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P for professional.

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P for professional

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The word 'professional' crops up a lot. As members of CILIP we define ourselves as part of a body of library and information professionals. As candidates for CILIP qualifications we have to demonstrate a commitment to continuing professional development, a breadth of professional knowledge, an understanding of the wider professional context, and participation in professional affairs.

But what exactly does 'professional' mean? Is there a difference between an information worker and an information professional? What exactly is the difference between training and professional development? And how do you go about becoming a professional?

Being a professional is partly about developing the range of skills expected of anyone working in the library and information sector, such as those defined by CILIP's Body of Professional Knowledge. But it's about more than that. Developing as a professional means not just doing training and having skills, but also knowing which skills you need to learn and taking action to acquire them. You need to be proactive about your own development and take responsibility for your own career. Working as a professional means not just being able to answer technical questions, but also knowing what questions need to be answered. You need to engage with other members of the profession so that you are aware of issues and trends, and current best practice.

If you're new to the profession, this may all sound a little scary. You might think 'professionals' are a million miles from you – world-class leaders such as Dame Lynne Brindley who debate key issues at a national and international level, or innovators like Sir Tim Berners-Lee who come up with ground-breaking ideas and technical developments that turn the information world on its head.

But most professionals are not high profile leaders or world-renowned experts. They are simply working members of the library and information community who take time to step outside the day-to-day concerns of the workplace and engage with issues and debates. They may contribute to leadership by serving on the committee of a Special Interest Group, or play a part in developing professional knowledge by sharing best practice ideas. In short, they are people just like you – and you could become just like them.

To be a professional you don't need years of experience, you don't need to be an expert and you don't need to be a leader. You just need to make a commitment to get involved in some way, and there are plenty of ways to get started.

Read

If you're reading this, you already know that reading is an excellent way to keep in touch with professional issues, build your background knowledge and pick up ideas for best practice.

- Find something to read. As a CILIP member you have access to Update and to key library and information e-journals (www.cilip.org.uk/publications). You may be able to access other journals through your employer, or your local library, or there's lots of material available free online. And if you're looking for something about a particular

topic, don’t forget that as a CILIP member you can search Library and Information Science Abstracts for free (www.cilip.org.uk/publications/lisa).

- Set yourself prompts to remind yourself to read. Set up RSS feeds or e-mail alerts for your favourite journals, so that the table of contents is sent to you as soon as it’s available. If you use an electronic diary such as Outlook, set yourself reminders to check key websites on a regular basis, or set up search alerts to scan key blogs.
- Set aside regular time for reading. If you are able to find time at work, maybe you could set aside an afternoon a month to read, or if that’s not possible perhaps you could read on the train or even over breakfast!
- Track what you've read and build up your own personal knowledge base. Keep copies if you can, bookmark favourite websites and build a bibliography using free web services such as CiteULike (www.citeulike.org), Connotea (www.connotea.org), or Zotero (www.zotero.org).
- Reflect on what you’ve read. Make notes, or add comments to your bibliography. Record your thoughts and opinions, and start to develop your professional viewpoint.

Discuss

Discussion is a great way to take ideas you’ve read about and think about how you could put them into practice. Admittedly your usual book club may not be too impressed if you suggest swapping the latest Richard & Judy recommendation for a discussion of a new journal article about cataloguing metadata, but perhaps you could join or even start a professional reading group which meets regularly to discuss hot topics in the information profession?

If you work for a large organisation, you may be able to meet with colleagues at work. Or you could make time for discussion in staff meetings by introducing a regular 'current awareness' session where you can discuss wider issues not directly related to your workplace.

If you can’t get together with others in person, why not form a virtual book group? You could use a JISCmail list such as the ‘lis-cilip-reg’ list for Chartership candidates, or even start a wiki.

Write

Have your discussions sparked ideas? Why not make a contribution of your own by writing an article for publication, or starting a blog? As your confidence grows you can use writing to share best practice with others, hone your ideas and raise your professional profile.

- Review a book or article that you’ve read, perhaps for your staff newsletter, the newsletter of one of your CILIP Special Interest Groups, or maybe for Update.
- Write about an event you've attended and contribute a brief article to your local CDG newsletter (if it’s a CDG event) or to CILIP’s Gazette.
- Share your experiences. Did you have an unusual path to Chartership? Is your job a little bit different? Why not write about it for the ‘People’ section in Gazette?
- Share your opinions by commenting on others’ blogs, or even start your own.
- Write a case study about a project, or a new way of working. There are many academic journals for information sector workers, so why not think about writing an article for a journal that you read?

Network

Networking with other professionals is a key part of CPD. Talking with others will help you to pick up tips on best practice, find out about other sectors and build a network of contacts. There are plenty of ways to start networking:

- Use a mentor. If you're working towards Certification or Chartership then you'll already have a mentor who could be a good source of contacts, or offer advice on how to make contacts. Even if you're not working towards a qualification, finding a mentor can be a great way to build knowledge and confidence by drawing on the experience of another professional.
- Look for events near you, including talks, visits to libraries, or social events organised by CDG, your local CILIP branch or other Special Interest Groups. They are a good way to meet other professionals, and many are free or low-cost.
- If you can't get out physically, then there are plenty of opportunities to network online, including CILIP Communities (communities.cilip.org.uk), Facebook (www.facebook.com), LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) and JISCmail lists (www.jiscmail.ac.uk). You can also network by commenting on blogs, but remember that whatever you say goes on record, and your current or future employers may be able to see it!
- If you're feeling ambitious, why not take your networking to another level by going international? Join in the CDG study tour, offer to host a visiting professional from overseas via the CDG/ILIG Hosts Directory (www.cilip.org.uk/specialinterestgroups/bysubject/international), or investigate an exchange with an overseas professional via LIBEX (www.cilip.org.uk/jobscareers/libex).

Share

Take your contribution beyond networking, and engage with the professional community.

- Join a committee. Why not contact your local CDG divisional committee to find out how you can get involved? There are all sorts of posts available, depending on the amount of time you have available.
- Host a visit. You may think your workplace is dull but chances are there will be something that would be of interest to others. Arranging a visit can also be a good way to find out more about where you work, and what your colleagues are up to!
- Make a presentation. Perhaps you could offer to speak about your experiences of Chartership at a CDG event?
- Support other professionals. If you're Chartered and a member of the CDG, then you're eligible to become a Candidate Support Officer (CSO) and offer support to other CILIP members working towards a CILIP qualification. Alternatively, you could train to be a CILIP mentor and offer support to individual candidates.
- Become an expert! Do you have specialist knowledge which could benefit others? Join CILIP Network of Expertise and Interests (cilip.camp7.org) and share what you know.

Get out there!

There are many ways to get involved that are well within your grasp, wherever you work and whatever stage your career is at. Just take a deep breath, dive in and get involved, and before you know it you'll be a Professional.