

How Research and Information Skills Can Help Save the Planet

Abstract: In this article **Rachael Wild** discusses the transformational difference librarians and information professionals can make by contributing to community causes in the workplace, using her own experience leading Fieldfisher’s Sustainability Programme to show how they can become effective project leaders.

Keywords: sustainability; law librarianship; leadership; project management

INTRODUCTION

We make assumptions every day, some of these assumptions can be helpful, and others are self-limiting. Often, the most harmful assumptions can be those that are made about us without our permission.

For example, people outside of our profession can accidentally put librarians in boxes. We are often thought of as people who like to stick with traditions, who rustle around in quiet settings, stampers in hand, telling others to “keep the noise down”, easily irritated by long overdue loans. Yet while it may be true that I (and perhaps others) get ruffled by noise and books we simply cannot track down, I am, and we are, as a profession much more than *that* outdated cliché.

As librarians and information professionals we evade any easy categorisation as we all have such a broad set of passions and motivations. This is what makes our profession so incredibly unique. Underestimate a librarian at your peril. If there is a common thread that unites us all, it is the extraordinary proclivity for lateral thinking and finding information in hidden places. All of those who use our services will attest to this incredibly helpful skill.

WHY YOU? AND THE SKILLSET SHOPPING LIST

The skills you have acquired, in addition to your lived experience, studies, hobbies and interests, will enable you to achieve anything you set your mind to. My skills as a librarian have helped me to become the Programme Lead for Sustainability at Fieldfisher, a role in which I assist in setting the direction for the firm’s sustainability strategy.

But why would you want to get involved in a project or programme? The first response I’ll give is that the more people, from different walks of life, with varied experiences, tools and skills that we have involved in positive action, the better. Plus, there are a number of pressing issues that we, as a society, could be focusing on. For example: structural inequality, the mental well-being crisis, global poverty, lack of representation and the climate emergency. Difficult issues, which evade easy

solutions. The next natural question then is: who do you want looking at these issues?

The skillset shopping list for a project or programme leader likely looks something like this: someone with good time management, who is pragmatic, organised and can solve problems by engaging lateral thinking. An individual who does intelligent research but can also come up with insightful and creative projects. Someone who is patient, works well in a team, who can lead but also listen. Ideally, someone who can work within a tight budget, even someone who understands the principles of GDPR and can write excellent procedures.

Hang on for a second, isn’t that the description of a librarian? The very same professional who is often stereotyped and put in a box. It is important to sit with this and let it sink in. It is so easy to look at everyone around you and think: “but surely, they must be better qualified to handle this?”; “Me? I don’t even have a related course in this, I couldn’t possibly know,”; “I’ve never done *proper* public speaking before, I don’t think I can do that?”. These thoughts have been very familiar to me, at various times in my career. However, when you focus on the skillset shopping list of what you want in a project leader, there is no escaping the fact that as librarians, we hit a number of the big ticket items. Imposter syndrome is something that has been brought forward in the public consciousness lately, but it is still vital that we reflect on this and think: “are other people holding me back, or am I doing it to myself?”

A GREEN PATH

I took my own journey with this by becoming the Programme Lead for Sustainability. It wasn’t a process that happened overnight, and it certainly wasn’t always in my comfort zone either. I think it is true that people often require a bit of coaxing to leave their comfort zone behind. Especially when you think of leaders as loud, confident people, who never tire of social interaction, and who definitely don’t get nervous. This is another set of assumptions I had to challenge. So how did I do that for myself and what did that process look like?

Authenticity is the starting point. I started with something I knew I would never tire of. A project that each day, even when I am exhausted, I never want to walk away from. For me, that's the state of our wonderful planet. I couldn't stop advocating for a healthy planet, so that was the cause I wanted to champion. As with all things, time is an important factor. It takes time to curate influence – any social media influencer or marketing specialist will tell you that. It is not a process you can rush, or skip through stages. You have to do it all properly to be successful. It's vital to build up slowly, be authentic and build trust with your audience. During this process you have to distil your purpose and goals, because with influence comes the advantage of helping to direct where money, resources and time flows.

I joined the grassroots environment team at its inception in 2017. I then assisted with lunch and learn events and awareness raising campaigns on various topics from air pollution to plastic waste and climate change. From there, I started presenting at these events. At first, this was small segments, perhaps an introduction or quiz at the start, something that didn't feel entirely different to conducting an induction, or an in-house training session. Getting more visibly involved, and building my confidence slowly, led to me becoming the co-lead of the programme. This was definitely the first hurdle in overcoming that imposter syndrome.

I didn't leave my librarian skills at the door though. The librarian in me really came to the fore when we looked at launching our flagship reforestation programme, *Rooting for Change*.¹ Research, organisation and creativity helped bring this project to life. In 2019–20, we committed to planting 6743 trees with women's cooperatives in southern India. This project was the one that made me realise that my skills had helped to deliver a project which facilitated a tangible, lasting change.

COUNTING OUR CARBON

From there, the logical next step was to look into a carbon reporting programme, because a key element of being sustainable – a battle that all businesses now face – is to measure, understand and then crucially reduce carbon footprints. In 2019–20 we did our first year of reporting with the Planet Mark² and became a certified member. This committed us to a minimum 5% year-on-year reduction of our UK carbon emissions. Again, being part of the team delivering this project was not only incredibly rewarding, but it also meant using a lot of those transferable skills mentioned above.

The increased exposure for the sustainability agenda that our carbon reporting programme brought led to us rebranding our work to align with societal changes and understanding. To ensure our programme had a more holistic outlook, we became the Sustainability Team, and the Sustainability Action Network. The Sustainability Action Network that I head up is a global network of committed individuals across our offices who consider

sustainability a front of mind issue. As a result of this rebrand, and the need to communicate it clearly with the rest of the firm, I presented at a whole-firm event as the Programme Lead for Sustainability. Later that year, because of my commitments above and beyond my primary role as a Knowledge & Information Officer, I was then presented with the firm's flagship award, the Just Purpose Award, for commitments to the Fieldfisher Global Community.

COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

Behaviour change is something that is notoriously difficult to implement. Anyone who has tried to start something new, like a morning swim or learning a language, can attest to the fact that habits, whilst wonderful, are not constructed overnight. In the post-pandemic world it became clear to me, and the Sustainability Action Network, that there was an important moment to seize when it came to behaviour change. We had all spent the best part of a year and a half at home, and the return to the office appeared, to me at least, to be fraught with the lure of the dreaded single-use plastic. There were individual wrapped lunches again, disposable cutlery, water bottles, all these things that we had managed to swipe away pre-pandemic were back with a vengeance.

Then in came Pawprint,³ a mobile app designed to help employees reduce their carbon footprint at home and at work. We launched a campaign using Pawprint called: *Sustainable Habits: How green can you go?* The idea was that you use the app to measure, track and reduce your carbon footprint, by taking eco actions such as bringing packed lunches, increasing public transport use, putting a water butt in your garden – all sorts! (There is a free version of the app if you want to give it a try).

The campaign was a great success and was followed in February 2022 by a Feelgood February sprint, where we encouraged employees to track actions that would improve their wellbeing by actively contributing to society. We also did a Pawpurposefully Reduce your Plastic sprint in the spring, where employees counted their plastic for the Greenpeace Big Plastic Count, and then used the actions in the app to proactively reduce the plastic they had counted.

Dissecting how this campaign came about, there were certainly elements where the aforementioned information officer skills came in handy. For example: on-boarding an app takes a fair amount of organisation, and it is a process that you will have done many times with new legal databases and products. Librarians are well versed in navigating a procedure with the necessary sensible record keeping, too. Further to that, the communications element of running a campaign is great fun, and isn't dissimilar at all to writing training descriptions, invites and library announcements. Creativity and organisation are skills that appear on our "Shopping List" and are evidenced in our day-to-day library tasks.

ROOTING FOR CHANGE

We launched the pilot year of Rooting for Change in 2019–20, and it has undoubtedly been the highlight of my career. Using my skills to make a difference in the workplace has always mattered to me, and this was the first time I felt that I was getting closer to that, until then, personal objective.

In 2022 we announced the expansion of the Rooting for Change project through £110,000 of investment.⁴ It now incorporates a portfolio of projects in the global south, including two mangrove planting programmes in Bangladesh and Indonesia, to protect those who are feeling heavily the impacts of climate change. Both of our programmes in these countries have larger community livelihood benefits, something we consider as essential when looking at any project.

We are also the seed funders of the Barefoot Ecologists' College in Auroville, India – the same place that we did our pilot project in 2019–20. Through this college, the local community will be taught about conservation and agroforestry, because accessible education is a key element to protecting the planet. As is enabling conservation through dignified employment and land rights. So, with that in mind, we have also donated to Cool Earth,⁵ who are giving indigenous groups in the Amazon the tools to protect the rainforest from exploitation.

AROUND THE RIVER BEND

The summer of 2022 was a little bit quieter, the focus instead was on looking to the horizon, at what we must achieve with our carbon reduction programme and how we intended to do it. Alongside that, there were other awareness raising activities, like a beach clean on the north bank of the river Thames in London (Figure 1). Those who are familiar with this ancient river will know that incredible things lurk in the sand, and come and go with the tide. We found all sorts, from plastic bottles, to glass, to Victorian pipes, even a Santander hire bike! What was brilliant about this day is that we had colleagues from various departments joining in, including two of my library team. That's another one of the positives, running a programme can really increase the sense of community, not only within your organisation, but within your team too. Once again, this sort of activity didn't take any mysterious powers, it was just the usual librarian toolkit.

A LIBRARIAN'S TOOLKIT

I've discussed here the skillsets that make you an ideal candidate for running a programme, but what precisely have my experiences as a knowledge and information officer brought to the table? Overall, I think the most valuable of them all remains the research element of our role. We are all used to starting afresh, whipping up a summary document, a research strategy, evaluating



Figure 1: Rachael Wild taking part in a beach clean on the north bank of the Thames in 2022.

sources, and the rest. After all, in this profession we spend a great deal of our time looking into areas of enquiry that we haven't seen before. Being able to start fresh, without fear or trepidation, is a skill we have developed which cannot be underestimated. I have utilised spreadsheets aplenty, full of data, or research about potential projects or campaigns. I've also created a knowledge area on a Wiki space, so that everyone collaborating with me knows exactly what is going on with all of our projects. It also serves as a directory for information.

Something else I have brought to the Sustainability Action Network, which definitely would not have been the case if I wasn't an information officer, is an element of current awareness. I send out a weekly newsletter to the Network to keep us all abreast of key news and trends in the sustainability space. (It's important to note here that this newsletter has also prompted further requests for current awareness, so I have increased the reach of my readership).

Finally, never underestimate the importance of being able to handle public speaking. Many of us have trained the various people who come into the library. Sometimes speaking to two people can be as daunting as 20. So, with practice, you can speak to many people too.

RISKS & REWARDS

All of the undoubted impact outlined above makes all of the time, the effort, the spreadsheets, the "to do" lists,

worth it. Through our programmes, we have put trees in the ground, we have supported communities globally in protecting themselves and the planet from the impacts of climate change, and we have measured carbon with the intention of reducing it. We have changed people's behaviour and we have collaborated as an organisation. Of course, there is still a lot of work to be done and we must not stop here.

But it is important for me to mention that there are risks as well as rewards when running this type of programme. Your skills can help you save the planet, but you can also give yourself a pinch of stress along the way. It is important from the very beginning to be careful and realistic about time management. You need to communicate well with your primary team, because only with their support and understanding will you be able to flourish and ultimately bring your department exposure as a result. You will also need to juggle conflicting priorities with shrewdness and respect as you deliver at pace.

Let it be known, though, that the rewards are *massive*. You may find that others in your team are right behind you, and it's something you can work on together. You may make friendships that will last a lifetime, I know I have. The increased profile for yourself and your team is a fantastic benefit. The skills that you have learnt in the process of running a programme are transferable and you will find that you will excel in your primary role as a result. You will also be part of what, hopefully, will be lasting change and a commitment to global community and global impacts.

WHAT ARE YOUR CAUSES?

It was inevitable that I was always going to end this article with a call to action. It's over to you now, enough about me. Ask yourself, if you were to get up tomorrow, and get going on a project or programme, what would it be? That's the place where you should start ...

Footnotes

¹ 'Rooting for Change' (Fieldfisher, 5 June 2020) <<https://www.fieldfisher.com/en/insights/rooting-for-change>> accessed 23 November 2022.

² 'Fieldfisher' (Planet Mark, Members) <<https://www.planetmark.com/member/fieldfisher/>> accessed 23 November 2022.

³ 'Fieldfisher acts on carbon 'Pawprint' with sustainability initiative' (Fieldfisher, 19 November 2021) <<https://www.fieldfisher.com/en/insights/fieldfisher-acts-on-carbon-pawprint-with-sustainab>> accessed 23 November 2022.

⁴ 'Rooting for Change: Local initiatives with a global impact' (Fieldfisher, 13 May 2022) <<https://www.fieldfisher.com/en/insights/rooting-for-change-local-initiatives-with-a-global>> accessed 23 November 2022.

⁵ 'Rooting for Change with Fieldfisher' (Cool Earth, 1 May 2022) <<https://www.coolearth.org/news/fieldfisher-rooting-for-change/>> accessed 23 November 2022.

Biography

Rachael Wild is a Knowledge & Information Officer supporting the Tax & Private Client team at Fieldfisher. She also leads the firm's Sustainability Programme. Rachael has a BA in English Literature from Durham University and has worked in the legal information profession since 2016. In 2019, Rachael completed BIALL's Legal Foundations course at the University of Westminster.