

Historic Libraries Forum – mentoring scheme

While many organizations include a form of mentoring as part of their induction and staff development programme, the HLF has identified a particular need for professionals working with historic collections. Librarians working within this field are often rather isolated, either because they work alone or within a very small team in small organizations or, if their collections form part of a larger library, their particular expertise might not be shared by colleagues working in other areas. At all levels of their career, from new professional to management, HLF members might feel the benefit of sharing their experiences and problems in a confidential series of meetings with a colleague working elsewhere. Such an arrangement, which can, after a while, become reasonably informal, can be extremely beneficial, as it goes beyond merely networking. While its value is obvious to the person seeking a mentor (whom we are calling the mentee), it can be equally satisfying for the mentor, a professional with more experience and good interpersonal skills who wishes to put something back into the profession. Quite often the mentor will have been actively involved in staff development initiatives already, but this is not a prerequisite: an interest in others and the ability to listen are characteristics that many librarians possess.

The HLF would like to facilitate such an initiative by identifying potential mentors and mentees and bringing them together. It will prepare some advisory material which should be considered by pairs at the start of their mentoring.

Things to think about:

Where do you want to meet? A neutral setting such as a pub or café might be more appropriate than the workplace.

How often do you want to meet? Once a month for a period of six months is common, with the option to continue as and when necessary if both parties would like to do this. Decide this at the first meeting and try to stick to it. Some successful partnerships last for many years on an informal and irregular basis with the benefit to the mentee's entire career and not simply the present post.

How formal do you wish the partnership to be? It is usual to begin reasonably formally, i.e. to establish the topics you wish to discuss and try to achieve an outcome, which should be documented in some way to ensure that you are making progress, particularly if action points derive from discussions. But pairs often find after the initial few months that they continue to derive benefit in a more informal way which might not even require regular face to face contact. Emails or phone calls can be a supportive way to continue if time prevents meetings.

What topics will you discuss? The initial topics often come from the person being mentored who might be uncertain about procedures or knowledge or raise questions about dealing with colleagues or users. But the mentor is likely to come up with suggestions for professional development which the mentee may not have considered: this is very much a two-way process. The additional documentation might prove a useful starting point.

Mentoring is not to be confused with counselling and it could be dangerous for an untrained person to take steps to fill that role. If the discussion seems to be moving in a direction with which the mentor is not comfortable, it is best for both parties to reassess how they should continue.

Similarly, some partnerships do not work for a variety of reasons. If so, don't feel this to be a personal failure but recognize it and we will try to find you an alternative partner.

How to proceed:

If you think you might be interested in taking part in this initiative, either as mentor or mentee, send in the application form (on the HLF website). We will try to find you a suitable partner. We will try to link people within a reasonable geographical area so as to make meetings easier, but it would help if you could specify how mobile you are, and whether distance is likely to be an issue.