Transitioning from Student to Professional

Skills, brands, and association membership and participation are the keys to making the jump from school to the working world and succeeding professionally.

BY DAVID CAPPOLI, MLS, AND RACHEL BATES WILFAHRT, MLIS

At the SLA 2013 Annual Conference in San Diego, newly named SLA Fellows and Rising Stars teamed up to deliver presentations on selected industry topics and trends. David Cappoli, a 2013 Fellow, and Rachel Bates Wilfahrt, a 2013 Rising Star, discussed the skills that young information professionals must acquire to gain a foothold in the workplace.

The two of us met at the SLA 2010 Conference in New Orleans and learned that we both are interested in the transition from student to professional. While the information professionals reading this may not need guidance on making this transition, they may still want to share these pieces of advice with students they know and/or mentor.

Skills and qualities. Of the many skills and qualities you should develop, the key ones pertain to communication, technology, and flexibility. You should learn to communicate effectively with managers, peers, and those you supervise, as well as those beyond your immediate circle. Honing your communication skills will enable you to bring forth your ideas and thoughts in a manner that is easily understood.

While not all of us have a predisposition for learning complex technological skills, developing a high level of comfort with using and adopting new types of technology shows that you are willing to try out new programs and tools and provide a candid assessment of such resources. It also shows that you possess a flexible nature and a willingness to follow ideas and paths that you have not taken in the past, marking you as the type of person who can lead through challenging times.

Perspective. Think of yourself as self-employed. This will help you see yourself in terms of a skill set as opposed to a position—for example, as someone who combines deep research capabilities with expert information organization and data analytics skills, as opposed to someone who is an associate director of prospect development.

Seek out opportunities to learn new skills, especially those that are transferrable to other positions. A valuable resource to help you identify your skill set is Kim Dority’s *Rethinking Information Work*. It proved invaluable in helping Rachel determine her professional brand and career interests.

The job hunt. When looking for a new position, you must be proactive, as no one is waiting to provide you with a job. As you review openings that appeal to you, think about how your existing skills match those required of the positions, and consider the skill areas that you might want to enhance. Construct your portfolio along project-based lines, because it will give you much more flexibility when looking for positions. Think about your past paid work, internships, coursework, and other experiences and determine what you learned, the skills you acquired, and how the overall experience benefitted you.

While you’re still a student, explore opportunities for internships and field work. Even if such opportunities are unpaid, they may offer valuable experience and connect you with future employers. This is important at any stage in your career. If your position suddenly disappears, you can weave a narrative of your past work to find something that may be different from your previous job.

Revenue and brand-building. Think of your work in terms of generating revenue and building a brand. For example, Rachel has her own business as well as a full-time job, is active in SLA, and accepts speaking and writing engagements. Brand-building activities like volunteering will help position you for potential job transitions. Additionally, some employment contexts won’t allow you to develop skills you want to acquire, so you will need to look for outside opportunities.

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opportunities to develop them.

**Association membership.** Joining a professional organization as a student is an incredible investment. In addition to receiving a significantly discounted membership, you have the opportunity to join discussion lists relevant to your interests, take part in continuing education programs, apply for scholarships and stipends that often have small applicant pools, connect with a formal or informal mentor and/or support groups, and network with others in your profession. By participating in a mentoring arrangement, you will not only learn but teach—mentoring is mutually effective. We always learn from one another, regardless of our years of experience.

**Association participation.** For building a brand, volunteering offers a no-fail environment and helps you—

- Develop your leadership potential;
- Connect with others who have similar interests;
- Collaborate with those from other industries and markets who may not be fully aware of an information professional’s skill set; and
- Build your soft skills, including public speaking and leadership.

**Investing in yourself.** You need to invest in yourself as much as possible, and one of the best ways to do this is by attending the SLA Annual Conference. You can candidly chat with other information professionals, attend open houses, talk with information vendors, and participate in presentations that will teach you about new tools and resources and help you succeed as an information professional. And you’ll meet interesting people—in fact, the two of us first met while leaving New Orleans (site of the SLA 2010 Annual Conference) on an airport shuttle.

**Owning your versatility.** Brand yourself as succinctly yet as broadly as you can, as early as you can, and use LinkedIn as your primary networking career tool. Rachel’s full-time professional work has been in higher education advancement, but she doesn’t brand herself based solely on her experience in that field. Many of the information skills that she uses in her job, including research, information management and analytics, are highly transferable.

As you map out your career path, frame your current industry as a context in which you’ve learned and developed certain skills, not as the only field in which you can deploy them. Volunteer roles are also areas in which you can gain additional skills or industry experience, so highlight those as well! **SLA**

world different in a better way? That’s what members want to know, and making decisions on that basis is what enables leaders to uncover how value can best be achieved.

After leaders gather all of this information and create programs, how do they know whether they have truly aligned with their members’ needs? If they are making an offer and it is taken, then the association has hit the sweet spot. If the offer is not being taken, it is usually the result of one or more of three conditions:

- **It may be that the benefits don’t match the members’ highest-priority needs.** If that is the case, did the leaders have complete information and analyze the information correctly? Did they develop a program or service that truly meets a high-priority need?
- **The communications about the program or service may not have enabled potential users to understand the value in terms that matter to them.** It is essential that communications highlight the benefit to the individual member, not the features of the program or service. The member must clearly understand the benefit of participation.
- **The benefits and communications may be correct, but there are barriers to access due to a problem with the program delivery method.** A clear analysis of the barriers is critical before making any changes to the program or the communications.

Member satisfaction is all about value. Delivering value is all about clearly understanding the world in which members live and work, and using that information to develop strategies that respond to current high-priority needs while moving toward a successful future. **SLA**