
Exploring the Sabbatical or Other Leave as a Means of Energizing a Career

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ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE CHALLENGES LIBRARIANS to create leaves that will not only inspire professional growth but also renewal. It presents a framework for developing a successful leave, incorporating useful advice from librarians at Concordia University (Montreal). As food for thought, the author offers examples of specific options meant to encourage professionals to explore their own creative ideas. Finally, a central theme of this article is that a midlife leave provides one with the perfect opportunity to take stock of oneself in order to define future career directions.

Midlife is a time when rebel forces, feisty protestors from within, often insist on being heard. It is a time, in other words, when professionals often long to break loose from the stress “to do far more, in less time” (Barner, 1994, p. 4). Escaping from current job constraints into a world of creative endeavor, when well-executed, is a superb means of invigorating a career stuck in gear and discovering a fresh perspective from which to view one’s profession.

To ignite renewal, midcareer is the perfect time to grant one’s imagination free reign. Daydreaming about the many compelling leave options, not confining oneself to study and research, in itself is often wondrously energizing. To achieve a truly enriching experience, combining more contemplative tasks with those that add another dimension is especially rejuvenating.

Creating a successful leave so that one returns to work truly revived, furthermore, is more likely when professionals plan conscientiously and far in advance. Such preparation includes becoming familiar with the culture of one’s institution, selecting inspiring projects, negotiating a leave conducive to personal reward, and producing a good balance of activities. Moreover, to profit most from a leave, one should take a prolonged look

at how one's career is progressing and what type of project will maximize one's career goals.

PRELIMINARY MATTERS

Taking Stock at Midlife

Job success demands that professionals keep a jaunty pace while acquiring skills needed for the workplace of the twenty-first century. Mastering new technologies and other developments in the field also promotes job satisfaction and enhances leadership skills. As stated by Ronald L. Krannich (1997): "Overall, success in tomorrow's job market will require a new breed of worker who anticipates, prepares, and eagerly adapts to change. Such individuals prepare for career transitions by acquiring new skills and actively seeking new work environments" (p.26).

Taking stock of abilities, then, should be done regularly throughout a career. Certainly midlife is ideal for determining if proficiencies are serving one well with respect to ultimate career goals, whether these include advancement or lateral moves. Skills to be evaluated include not only those that are traditionally associated with the field but also skills like teamworking, networking, and leadership—that is, professional and personal competencies such as those outlined by the Special Libraries Association in *Competencies for Special Librarians of the 21st Century* (<http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/professional/meaning/comp.cfm>).

The sabbatical, furthermore, is for some an ideal time for test-driving alternative careers providing as it does occasions for applying skills to fields like editing, fundraising, natural language translation, publishing, and marketing (Sellen, 1997). Applying library skills to nontraditional settings such as online information services, computer graphics, or Internet-content management might be appealing to some professionals. Moreover, trying out problem-solving skills in consulting, entrepreneurial, or other endeavors while currently employed is a prudent course of action to be sure. Even for the professional not desiring a job change, doing a stint in a completely different milieu provides a stimulating frame of reference from which to view one's present job.

A valuable offshoot of a leave, then, is taking stock of one's mission in order to define future career directions. This can be done alone or with a mentor or counselor and should include the thoughtful analysis of one's values, personality, and interests to see if they match one's current objectives. "Through self-exploration you will begin to see how capable you are, how much more is possible for you, and how wonderful you are and could become on the road to success" (Michelozzi, 2000, p. 12).

Getting Organized

After taking stock of skills and current career objectives, the information professional is better equipped to weave together the threads of a well-

designed leave. This obviously demands earnest concentration on many, sometimes laborious, details. Responding to a call for papers or submitting a grant proposal, for example, requires that deadline dates be observed. As stated by Lynda Cronin (2000), author of *Midlife Runaway: A Grown Ups' Guide to Taking a Year Off*, who took a travel leave with her husband: "We're off! After three years of wishing and hoping and thinking and praying and planning, we have finally set out on our great adventure" (p. 15).

At the outset of planning, it is wise for professionals to network with colleagues to uncover the type of proposals that are likely to be approved and to inform themselves about sabbatical policies. Professionals are often able to decipher through the grapevine whether a particular project will be accepted. As stated by one Concordia University librarian, current trends in the information profession tend to influence whether a project is likely to be approved. Her own project, a citation analysis, was linked very closely to her work at Concordia University to increase its chances of being approved (unnamed, personal communication, December 6, 2000).

Another Concordia University librarian, Ruth Noble, requested funding through the University's Library Research Fund, a matter that required approval and the meeting of a deadline date (R. Noble, personal communication, November 29, 2000). Her sabbatical project (done in collaboration with a colleague) primarily involved administering two surveys. "[O]ne was a survey of Concordia students (distributed by professors in undergraduate courses of departments representing all faculties) with respect to their library needs and experiences. The other was a survey (by mail) of academic chemists in Chemistry departments (small, medium and large depending on the number of faculty in the department) in all regions of Canada" (R. Noble, personal communication, December 19, 2000). Because this project involved administering surveys, university policy required that they be submitted to Concordia University's Human Research Ethics Committee for approval. This meant that Ms. Noble had to allow sufficient time for the board to meet to consider them in advance.

Negotiating a Leave

Although the sabbatical originated in the academic sector, it is becoming increasingly prevalent in the public sector (Cronin, 2000, p. 78–79). While it may be more challenging to convince employers in the private sector of the merits of a sabbatical, this is nevertheless worth pursuing. When employers compete for top employees, they are more willing to negotiate benefits to attract professionals. Even if an organization has no formal leave policy, its administration may be willing to accommodate those who make good cases for leaves.

Furthermore, since sabbatical or leave policies vary from institution to institution, some establishments are more flexible about negotiating the conditions of a leave. Whereas an institution may specify that the sabbati-

cal's purpose is for intensive study, research, scholarship, "or other creative accomplishment," "other creative accomplishment" might be defined very broadly. In addition, what is accepted by this year's administration might not be accepted five years from now. Leave policies, then, may appear at first glance to be more restrictive than they are in actual practice. Therefore, it is wise to become savvy regarding the culture of one's institution.

EXPLORING THE OPTIONS

Leave options are virtually limitless. Librarians have taken sabbaticals for such activities as setting up Web sites, placing courses on the Web, chairing conference committees, creating databases, and pursuing volunteer work. While pursuing research, study, and publishing are popular pursuits, indulging one's passions in undertakings such as internships, exchanges, community service, and travel abroad can add an element of adventure. Moreover, public service activities—like developing advocacy strategies to strengthen the presence of library issues in government bodies—can add a real sense of gratification. Combining types of activities can also result in an experience which is more varied, balanced, and conducive to renewal. Professionals should strive to tailor activities to suit their own stages of professional growth and development. Among options that might be considered are those elaborated upon below.

Internships/Fellowships

Sometimes paid and sometimes unpaid, internships are often undertaken in conjunction with pursuing another degree. They offer tantalizing opportunities for short-term work and learning adventures. They also provide marvelous opportunities to investigate new careers and new work settings.

Organizations of all types offer internships, many in rich cultural settings. For example, the Library of Congress provides eight- to twelve-week and summer internships to anyone "who is doing serious research" in Washington, DC (Oldman & Hamadeh, 2001, p. 261). Likewise, the United Nations offers two-month library science internships in New York City to those who are "fluent in English and proficient in one foreign language" (p. 422). For an extensive list of internships, *Peterson's Internships* (1998) is recommended. It specifies which internships are available to "career changers" and lists library-specific internships under the heading "Education, Training, and Library" (p. 542).

Governmental libraries, such as the national libraries of North America, also present various internship programs. Contributing to working groups or task forces at a national library is an excellent way to learn about digital collections, online services, and more. For example, the National Library of Canada offers a fellowship program in which Charlotte MacLaurin of Concordia University participated for two months. As a member of a Collection Management Policy Team, she was able to contribute to the

greater library community and to finish her leave with a great sense of satisfaction (C. MacLaurin, personal communication, November 22, 2000).

Finally, there is no reason for the creative individual to restrict him or herself to formal internship or other programs. It is quite feasible to contact a potential establishment to propose a project of one's own, as Ms. MacLaurin did with Simon Fraser University (C. MacLaurin, personal communication, November 22, 2000). Academic or other research institutions are often more than happy to accommodate professional development goals, especially when projects proposed advance their own aims.

Exchanges

Exchanging jobs with another information professional in one's own country or abroad can also be tremendously liberating. Formal exchanges are established for various purposes: enhancing expertise, creating professional links, upgrading language skills, and promoting mutual understanding with those from other countries. Exchanges present challenges that frequently leave professionals eager to return to work, to share what they have learned, and to implement new ideas.

To help individuals uncover exchanges, many professional associations list programs on their Web sites. The American Library Association's Web site, for example, (<http://www.ala.org/work/international/links.html>), provides links to many organizations worldwide that have arranged professional exchanges. For those interested in experiences abroad, this site provides contact information for bodies such as the Association for International Practical Training and the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX).

Furthermore, universities sometimes facilitate exchanges for librarians as do organizations like the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). The IFLA Journal does this by providing a list of people who desire to participate in exchanges with someone from a country other than their own. Likewise, the LIBEX Bureau for International Staff Exchange fosters exchanges "for librarians from the U.S., Canada, E.E.C. countries, Commonwealth and other countries" (ALA Guide, 1999, Overseas-Exchange Programs).

In addition to considering the aforementioned possibilities, those with initiative, as in the case of internships, can create their own exchanges by contacting establishments of interest. This is a good way to locate like-minded professionals who are interested in exchanging jobs.

Conference/Event Participation

Other individuals may seize reprieves from regular work preoccupations to advance the goals of professional associations. Popular activities include presenting conference papers or conducting workshops. Other activities might focus on promoting aims of division or interest groups. At least two Concordia University librarians have spent a good part of sabbaticals organizing annual conferences such as that of the Association of Mov-

ing Image Archivists. Such projects provide a superlative means of networking and keeping up with trends in the field.

Simply attending conferences during a leave adds variety and helps librarians achieve a sense of balance so that they do not remain too solitary. In other words, conference work helps ensure that professionals are not too lonely and isolated. Scheduling events and conferences, whether they are library related or not, are good means of offsetting research and study.

As with exchanges and internships, many professional association and other Web sites provide useful links to events of all kinds. The National Library of Canada's Web site (<http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/6/7/s7-1004-e.html>) maintains a selective list of meetings and conferences in the United States, Canada, and overseas. Links to library associations make it easy for professionals to track events. Moreover, scanning conference schedules and continuing education programs fosters the generation of creative ideas for participating in these conferences.

Community Service, Volunteer Work

Good Samaritan work also can be blended with other projects to make one's leave more rewarding. Working in a developing country, for instance, offers personal reward as well as opportunities for professional growth. Organizations such as the Peace Corps provide opportunities for librarians to master another language and to work in developing countries (ALA, 1999, Overseas). For those who already speak more than one language, naturally, the opportunities are richer.

Most people are surprised by the wide range of short-term volunteer experiences that are available in North America and abroad. Some programs are fully subsidized whereas others require that individuals pay their own way. Possibilities include community development, environmental research, historical restoration, marine research, museum work, outdoor and recreational work, public health, social action, teaching, scientific research, work with religious organizations, and much more (McMillon, 1999, p. 375-391).

For those who wish to stay closer to home while helping less-fortunate individuals, there are possibilities in community service agencies. Creative individuals might try piloting services for any number of local community groups that exist for ethnic groups and other populations. The elderly, the unemployed, the physically challenged, and those with AIDS are among the wide variety of populations that can profit enormously from such efforts.

Travel

There are few things more invigorating than new surroundings for enhancing the joy of the sabbatical. For example, signing up for language study or for a cultural tour in Amsterdam provides an alluring adjunct to the pursuit of more scholarly goals. To support such aims, some institutions

will defray the cost of travel and related expenses such as conference registration, tuition fees, and moving expenses.

For fascinating accounts of two librarians' experiences abroad, The Special Libraries Association Web site's "Librarians Abroad" section is worth perusal. Donna Hanson recounts time spent in the United Arab Emirates (<http://www.sla.org/chapter/cwcn/wwest/v1n1/hanson11.htm>) where she worked as a technical services supervisor, and Carol Williams describes a ten-month sabbatical experience in Southern France (<http://www.sla.org/chapter/cwcn/wwest/v1n1/willia11.htm>).

Traveling within one's own continent can be equally exciting and may be more feasible for many professionals. Charlotte MacLaurin, from Concordia University, and her husband planned joint sabbaticals and relocated from Quebec to British Columbia for approximately ten months. Ms. MacLaurin initiated a survey on library effectiveness at Simon Fraser University where it so happened that staff were in the midst of doing a review of services. The administration was pleased to accommodate her survey. During the same leave, Ms. MacLaurin participated in a previously mentioned fellowship at the National Library of Canada. In conjunction with these projects, she attended the BC Library Association Conference, participated in other professional events, and got to know librarians across the country. The result was that she finished her sabbatical feeling enormously refreshed and having acquired a broader understanding of how library services in Quebec differed from those in British Columbia (C. MacLaurin, personal communication, November 22, 2000).

Study and Research

Many professionals focus their sabbatical dreams on what they consider to be the most traditionally acceptable activities: study or research. They imagine themselves delving into fascinating topics without interruption. In their prime, they expect to approach leaves vigorously and with enormous discipline, to launch ultimate quantum theories of information science. At last they expect to obtain their just rewards, emerging as tomorrow's superstars!

As laudable as research is, it behooves professionals to ask themselves critically whether prospective research projects will truly add something valuable to the field. Should their conclusion be positive, perusing the *Gale Directory of Learning Worldwide* (Hunt, 2001) might help them track down appropriate research establishments. This publication lists a multitude of libraries, academic societies, research institutes, and other associations that present opportunities for collaborating with scholars overseas and doing research in the field (pp. 3936–3938). For each country, a "National Survey" provides an overview of "Education, Libraries, and Museums" and provides a "description of any special collections" (pp. x–xi).

Study options might be more titillating than research to some professionals and may be more conducive to their achievement of career goals. Naturally, there are many formal and informal learning projects possible. Seeking another subject degree can open up new job options. Acquiring an M.B.A. degree can strengthen leadership and management skills. Then, alternatives to seeking another degree include taking short-term courses through distance or traditional means to improve oratory, communication, or other abilities. Such educational endeavors not only rekindle the delight that accompanies learning but enhance credentials and career options.

FUNDING

Seeking funding for a leave involves exploring such sources as professional, public, and private bodies as well as one's own institution. In addition to this, applying for funding includes drawing up a proposal and documenting a project's value. If applying for more than one award, a wise choice indeed, it is important to follow the advice of David G. Bauer (1999) and "to determine how you could change or alter your idea so that it appeals to different grantors" (p. 29).

Professional organizations often sponsor activities and can refer librarians to funding agencies. The Canadian Library Association, for example, sponsors library research and development grants. The American Library Association's Web site lists numerous funding organizations such as the Council for International Exchange of Scholars in Washington, DC (through which various countries offer research or lecturing awards in library science) and the Bogle Pratt International Travel Fund (<http://www.ala.org/work/international/links.html>).

Finally, a wide variety of grant directories, such as *Funding for United States Study: A Guide for International Students and Professionals* (O'Sullivan, 1996) lists funding bodies from which information specialists can uncover awards (p. 450).

ADVICE FROM OTHER LIBRARIANS

The wise individual gathers advice from colleagues who have survived and thrived through the sabbatical process and who are familiar with pitfalls that might impede one's ultimate success. Interviews with Concordia University librarians, who are members of the Concordia University Faculty Association, provide substance for other librarians' reflection. Questions asked of these librarians included the following: "What would you do differently were you to plan another sabbatical?" and "What advice would you give others planning a sabbatical to ensure a successful experience?" A summary of some of their statements, paraphrased by the author, follows:

- Ensure sufficient time for planning, well in advance of one's leave.
- Conduct any preliminary research and preparation necessary in advance to "get off to a good start."

- Be sure to meet sabbatical policy, grant, and other deadlines.
- Consider early on whether statistical consultants, students, or others should be hired to assist one with repetitive or specialized tasks so that one can use professional skills where they really count.
- Take time before the leave begins to consult advisors on designing the project in a manner that is consistent with good research.
- If planning statistical analyses, consult a statistician in advance for input on designing appropriate questionnaires, surveys, and the like.
- If working in collaboration with others, discuss different work styles beforehand and define the division of labor clearly, so that it is fair.
- Inform oneself early on as to the support provided by one's establishment (e.g., funding, statistical support).
- Reflect on how realistic expectations are with respect to how much can be accomplished during a leave. Many people underestimate this.
- Allow for the unexpected, such as health problems or a death in the family.
- Schedule time for relaxation, exercise, and entertainment.
- Consider carefully the desired length of leave, especially when planning a time-consuming project.
- Recognize that when one returns from a sabbatical, one will have to catch up on new databases, new software, and new policies that have been instituted during one's absence.
- Reflect upon what time of year is most conducive to one's productivity with respect to the type of leave project one is undertaking. For instance, would research be more appealing in the winter?
- Avoid the temptation to stay in perpetual communication with one's employer or users through the telephone or work-related e-mails. This can impede one's progress and the completion of a major project.
- If the leave includes vacation time, schedule it during an appealing time.
- If planning on publishing, contact editors well in advance to uncover the likelihood of the project being published.

BENEFITS

Concordia University librarians were also asked the following during interviews: "What professional benefits did you derive from the above-mentioned sabbatical?" and "What personal benefits did you derive from the above-mentioned sabbatical?" Benefits expressed, as paraphrased by the author, include the following:

- Reaffirmed that my own professional focus was consistent with what other librarians were doing. I discovered that I was on the right track!
- Broadened my perspective on problem-solving in the field.
- Increased my flexibility so that upon my return to work I was a more effective team player.
- Was very energizing and prevented my own burnout.

- Enjoyed the freedom I had to do something important to me professionally, something my normal duties did not permit me to undertake.
- Finally I had time, without interruption, to give my undivided attention to a project.
- Benefited from the stimulation of working on something far removed from my day-to-day duties.
- Was able to extricate myself from the library culture and view librarianship from a different angle, becoming a user myself and seeing things again from the user's point of view.
- Found it very rewarding and validating that my supervisor took pride in the conference presentation that resulted from my sabbatical project.
- Was able to sleep in until 8 A.M., swim every day, and recover from exhaustion!
- Rediscovered the virtue of patience, experiencing less stress, a change my spouse appreciated immensely.

FINAL REMARKS

A truly successful leave, like many things in life, requires well-thought-out planning, deliberation with respect to long-term goals and self-reflection. Setting one's sights high, working with a prestigious organization, or collaborating with experts in one's field can be part of the excitement. Choosing a project, however, goes beyond finding one acceptable to one's employer. It also goes beyond producing a crowning achievement or definitive study. To achieve success, there is every reason to choose captivating activities that inspire joyful pleasure and rejuvenation.

To reiterate, professionals should pay attention to inner signs of warning—to those perspicacious rebel voices who demand a reprieve from current midlife pressures. Creating sabbaticals that are truly invigorating is not only possible but also crucial to one's well being. This is an excellent time to immerse oneself in stimulating change, to launch a pilot project, or to indulge oneself in an innovative endeavor that truly arouses one's curiosity. Engaging oneself in activities that are enticing personally as well as professionally makes sense from every perspective.

Finally, creating a triumphant and worthwhile experience requires giving in to fantasies and paying attention to intuition. One's goal should be to return to work energetic and raring to take on new challenges and changes. The sabbatical in its ideal form leaves professionals delightfully satisfied, as was Charlotte MacLaurin after a sabbatical that she described as a "wonderful gift" (C. MacLaurin, personal communication, November 22, 2000).

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