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Research and the new librarian

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What is research?

Traditionally, research has been conceptualised as the systematic, objective, valid, reliable collection and analysis of empirical data to solve a problem (applied research) or as a means to build theory and add to the existing knowledge base (basic research). (Bettis & Gregson in Russ-Eft, 2004, p.1)

Sounds complicated, right? Not so much.

In professional practice, research is often undertaken to solve a problem. Without even thinking about it, you probably undertake research fairly routinely in the course of going about your job.

For example, your library wants to redevelop its website. The organisation recognises that this will be a significant investment in resources, and decides to undertake some investigation to help shape the direction of the project. To begin with, you, as the project officer, spend time surfing the web, looking for examples of websites that work well, both within the library sphere, and outside it (an environmental scan). Next, you decide that it would be pertinent to see whether anyone else has written anything about how they undertook a similar project (conducting a literature review). Eventually, the project team might show the beta site to a small group of users and see if they're able to navigate it and whether they link it (usability testing). You then take the feedback, revise the product, make the new website live, and write up a report for management on how the project was conducted (project evaluation). Six months down the track, you might look at usage data and see how site usage is tracking, and you might compare this data to usage data from the old site. You might write another report for management, to show return on investment.

You might call this 'getting the job done': I call it **research**.

All that's missing here is the final step: writing up your project in the form of a conference paper or journal article and submitting it for publication. This final step in documenting your research is vital: it's your opportunity to contribute to the research base, to 'close the loop' on your project and to disseminate your results so that others can learn from, and potentially build upon, your work.

What's it to me?

Students and new professionals often suffer from a lack of confidence in their capacity to contribute to what we might call the 'research base'. I'm here to tell you that you, as a new professional, can (and should!) be undertaking research, whether it's intrinsically related to your practice in your current job, or whether it's on a topic that you simply have a personal interest in.

Carve out a niche

Do you have a particular passion? Interested in online service delivery? Programming for youth? Start to carve out a niche (or specialisation) for yourself by researching and publishing in that area. You'll extend your breadth and depth of knowledge, which will help you in your practice and in moving onwards and upwards in your career. The more you publish on a particular topic, the more you'll find people come to associate you with that area of research. You'll begin to build a name for yourself as a practitioner-researcher.

Develop your skills

Think: CV fodder. Selection criteria typically refer to generic capabilities like communication, liaison, project management, and technology skills. When you're just starting out, it's often necessary to draw from outside your professional practice experience to flesh out your responses to selection criteria. Research is a great way to develop generic skills and to develop and demonstrate the project management skills that are required for more senior positions.

Make connections

Build your professional network by seeking out opportunities to collaborate with other practitioners on research projects. This is a great way to gain cross-sectoral experience, and an opportunity to learn from potentially more experienced researchers.

Make informed decisions

By taking a research-based approach to your work, you can ensure you are making informed and sound decisions. Research is a great platform for innovation: it keeps us honest as practitioners, because it makes us consider whether a particular innovation is needed, and, post-implementation, whether it works.

Research is fun

I'm passionate about learning new things, so for me the discovery that's involved in research if particularly enjoyable. We get to find stuff out – stuff that we may not have known before. And your research can lead to even more fun: meeting new people, making new friends, conference attendance – and travel!

Dip your toes in the waters of research!

Interested in pursuing research? Here are a few suggestions to help you 'dip your toes' in!

Conduct a literature review

An excellent first step is to complete a literature review. By undertaking a deep and broad analysis of the published literature on a topic, and in turn submitting your synthesis for publication, you would be doing an enormous service to future researchers in this area. You will also uncover gaps in the literature that suggest future research projects.

Turn your practice into a project

Working on something new or innovative at work? Almost anything you're working on could have a research angle. It doesn't have to be rocket science: research is about making a contribution to the profession – it's about creating new knowledge to help move the profession forward – and we need all kinds of knowledge. Start out with something small and you'll soon have a taste for research.

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References

Russ-Eft, D. F. (2004). So what is research anyway? *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 15(1), 1.