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The salaries initiative: planning, implementation and action

Bob McKee

Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (CILIP)
London, UK

In my contribution I shall say something about our work in the UK on the issue of salaries. I shall use this as a case study of developing a strategy and then putting that strategy into action.

Levels of salary and conditions of employment are relative. What is a good level of salary in one country might be seen as a poor level of salary in another country.

Compared with many countries the UK has good levels of salaries and conditions of employment. We have a long history of organised labour – of collective action through trade unions and also through political activity. The strength of organised labour in the UK has helped to produce three important benefits: a framework of employment law which protects and promotes the rights of workers; a system of collective bargaining by which pay for most people is negotiated collectively not individually; and employment conditions which give workers a good range of benefits – a range which is being further improved by European legislation.

So this framework of legislation, collective negotiation and worker benefits gives library staff and other workers in the UK better conditions of employment than in many other countries. But there are library staff in the UK who have cause for complaint about their salary and status relative to the salary and status of comparable professionals in the UK.

When I became Chief Executive of the (then) Library Association in 1999 it became clear that some colleagues were seriously concerned about low levels of pay and status – and that they expected their Association to “do something” about the situation. But comments tended to be negative, not constructive. People talked about the problem – but not about possible solutions.

Three main issues were raised – all based on misunderstandings or a lack of awareness about the role of a professional association in the UK context.

First, people asked, why could we not achieve higher salaries for our members by negotiating pay levels on behalf of our members? Because, we replied, we are not a trade union. In the UK, all types of library workers are already covered by various trade unions which are recognised for collective bargaining purposes. As a professional association we would not be given that recognition and we have a different type of credibility and authority with employers.

Second, people asked, why did we accept for publication in our regular bulletin of job vacancies details of jobs where the salary offered was below the level recommended in our published salary guidelines. Because, we replied, we do not practise censorship – and because the employer would simply place the job advertisement elsewhere if we did not publish it. It is much better to provide details of all available jobs and let our Members make their own decisions about which jobs to apply for.

Third, people asked, why did we not campaign for better salaries for library workers? Was this because our legal status, as a registered charity, prevented us from active campaigning? No, we replied, our charitable status does not prevent active campaigning – and we do campaign for better salaries by lobbying government, producing salary guidelines, working with employers, and supporting individual members.

It seemed clear to me from this dialogue that some colleagues did not understand our role as a professional association in work related to salaries, did not understand the reasons behind some of our policies, and were not fully aware of our activities in this area of work. We needed better communications – a better dialogue – and we needed a strategy.

Most of the comments and questions had come from email and online discussion lists. So we decided, in the Spring of 2001, to hold an online debate through our website on the issue of pay and status – which I, as Chief Executive, would personally moderate and respond to in order to demonstrate our commitment to this work. I hoped that the debate would clarify issues and move us forward from unfocused criticism to positive suggestions and a strategy for action.

The online debate was also an experiment to see if a debate held in cyberspace could be better than a traditional debate held in a meeting. Discussion in meetings can be constrained by many factors – age, appearance, accent, gender, seniority etc – which do not apply in cyberspace.

The online debate was held in May 2001 and was a success. It produced good discussion and good ideas, it enabled new voices to be heard, it democratised debate. It also took up a great deal of time – and the time cost of moderating such a debate has to be taken into account when deciding whether to use this process.

The outcomes from the debate were considered at our Council meeting in July 2001 – by which time I had attended the ALA 2001 Conference in San Francisco where I met Mitch Freedman and discovered his passion for pay equity. Since that meeting there has been valuable collaboration on the issue of salaries between the LA (and now CILIP) and the

ALA. We in CILIP are now talking with ALA about the possibility of using the toolkit developed by ALA to support our colleagues in the UK.

The online debate and the subsequent discussion in Council led to six clear lines of action:

- to review our qualifications to make them more inclusive, relevant and accessible – and to give them greater prominence, credibility and authority with employers
- to find out more about what was actually happening with salaries by conducting a regular survey of the pay and employment conditions of CILIP members
- to continue to publish salary guidelines and provide support for individual members – and also to provide assistance for members to help them develop their own advocacy and negotiating skills
- to strengthen our relations with employers and with the trade unions which operate in our area of work
- to publish a clear disclaimer in our job vacancies bulletin stating that publication of a vacancy does not mean endorsement of the pay and conditions offered – and to challenge employers in all cases where the advertised pay fell below our recommended salary guidelines
- to take every opportunity for advocacy not just in relation to the salaries and status of library workers but also in promoting the valuable contribution made by libraries and library workers in organisations and in society

These six lines of action form the basis of our strategy on salaries – and so the online debate was successful in converting unfocused criticism that “something must be done” into a clear strategy capable of promotion, implementation and evaluation.

Most of these lines of action have now been embedded into our main programme of activities – with some new work needed to conduct a survey of salaries, to develop new salary guidelines, and to provide support and a toolkit for self-help advocacy and negotiation.

During 2002 we carried out our first CILIP survey on the pay and status of library staff and the results were published in January of this year. The data gathered was indicative not authoritative but the value of the survey will become greater as it is repeated with better methodology and a better response rate. The survey reinforced our perception that many professionally qualified staff in the UK are paid relatively low salaries by the standards of other professions in the UK. The responses also reaffirmed our existing strategy by confirming the six lines of action agreed as a result of the online debate – and the responses also provided us with a contacts database of many colleagues who declared their willingness to work actively with us in our mission to improve the pay and status of library workers.

Meanwhile our other areas of developmental work are continuing. We are developing a range of new salary guidelines working in partnership with the various Special Interest Groups (equivalent to IFLA Sections) within CILIP. We are gathering information and stories from our case work in order to develop self-help toolkits for our Members. Because of the varied contexts in which library staff work, we intend to produce a number of different toolkits, each focused on a different area of work – beginning with school librarians and then moving on to special librarians, because our colleagues in these areas of work are often operating as solo library and information professionals in organisations dominated by staff from other professions.

We are also working – in partnership with other organisations – to address the issue of workforce development. This is becoming a priority in the UK on the political, economic and educational agendas. Investment in people is the single most important factor in business success whether in the commercial sector or in the public sector – and the overall workforce in the UK has relatively low levels of skills and qualifications when seen in the European context. The creation of workforce development strategies for different economic sectors has thus become a matter of critical importance – and by working in partnership with the relevant agencies we at CILIP aim to place the library and information workforce at the heart of the UK's approach to the information society and the knowledge economy.

So – on salaries. We now have a strategy – developed organically and democratically out of the views of our Members. We have six clear lines of action to put that strategy into practice and these lines of action are now embedded into our main programme of activities. We are working in partnership on the issue of workforce development. And we have a great opportunity because of the political and economic and educational focus on the information society and the knowledge economy.

But to take this forward we need the active involvement of our colleagues, the Members of CILIP. We need more survey returns from Members in order to produce data which is authoritative. We need more statistics from Members in order to develop our salary guidelines. We need more success stories from Members in order to enhance our range of planned self-help toolkits. I began this presentation by talking about the achievements of organised labour in the UK. In a similar way we need collective action by our Members to strengthen our work on the issue of salaries. A professional association is a community of Members – and we need more Members making their contribution more actively to that shared community.

So I conclude my presentation by paraphrasing the words of a famous American who once, memorably, visited Berlin. The Members of our various associations when considering the question of salaries must ask themselves not just what can their association do for them – but rather what can they do for their association.

Thank you for listening.

Bob McKee
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