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Never Say Never: How I became an entrepreneur in the library and information field

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Abstract

Anu Ojaranta, a doctoral student in Åbo Akademi University in Turku Finland discusses her career development and how the path took her to entrepreneurship in the field of Information and Library Science. What does it take to become an entrepreneur, what skills are required and what kind of personal character is needed.

Key words: libraries; entrepreneurship.

Background

As I look back at my work history, I would never have predicted to be an entrepreneur. I did not believe to be a teacher either, but that happened as well. When one has had a career in the library field for over 20 years, there is plenty of cumulated history to build from. When a dear colleague approached me and enquired if I would be willing to write about working as an entrepreneur in the library field, I felt like it could be useful for someone to hear my story.

My personal education history is characterised by a continuous educational aspiration, from college level education to Bachelor Degree in Library and Information Services, to Master in Library and Information Science. Now I am completing my Doctoral Degree in Library and Information Science in Åbo Akademi University in Turku, Finland. And I need to admit; it has been the curiosity, the never-ending quest for knowledge and learning, which has carried me to the pursuit of a Doctoral Degree.

Entrepreneurship requires knowledge in numerous areas, but first of all you need solid versatile subject expertise. How I ended up having the expertise that I have can be considered to be a pure coincidence. After completing my Bachelor's Degree, in 2001, I

wanted to gain more work experience from abroad. By 2000 I had already worked in the Nordic Library in Athens, Greece, and done a training period in Lisbon at the National Library of Portugal. In January 2003 I moved my belongings over the Baltic Sea to Stockholm, Sweden. I was the newly appointed school librarian for a privately owned secondary and upper secondary school. I was definitely going to look for something else, since school libraries were as far as possible from corporate libraries, which were the target of my aspirations at that time. But definitely not a school library. Little did I know.

I completed my Master's Degree while working in Stockholm. Despite the difficulties in the beginning – a school as a work environment was much more challenging as I had expected – I remained in the school for four whole years before moving back to my hometown Turku. Tears rolled down my cheeks and a great number of friends and numerous fond memories were left behind. After my time in Stockholm school libraries, pupils and learning were an inseparable part of me. This was what I wanted to do for work.

Miraculously, a full time school librarian position became vacant after one year of my return from Sweden. I got the position and there I was again – in

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2008 managing a school library for the secondary and the upper secondary school in a municipality next to Turku. I was able to develop the activities, bring learning to the library and promote the cooperation between the library and the teachers. However, once again the curiosity and the thirst for knowledge took the better of me and in 2009 I went to discuss a doctoral student position in Åbo Akademi University.

Through my work in school libraries I got interested in how teachers guide pupils to information seeking, what could be the collaboration between teachers and librarians and how to develop school library functions to further have an impact on pupils' learning. School libraries are rare in Finland. There are merely some 20 full time school librarians in the whole country. I had finally found my niche in the information science field; to conduct research around information literacy issues in school libraries and to study the cooperation between teachers and librarians.

Developing the expertise

My career as a researcher had a slow beginning as I had a full time position as a school librarian. Later on I continued to work with younger pupils in early childhood, pre-primary and primary education and school collaborative work in a Kaarina City Library again close to Turku. There I, together with a teacher in a school, was involved in a national reading campaign (Joy of Reading, 2015) as one of the 30 pilot programs in Finland. Since I had already progressed in my research, I was asked to share my knowledge about teacher librarian cooperation in the campaign events. Moreover, the term multiliteracy had entered the scene as the Finnish National Core Curriculum (Board of Education, 2014) was under renewal already at that time and the current National Core Curriculum included the term multiliteracy as one of the seven transversal competencies. I felt that multiliteracy was a marvellous opportunity for libraries to form deeper collaboration with schools. I started to receive invitation to speak about issues relating to my research and work experience.

Finland is a fairly small nation. We have some 4000 persons working in public libraries in Finland. The ones who are active on a national level and are educating librarians are known throughout the

country. Moreover, this means that the markets for an entrepreneur are narrow. My expertise in school cooperation became known and I ended up doing lectures and speeches. Finland has a tax system – which will change in 2019 – where for all the extra employment outside regular daily work is taxed much higher, usually around 40-50%. This was one of the reasons I started my own company. Through a company income taxes are added to one's personal taxation with a regular percentage. But I also wanted to learn, being a life long learner as I have already admitted.

Taxes and other necessities

As I wrote in the beginning, I had never pictured myself as an entrepreneur. Suddenly I was using evenings to study which would be the most suitable form of business and what do I need to know, and most of all, what do I need to learn. In fact, one way I reasoned the business idea to myself was that I could learn what it is like to have a small business. Surprisingly, all became very fascinating.

There were a lot of issues connected to taxes, of which I had no prior experience. How and when to pay Value Added Tax, how will I pay Income Tax? Is it obligatory to pay pension insurance premium and, if yes, at what stage of yearly income? How do I acquire an insurance against loss or damage while working for my company and during work related trips? At first, no one was able to give me direct answers. Luckily enough, Turku has a Business Park, where business advisors help new entrepreneurs to get started.

After a lot of visits and phone calls I was able to gather enough information. These issues were not easy to find out because I had several roles at the same time, which affected the situation; being a doctoral student with pension insurance premium paid elsewhere at the same time, and there were additionally income restrictions whilst using research funding. What one can take from all of this is that there are a lot of issues to find out and it may not be easy.

I received an identification number for my one-woman-company, entered the Value Added Tax Registry, and started a commercial bank account.

Most organisations do not accept paper bills anymore and I needed to find a system to send out e-bills. There was no need to enter the Trade Register. I studied the insurances and pension insurance. These issues have numerous differences in legislations in different countries and so it is not purposeful to go into these details. Even though there was a lot of work going through all that learning, I am content with all the effort and of the decisions I made.

Since I did not aim to make a full time living out of this small business I decided to do my own book keeping. I had my old professional college degree in economics, so doing my own book keeping did not seem entirely impossible. However, to be honest, the first time filling in the tax return forms, it was not easy and I was overly stressed, because I wanted to do everything right. The following years were easier.

Marketing

After the first year, as I had already accumulated some income, I was able to hire professionals to take promotion photos, to have a web page constructed and to hire a graphic designer for the visual style and for logo type. While working full time, and in the midst of my doctoral thesis, it was impossible to find time to create the web pages myself. Some things are best left to those who are the professionals; my expertise is somewhere else. This is important to remember, not to disperse your time to wrong goals.

All three professionals worked together to find the right visual style and to make the appearance really look professional. Ordering a logo, a business card, a mini brochure and flyer from a graphic designer who you get along with is just wonderful – they know your taste and it is easy to continue the relationship in the form of new products if needed. The web page was launched approximately 3 months after we started the preliminary planning. I can now update my web page, add references, write a blog and update my online CV.

A very central part of marketing is the social media. The accounts for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are the most important for me. As my customer base is in Finland, and consists mostly of public libraries,

university libraries and municipalities, it is easy to know where the customers are and how to reach them. However, until now, the majority of the assignments have reached me through regular channels and through word of mouth.

Having the accounts is clearly not enough, they need to be active all the time. The social media activity is vital and requires constant work. Twitter tweets can be timed, so this can be planned ahead. Blogging needs work and planning the pictures for Instagram takes some time. And the pictures should be of you and your events, since the pictures need to look personal. There is a lot more to be done in the field of social media marketing, like starting video blogging or possibly starting your own podcast. And for more volume you would need e-mail marketing systems and designed landing pages. Plenty can be done with a minimal marketing budget, by just investing your time. But that time you need to find. The most important is that you know your customers and they learn to know you.

Learning

When starting something new, there is bound to be some learning, after all that information seeking, reading, comparing data and making decisions based on found information. Discussions with different specialists, and trying to understand the different aspects of taxation, are all aiming at creating a functional entity. You need to be up to the challenge of taking up marketing methods and all the administration that will follow keeping a company going. Be prepared to spend time on research, creating contents, communicating, updating the web page, book keeping, calculating offers and sending bills and, most important of all, keeping contact with your clients. There is a lot of work, and therefore you need to have your heart in it. A part time entrepreneurship is still easy, but to make this full time work in a country the size of Finland would really need a lot of effort.

In the end, what is needed the most is a strong professional profile. You have to be a good performer, sure and natural, easily approachable, and you need skills in pedagogy. When it comes to your product – which is you, your skills and knowledge –

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you need to be an innovative and a bold forward thinker, who has plenty to give to your professional community. Do what you love and the love and dedication is noticed.

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