12-month post to focus specifically on this.

Initially the post was advertised internally, but there was no interest, so it was advertised externally. There were two applicants - one from another department in the University (who subsequently withdrew their application) and one from a local University (who was successful in their application and interviewed). They were interested in exploring this role as a secondment to keep the security of their current role.

Why this approach was chosen

The applicant was looking to develop their skills and experience in a different role (and organisation), but wanted the security that comes from having a long-term employment (pension etc.) as well as a secure job role. A secondment gave them a lower risk option for developing skills and experience without losing the security of their current role.

How it was implemented

Whilst Birmingham City University had not had this sort of arrangement before, the organisation the staff member originated from had, and so the organisations were able to share example contracts and negotiate to work out an arrangement that worked for both institutions. The successful applicant worked for Birmingham City University whilst remaining

an employee of their original organisation. This did mean there was an administrative fee on top of the salary cost, as well as VAT costs, which made it a very expensive option.

Annual leave was co-ordinated with both organisations (Birmingham City University for the practical agreement, the original institution for the administrative aspect).

Benefits of the approach

There were numerous benefits to this approach for all involved - the secondee, the host organisation, and the original organisation.

One key advantage for Birmingham City University was they gained the advantage of having a fresh pair of eyes on things - someone without any history at the organisation who could evaluate things in a more neutral and open-minded way. It also helped to have dedicated resource on this specific service - it ensured there was focus on a key strategic driver.

The opportunity has been beneficial to the secondee, as they have been able to develop skills and experience in a different role and organisation. It has enabled them to work at a more strategic level, as well as giving a confidence boost for their future career.

It will also benefit the organisation they have been seconded from as when they return to their post they will have a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience that they will be able to bring back to their organisation.

Challenges of the approach

The main challenges of the approach were the financial implications, which meant the costs of having an external secondment were much higher than those of employing someone.

There were also some practical challenges of having someone working at one organisation but being employed by another, such as things like annual leave as well as systems access (it took a while to get set up as an associate member of staff).

It also highlighted the need for cultural change in the library (e.g. moving of tasks to different teams, adjustments to processes and procedures), which may not all have been identified if the role had been taken on by someone internal.

One small challenge for the secondee was that they were not eligible for any internal opportunities as they are not technically a member of staff. This could impact things like

pay, but in this particular case meant they were ineligible to apply for internal opportunities during a restructure.

What can we learn?

This experience demonstrated that an external secondment can be an excellent way to bring new people in, to focus on specific tasks, and to develop people within our sector, however it's more difficult to do than envisaged and may not be a financially viable option in future.

A more preferable option if possible would be to employ them on a temporary basis as a full member of staff whilst their other post is also kept open.

Who might consider this?

This option might be useful for specific project-based posts - those that are very defined, with a clear end point. It may also be useful for temporary posts such as maternity cover.

Advice for people considering this approach ...

Get the information upfront about the administrative side to check full costs in advance (i.e. administrative fees, and whether or not there will be VAT on top for the salary and/or the administrative costs)

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