

Working Outside The Box

Good morning, thank you for having me along to talk to you and thank you to Mark Haines for that amusing introduction.

When I applied for university, many moons ago, it was to do the BA degree in Library and Information Studies. Part way through first year they changed the title to Information and Library Studies, at the time it seemed a small administrative tweak but I think it was actually very indicative of what was to come. Librarianship is no longer the stereotype of cataloguing dusty tomes and labeling journals, not that I need to tell anyone here that. Now our roles cover a lot more tasks and our job titles are just as varied accordingly (although for the purposes of this talk I will stick to the traditional term of Librarian). Rather than seeing this diversion as a bad thing, I have embraced the evolution - and maybe gone a bit too far in the other direction, or out of the box. I called my presentation today “Working Outside The Box” but to be honest sometimes I think I got confused and sent my box for recycling. I'm certainly not sure I've been in it recently. Obviously I would not recommend everyone to do this, the world needs “proper” librarians to try and keep some semblance of order but I hope my experiences can help you see it can be an challenging, and so interesting, world outside your comfort zone.

I think the term “out of the box” can mean a few different things, I am mostly referring to going outside your comfort zone in the context of leaving the traditional roles of a librarian. There is also thinking outside the box, when you are faced with a problem and the usual solutions do not work so you have to look at the problem from a totally different angle and think laterally to find a suitable solution. I'm sure as well, that some of us have looked out the office window on a sunny day and wished we could literally walk out of our box!

Now, just to see if you've woken up after the excitement of last night's LexisNexis awards dinner, I'd like to have a wee show of hands please. At work have you ever - fixed a paper jam in a printer? Replaced the photocopier toner? Taught a library user a keyboard shortcut in Word, or how to use some other electronic resource? And how many of you are employed in your [SLIDE] IT department? Hmmm, exactly!

I think we've all been in a situation where we thought 'that's not in my job description' or 'that's not what I'm here to do' but it's not so usual for us to think 'ooh yeah I would love to do that, give me a shot at it'. My current job is very unusual as I am the only employee - so when something needs done it IS my job to do it - whether its shopping for soap, arranging a speaker on financial issues facing the legal profession, dealing with a threat of legionnaires disease in the water system, or processing payroll and

ensuring HMRC are satisfied. Yes, I have done all of these recently, I would claim to be quite flexible [SLIDE].

In these competitive times job descriptions and titles blur into each other. Under threat of redundancy, and reducing work forces, people have to be more willing to be flexible, try different things and learn new skills. Even before the recession though - job opportunities were evolving and the edges of our boxes were less well defined, I know I strayed from the path a while ago.

I joined the [SLIDE] Society of Advocates in Aberdeen 6 years ago. Basically it is a professional body for solicitors. When we were formed in the 14th Century you had to be a member to practice law in the area, now that power falls to the Law Society of Scotland and local solicitors can choose whether or not to join. We have competition from the Aberdeen Bar Association, they are known as the young trendies and we're...not *sigh*. Nowadays the society offers our members: CPD and social events, representation on key professional issues, a venue to hire for their own events - oh and by venue I mean library, it's full of those book things people used to read. That's maybe unfair, they do use the library, sometimes - especially as it has wifi so they can check their email in between court appearances. The sheriff court rents out the basement and ground floor of our lovely custom made building so I sometimes hear the jingle of handcuffs as the 'alleged naughty people' get taken into court. It means we're well placed when the other side refers to a case they haven't considered and we also have a self serve coffee room where they can escape clients/police/journalists and discuss cases..or football.

My background means I'm well suited to their role of Executive Secretary and Librarian. My parents are in the hotel trade so I grew up in hotels and have well honed people skills accordingly. I'm also quite happy dealing with wine orders, menu choices and laying tables. Having decided I wanted to work 9-5 when I was a wee young thing, I finally decided on librarianship to mix my love of books, people and computers. I fell into law libraries if the truth be told, it was not a planned out route but it is one I have enjoyed. I worked at Advocates Library, then McGrigors (as it then was) and then back to Advocates for my dream job, which I relished, and thought I would never leave. Then my husband and I decided we wanted to go back to Aberdeen where we studied and met. Job opportunities there for me were limited and I was worried what I would do but an opportunity came along at the Society and I took it. For quite some time I could be heard bemoaning the fact I was no longer utilising my degree, and maybe we should go back to Edinburgh but life wise we love being 'up north' and meanwhile I'd been developing my role into something that really suits me as a person. Now I get to be a Librarian breathing some life back into a previously very under used library, plus an Event Manager and hostess. I am the HR, Finance, IT and Facilities departments all

rolled into one person. It could be said I was fulfilling my potential as a librarian and needed further challenges and this role has grown with me until it no longer fits in a box, but it does bring me job satisfaction.

With our social events I have to [SLIDE] organise and attend them, to make sure everything goes okay, pay any bills, ensure no one is left alone without someone to talk to. Those of you who know me know I love social events and indeed used to arrange them for Advocates Library nights out and still arrange dinners after some of the Scottish Law Librarian Group networking meetings. So in the past year I've enjoyed, as my work [SLIDE]: gambling at the Perth Races, dinner with Stuart MacBride the crime author before an event he did for us, Sunday lunch at my parent's restaurant in the Trossachs and dressing up in an Mrs Claus outfit (well it was for charity and we did sell a lot of raffle tickets that night!).

Obviously this is far removed from my library training, but there are many transferable skills involved and it's easy to identify earlier experiences that have been instrumental in enabling me to achieve the necessary in this post. What librarian is not good at organising things? Fair enough it's usually information in a database or books on a shelf, but the skills involved are transferable to maintaining our members' details or the archives of society records. The [SLIDE] attention to detail needed in cataloging is now useful in taking Minutes of our Committee meetings. Working to deadlines used to be for research requests, now it's for running events. If you have ever worried about not getting some information to a partner before his board meeting you'll know deadlines are important. Just so with hosting events for lawyers – refreshments must be ready and waiting when expected! [SLIDE] At least research does not need to be at a certain temperature, or leave a room full of dirty washing up afterwards!

Multi tasking is also key with events. We have a monthly Library Lunch, as the library is ready for here, and on those days: the post still needs dealt with, emails responded to, and library users helped out; at the same time as laying up the table and preparing the drinks. [SLIDE] Then there's greeting caterers and briefing on any special arrangements (usually dietary requirements) for the day, whisking the cold drinks out of the fridge at the last minute, and welcoming all guests and making sure people have been introduced when new to the event.

Another example of a transferable skill is that I used to be in charge of Monograph Acquisitions budget, [SLIDE] now I run the daily accounts of the Society and its annuity fund, and work with the Treasurer and accountant to put together the annual Accounts. I did have to learn the wonderful world of payroll, but it is not hard to muster motivation to pay yourself, I promise! Recently HMRC introduced Real Time Information and our previous processes no longer complied with their requirements.

After consultation with an accountant, I acquired a copy of the SAGE software and worked out how to use it. I am proud to say that no caretakers, cover staff, or annuitants received a late payment during this change over.

At the Advocates Library I managed a team of 4 full time and 6 part time staff, [SLIDE] now I have a team of people who can cover when I need time off for holidays, sick or professional leave. I also manage our caretakers - and to a certain extent the Management Committee who are in effect my 'boss'. I am the consistent element which supports an ever changing committee, each year we get a new President with new priorities and project goals. Tactful people management is needed to manage your manager, but I have to keep the big picture in mind and guide them on what is fitting and appropriate for the future of the Society. The Management Committee is made up of a range of Society members, most of whom have full time jobs to do and this is just a side interest, each have their own ways of doing things and reason for being on the committee. Trying to understand this, and accommodate and adapt to suit, makes things work more effectively. In many such groups there's always someone who doesn't reply to emails but if you give them a quick phone you get their response, or who you get to know does not like speaking out in the group but will give their opinion quietly later, and then let you work it into the specific project. Yes, it would be easier to manage a group of people if they all did what you wanted and acted in the same way, but anyone who has been in a team knows that is not what happens in reality and that working *with* the quirks makes a stronger workforce. Of course, if someone is behaving inappropriately, they need to be dealt with, such as the committee member we had who failed to turn up for several meetings in a row. A carefully worded conversation of "perhaps this isn't a good time for you to be involved" gave them the polite escape they had probably been looking for without loss of face, and we were free to fill their space with a more attentive member. People management is important in all jobs, whether it's in connection with co-workers or the actual library users – again each have their quirks and need to be treated accordingly.

In my current post I work in an office by myself primarily, so [click SLIDE] self motivation is essential. If I don't do something it doesn't get done, and there's a lot to be done. It is strange not having a line manager overseeing your work, or just someone checking that things are done. I must say it suits me though, I am rather a control freak and this way I get to be in control of my working day. There would only ever be a problem if deadlines were not met [SLIDE] – minutes and agenda need to be circulated before meetings, annuitants need to be paid their annual pension amount, events need to be organised and run smoothly, and annual subscriptions need to be gathered.

[click SLIDE] Time management, therefore, is essential, as is prioritising work carefully. [click SLIDE] Obviously these concepts are interlinked. There are many

projects on the list for “one day”, unfortunately cataloguing the rest of the library is one of those. I have done the textbooks and current subscription materials but there are still a lot of cupboards I have not got to – and they are not high priority compared to various other projects. I find using Outlook’s Calendar and Tasks functions key for this. Events go in the Calendar as I arrange them with a reminder set a fortnight before the date so I can check that everything was arranged that needed to be, ensure I have shopped for anything needed, or set a task to get it in due course (this I actually need to do on my iPhone as shopping is often done on the way to work the morning of, or the morning before, an event). Once I’ve checked everything is ready, I reset the reminder for a week before when I send a reminder email if booking is still open and make sure any necessary paper work is ready – such as attendance sheet and feedback forms for CPD sessions. [SLIDE] Tasks are used for recurring things – my favourite is on the 22nd of each month and is called simply “payroll”. Even little things like “wind Grandfather clock” or “tidy up and leave” have recurring tasks just in case I forget or don’t notice what time it is, although they just get deleted rather than marked as completed. Big projects or reports to write get a task set too, recurring or otherwise. I can be prone to using the Snooze function, some days I don’t have time to do the extra things I’ve set myself so acknowledging that and resetting the task rather than trying to cram everything in makes sure everything receives due care and attention in time. Every 3 months I print off the “completed tasks” and this means that if ever anyone does question what on earth I’ve been doing with my time I can show them. Those lists, together with the Events Calendar for the year, cover most of my time. I also find glancing down the list helps my self motivation as you can see all the things you have achieved and feel like progress is being made. [SLIDE] Of course the photo gallery of past events helps with that too, seeing all the happy faces gives me great job satisfaction! Here you can see our Annual Dinner, winners of a quiz night, a wine and cheese tasting, and a Royal Wedding viewing event (that day my job found me, at 10am, wearing a tiara, drinking champers with a strawberry in it, and eating a Union Jack cupcake!)

Another transferable skill needed with this is that of decision making [SLIDE]. Often in any job things happen that need reacted to immediately so it is not always possible to refer to your line manager. In my post, this can be from little things such as deciding which nibbles in Markies to buy, to having someone on the phone asking if they can book an external hire event in our library, or to having to cope with water falling from the ceiling. As I wrote this talk I received some “constructive criticism” from the President as I had forwarded an email to all members that someone complained about to him, so I do not always get it right obviously – but he has more important things to do than to clear every little thing I do, as I am sure most line managers do. Obviously with big decisions like changing venue for our Annual Dinner or instructing building works to be done, the entire Management Committee would be consulted. It has to be

something which is judged on a case by case basis, if we have the authority to make a decision or not, which way the decision should go, and what consequences your decision might cause. As with most things experience, trial and error are often the key teachers with this. Over the years the autonomy I have has increased as I have proven my capabilities. The President in my first year had to cope with a constant barrage of questions and almost hold my hand, whereas next year's President has already asked that I keep him right with what to do as I've been here longer than him and know the ropes (and big picture) better than he does!

[SLIDE] Project management is also a transferable skill most librarians develop through time, at McGrigors I was involved in the moving of the library - from a cupboard in the old office to a purpose built space in the new - deciding the order of the books, what to do with all the maps which suddenly appeared in the library and helping solicitors cope with a centralised collection rather than having their own books in their section. At the Advocates Library I helped develop the library pages of the website, and one weekend I had to deal with a sprinkler malfunction - and the necessary eviction of lots of soggy books. [SLIDE] That was an occasion where there certainly wasn't time to consult a line manager, or plan in detail what we would do, I just had to jump to Action!

The Society has given me some similar projects, I've rearranged the textbook collection, and wrote the plan and content for our website, for example, but it has also taken me out of my comfort zone - especially with the Library Cleaning Project of 2010. The idea was that we would have the walls and ceiling cleaned, [SLIDE] you can see here we'd had a test panel done many years ago. It took 2 men 3 weeks to do that 1 panel, I believe, and cost £6,000. Our building is listed so we had to consult Historic Scotland about what we could do, they didn't give much help or guidance though, so next we gathered quotes and evaluated who to use. In the end we only planned on getting the walls cleaned and some window sills replaced, the ceiling would be too expensive. Then I had to co-ordinate between the scaffolding company, the court below, which would need to close so the work didn't disturb any Sheriffs, and the company that were actually doing the work. Eek! Unfortunately this didn't all go as planned and where they were supposed to *clean* the paintwork, they ended up damaging it with overly abrasive methods. So then they had to repaint it instead, of course trying to keep it as close to the 1890 original as possible. I had hideous conversations with them about what shades of pink it should be, trying to judge from what we could see under the smoke and grime of all those years and how much that would have discolored over the years anyway. They were able to take a stencil of the original pattern and luckily the gold leaf dots were still intact, so hopefully the end result is close to original [SLIDE] - either way it looks good with the colour of the wooden cupboards and prettier than the almost black it was before (the bit above the window frame it shows the transformation best I think). I live in dread of the ceiling project actually occurring one day. At least I

learnt some lessons during this project, as we all should with new experiences that we are involved with. The first thing was that it is important to fully engage with workmen and [SLIDE] take responsibility for their presence in your building. When I saw the Cif bottle and green scourer pads I should have questioned their presence rather than presuming the workers were professionals and so would know what they were doing. Similarly, it is okay to [click SLIDE] question other people working temporarily for your company. Recently we had workmen in cleaning our water tanks and I was careful to ask what they were doing each day, and refer to the project sheet we had drawn up in advance of getting quotes. I also got progress reports whenever I saw them, although I was not going to go up in the attic and monitor their work this communication flow meant they could check things with me at the same time and so ensured everyone knew what they were doing and had the information to do it properly – without breathing down each other’s necks.

Not every job allows this much diversity - and to be honest that is probably a good thing, but I would argue that it is always possible to change a job, or at least alter some tasks that you don't like. Jobs, much like relationships, don't come as the finished perfect product. They need tweaking and evolving into what you want them. [SLIDE] If there's something about your job that you don't like, why not consider if it can be done differently, or if it needs done at all. Obviously some things have to be done, and done in a particular way and that’s the end of it but its worth evaluating every now and then, or if you are part of a team and there are tasks everyone hates why not put them on a rota so that you only have to deal with them occasionally?

My predecessor at the Society was quite reactive, that is she did what she was asked to do. I took the proactive approach and have changed quite a lot of processes as a result. [click SLIDE] For example when I started all the bills were paid by cheque, even regular, obviously necessary things like the telephone. Now they are set up as direct debit or done by BACS so reducing the need for counter signatories - I do hate writing cheques and locating a suitable person to sign them is not always simple! Streamlining processes also helps with your time management.

The job at the Society has evolved with me, and I'm lucky that it is the kind of job that has room to do that. I can bring responsibility to myself and am not just given tasks which I have to deal with. Anyone can [click SLIDE] be proactive though and action change, even though making work for yourself may not seem desirable, if its work that gives you job satisfaction - and even enjoyment- it’s worth it! When I started at the Society they didn't have a website so I tentatively suggested we get one, not wanting to upset the old fashioned ness of the place. The response however was – “ooh yes we looked into that a few years ago but then the President changed and it was forgotten about”. Digging about in the files I even found a draft that had been designed at the

time. I really enjoy web editing, and taking photos for the website so now have this to play with. [SLIDE] Last year I even persuaded them we should have a Facebook group page so that members could see about our events in their own time and discuss issues across the profession without having to be 'friends'. It's a private group so you are not getting to see that though sorry! Sometimes it's necessary to bide your time and not just run in screaming with your idea, I'd suggested a facebook presence before and been told that wasn't appropriate; and back then it was true that many firms didn't allow access. However, at a later management committee meeting a discussion started about the fact that when a solicitor is working they don't always have time to read my emails about theatre trips or wine tastings. I took this as an opportunity to point out that you can create events on Facebook which would then come up in member's feeds and they could look at them in their own time - if they had time to play on Facebook they probably had time to think about social events. So [SLIDE] persistence and careful timing [click SLIDE] are essential in guiding your role in your desired direction.

In a normal work environment I appreciate it is different, but it is always possible to ask questions - why is this done like this?, wouldn't this work well?, have you thought about..? I've found that most employers appreciate staff taking an interest and showing some [SLIDE] creative thought. Yes, it is important to get on with the tasks that need done but reading company newsletters is a justified use of your time and you might find that one of your solicitors or lecturers are working on a project that you have a great resource about or have done an enquiry about before that you could share your findings, so giving them a helping hand and proving you are involved with the wider organisation and not just concentrating on your library, or box. Also as you show you are interested and knowledgeable you can help change people's expectations, showing them that the library or information centre is an essential part of the organisation and a useful cog in the big wheel. Some law firms require their support staff to do time recording and this is great to allow them to put a monetary value on your research and support but an alternative is that information professionals can work with PSLs (professional support lawyers) in supporting the goals of the firm and so increase their visibility and the value the partners consider the unit to have. Reaching out to those in other departments and building relationships throughout the firm is good for the company as a whole, as well as re-enforcing your importance.

[click SLIDE] Assessing future challenges is also important to anyone's role, sometimes asking questions about how things are done can raise these or sometimes you get a sneak glimpse into the future during a conversation with someone higher up the organisation. At the Society, the main challenge is ensuring our membership numbers are maintained. After all, if we have no members I probably have no job. As I mentioned earlier we are perceived as being for the older generations, and as they die off (harsh but true) we do not want the Society to die off too. We used to have an

annuity fund, like a pension, that members could join. They have to stay a member until they die and then their widow receives payments for the rest of her life. The fund was closed back in the 80s but we still have over 100 members who are in it, many of whom are over 65, that's a third of our membership who will die before I retire. So we need to try and attract the "young uns" – and ensure they stay members. To do this we have set up TANA, that is a group for Trainee And New Advocates, and we have exclusive events for TANA members. The aim of this group is to support trainees and newly qualified solicitors and ensure they have plenty of opportunities to network with their peers – after all they will be spending their careers working with them. As an aside, it also hopes to make Society membership more of a given to local solicitors – get them young as the saying goes, and change the perception of the Society's membership, as we increase our younger members (and decrease the average age!).

So there's *that* word, did you notice me sneaking it in? [SLIDE] Networking is essential in our profession as well as to lawyers. Sorry I know not everyone is as talkative as me and as comfortable talking to different people but even just asking if someone is working on an interesting case as you photocopy the case report they requested, or when you meet by the vending machine, can show you are interested in their work and support what they are doing. We all want our employers to value and appreciate their library and what we do, but showing we are interested in what they do makes them feel valued too, it works both ways. In my role, I ask about members work with a couple of sub conscious motives - I'm always considering our future CPD programme and what speakers and topics would be useful and I'm often asked if I know who deals with particular types of work, or nowadays if I know any firms that are hiring. It's not always appropriate to be a gossip hub but if you can join dots together and help people with their issues they tend to be grateful. You never know who could be useful to you or vice versa so it pays to make friends wherever possible, what goes around comes around so if you help someone today they could help you in the future - and if not, well you helped someone and isn't that what we library types thrive on? This philosophy has helped me get jobs, never mind answer enquiries and get speakers for training sessions.

Again my job is unusual in that I'm not just a member of BIALL and the Scottish Law Librarians Group but found I was eligible for [SLIDE] Aberdeen PA, an organisation which supports local personal assistants, as my role is very administrative and includes event management. At their events (which usually involve free food and/or drink!) I get to meet a variety of people which is nice just for a natter but also sometimes beneficial from a work prospective. The lady who had been tasked with arranging a small but posh dinner for some executives out-with the usual boring hotel venues, so I invited her for a tour of my library. Her company then held a dinner there and her boss, and his guests were very impressed. Another lady was having problems with her caterers, so I

suggested an alternative - so pleasing her and the caterer who got new business. So again, moving outside the box has advantages, I nearly didn't apply for membership as my job title is not PA but as they agreed, I am in effect the PA of the Society.

It is good to take any [SLIDE] random opportunities that arise too, for example I got an invitation to a presentation about the army. I nearly dismissed it as irrelevant to my job and life but then I realised that there would be men in uniform so thought I would give it a go. It turned out to be a very interesting presentation, but also as they had invited lots of Aberdeen professionals, it was a great networking opportunity and I ended up with a couple of cards for chaps that I later had as speakers at our training events, and one for a lady who considered using our library as a venue for an event she was organising. I managed to resist the very persistent invite to join the Reserves although I could see they have some amazing training with lots of transferable skills involved.

However, when I was approached by Marianne Barber at a BIALL conference to become involved with the [SLIDE] Website Committee it immediately struck me that this could be a good fit, and of course a good thing to add to my LinkedIn profile. I maintain the Society's website, update my parent's hotel's website, blog, tweet, and am generally an internet addict so if I was going to join any committee this one is the best fit. It also helps that it has lovely members and it does impress the solicitors when I say I'm off to London for a meeting! [SLIDE] Professional involvement is key in all jobs, not just for information professionals. I'm doing quite well with my career bucket list – I've got a job that I love, joined a committee, had an article published, and almost *touch wood* survived presenting a session at a conference of my peers. I did have a book contract several years ago but that did not fit in with my work/life balance so I prioritised the more important things.

Of course that brings me nicely to one of my other key learning points that I know some of us need to accomplish – saying [SLIDE] “no”. Yes it is good to be helpful and put yourself forward for good opportunities but sometimes it is important to say no. Although the Reserves sound like a fantastic opportunity I do not have the time or inclination to get involved. Just because a Managing Partner or respected lecturer approaches you about a project does not mean it is right for you or your department. For example, I was tasked with investigating licensing laws as they apply to external event bookings, I tactfully suggested that one of our solicitors who dealt with licensing might be better at advising on this. No one could argue with my logic and I escaped having to actually read one of those dull law books!

Now my synopsis promises I will cover marketing [SLIDE] and I've not used that word yet. However I have mentioned several informal methods – the chat by the vending machine, the networking at the army presentation – these are all marketing your service

and skills. So what should a librarian market? There's the wonderful resources you have available in your library, your vast knowledge of how to use electronic resources, your enquiry service. However sometimes you need to think outside the box, for example, when I started at the Society the library was hardly ever used. In fact one week I did not see another human during office hours at all. Not long after there was a roof collapse in the courts cafeteria and it had to close until it could get new glass installed so I was asked if we could provide tea and coffee making facilities. We advertised this around our members, and other court practitioners, and it became very popular. Whilst there, some people were using the library, and some decided to become members. When the courts reopened it was suggested we could keep our "coffee room" as some people preferred it, and so was born a new service we offer our members and a new thing I can market and draw people into the building with. An empty library is a sad sight so I suggested we could hire it out for external events as well as those we held, or those of our members. Since then it has been used for seminars, quizzes, dinners, birthday parties and even has a wedding booked in September! Again, not the usual functionality to advertise a library for but a good way of bringing in some life, increasing income, and getting the name known around the local area.

I hope I have included enough practical examples to prove that [SLIDE] peeking out of your box can be beneficial and rewarding. [SLIDE] See how content he is?! I also hope you will endeavour to try something different to open up your skill set a little, and here's a reminder [SLIDE] of the key transferable skills we've covered. Many of which I am sure you could think of examples in your own current position, there's nothing terribly new and scary, but used carefully they can be most rewarding.

Obviously if you have any questions I am happy to take them by email [SLIDE] once you are back in the safety of your box, if you see me later in the conference, or of course right now if you do not mind sharing with the rest of the room - thank you for listening.