

Being an active member of a library organisation

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Conference attendee A: 'Why do you never organise any events in my part of the UK?'

Me: 'We have tried to but we do need local help to host an event and we would really love someone from your area to join our committee to help us achieve that'

Conference attendee B: 'Everyone that works for BIALL (British and Irish Association of Law Librarians) is a volunteer, and so we do need as many members as possible to step forward and help so that we can all get the most out of the organisation.'

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Every year at the BIALL Conference there is a Q&A session where members can ask questions of anyone involved in running the organisation. This was the part of my role as Acting Chair for BIALL's Professional Development Committee (PDC) that I dreaded most.

The BIALL PDC, one of ten BIALL committees reporting to the BIALL council, organises training and network events for the law librarian community. Anyone who has been part of a professional organisation that offers training has probably heard questions similar to that posed by conference attendee A. This was asked of me at a recent BIALL Conference Q&A session. The truth was that we had been working hard to facilitate an event in this area for quite some time but lacked local volunteers to enable the event to happen. When conference attendee B stood up and added to my answer I wanted to hug her. Attendee B was a stranger to me, but she had hit the nail on the head: if we want library groups, committees and organisations to be more active and to do more for us, we the members have to step up and become active participants in making things happen.

Committee history

The BIALL PDC was not the first that I had joined. I started with a local CILIP group that would arrange CPD events for academic librarians in the West Midlands. I helped to arrange one event with them and then it disbanded for a time because the leader of the group moved on. Shortly afterwards BIALL sent an email request for volunteers to join their new PR and Promotions Committee. As I had previously had training in writing press releases, I thought that I may be an asset to the group. Everyone on the committee was very nice and they were all experienced law librarians but I found it difficult see how I could be actively useful to the committee. At the BIALL conference that summer I was asked by a member of the BIALL PDC, who had seen me present on e-learning, if I could help transfer a fully face-to-face course that was held in a London university every week, to a fully online course to enable BIALL members from across the UK and Ireland to participate in it. After a conversation about what they needed and my views on it, I was fully signed up and the project to transform the course was mine to complete. A month later I was invited to my first meeting. It felt quite overwhelming – my advice to anyone who is testing out a new committee is that it takes time to understand all of what is being discussed.

What's in it for you?

Being part of a library organisation is not only about making things happen and giving something back: it is also very rewarding. Membership of a committee can provide networking opportunities and skills that are valuable for CPD. For example, my first task for the BIALL PDC was to use project management skills to ensure that the whole of the face-to-face course was transferred to an online course within a few months. I had to develop negotiation skills in order to work with the academic who led the course, and when I became acting chair of the

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committee I acquired leadership and management skills to ensure that events were going to plan and on schedule. I also produced updates for the BIALL newsletter and other BIALL committees. I improved my event management skills through arranging venue hire, production of course materials, advertising, event booking, dealing with participants' queries, catering and acting as host for events across the UK and Ireland. As a result I found that when I attended the BIALL conference in Dublin this year quite a few Irish law librarians came and said hello to me as they had seen me when I had hosted two events in Dublin. It can sometimes be nerve-wracking attending a four-day conference with strangers but if you are already an active member of a committee or organisation, other people will recognise you, and you are likely to make committee friends to socialise with too. (BIALL PDC has the best dancers!)

Being involved in a library organisation allows you influence and change things. For example, as an institutional member of BIALL, I was unhappy that only personal members of BIALL could apply for bursaries to attend conferences or training courses free of charge. I made the case that active members should also be able to apply, particularly as they are likely to have had significant input into organising such events. As a committee we were also able to persuade BIALL Council to extend bursaries to a wider range of courses. Members of BIALL Council also have the opportunity to attend conferences around the world if the current President cannot do so.

What's in it for the employer?

Being on a committee that organises events allowed me to attend a number of them free of charge when I was acting as BIALL host. This will have saved my employers over £2000 in course fees and travel costs. My employer and the law students and staff whom I support have also benefited from the new knowledge and confidence that I gained from participating in these courses. In addition, I twice received a 50% discount on the BIALL conference fee because I was an active member of the committee. Similar organisations in other subject areas offer discounts to active members for their conferences. When I applied for a BIALL bursary to attend a course, the fact that I was an active member strengthened my case. Employers will benefit from the skills you gain as an active member and can use this as evidence of their workplace influencing the wider community.

Get active – something for everyone

This article has mainly focused on BIALL, but there are other organisations that require volunteers, such as the Business Librarians' Association. CILIP offer a range of groups for their members to become involved with, such as their Regional Networks or Special Interest Groups. UKSG allow you to self-nominate to become a member of one of their sub-committees. All these organisations are keen to get more active members and many are now becoming restricted in what they can offer due to the lack of new volunteers. The main argument I hear for a person not wishing to become an active member is that they 'do not have the time'. This implies that those who are active have lots of spare time, which is seldom the case. Since the last recession, work-load has increased for many librarians as cut backs have been made, but the same is true for those people organising that conference you plan to attend, or who edit the monthly newsletter you receive and the web pages you use. Most organisations that are looking for volunteers understand this and will allow you to participate as much or as little as you can. For example, in BIALL PDC we had a member who could not leave the office due to workload, but she was there at every networking event outside office hours to welcome people and ensure everything ran smoothly, and would join us online for meetings when she could. The more people who volunteer and get involved, the more the overall workload is reduced. So with the new academic year upon us, why not consider whether now might be the perfect opportunity to put yourself forward and volunteer for an organisation supporting your area of work?

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