

Interim management

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Employment in education and publishing, is going through a period of significant change and turbulence. Previously, many of our organisations offered fairly stable career structures and (in higher education, certainly) opportunities for progression in a stable working environment. Technological change and reorganisation were ubiquitous, but in most cases, people fitted around the roles that emerged, or had opportunities to move to other organisations. Obviously, there were major restructurings, but these tended to be time-defined and often linked to a particular circumstance. At the time of writing, the external environment seems even more uncertain and complex – Brexit, the impact of the June 2017 general election, the turbulent world politics and economy, technological change, and the increased marketisation of universities. Our own circumstances are more challenging too. In libraries and information services we have a less geographically mobile and aging workforce, which means that there may be greater barriers to developing a career in LIS.

In this context, there has been an increased use of interim management in higher education, and this editorial explores the practice of interim management and its value, particularly to academic libraries.

What is interim management?

Interim management began in the Netherlands in the 1970s and was later adopted in the UK. The fundamental reason for the development of interim management was twofold: the length of time required to replace permanent posts, especially in the public sector, and the level of employment protection afforded to individuals, especially redundancy protection. Employing temporary managers on fixed-term contracts saved both money and time for employers, and the rewards, in terms of flexibility and remuneration, meant that the option appealed to prospective interims.

The concept of interim management is easy to understand: you use an external contractor to fill a senior vacancy within your organisation, normally a senior manager/director-level role. The interim may be included on payroll on a fixed-term contract, or may be self-employed, usually operating through a limited company, also known as a personal service company.

The practice has developed, and is now common across the UK. There is a professional association, the [Institute of Interim Managers](#), and specialist practice areas in executive recruitment agencies including Odgers, Gatenby Sanderson, Practicus and Veredus. Recent taxation changes are making an impact on the supply of interims with the introduction of IR35 (intermediaries legislation). This legislation specifically challenges those people who supply their services to clients via their own

company, often known as a 'personal service company', or a limited liability partnership, who, in the eyes of the HMRC, should be classed as 'disguised employees'. Interims who are covering a substantive management role are likely to fall inside IR35, and this means you are liable for higher rate tax and NI payments without the benefits of being an employee (like paid leave and sick pay). Interim work, for those who are critical of the 'gig economy' is just a higher-paid version of the ubiquitous casualisation of employment.

Key benefits of using interim managers

Interims are expected to be able to function effectively in all elements of the role from the first day in post. This is one of the differences from an acting-up post where normally the postholder does not already have prior experience of the role. Their role is also different from consultants, who may also come in to work at a senior level, but who do not normally assume line management and leadership responsibilities.

There are several other distinctive elements of interim practice:

- **Availability.** Interim managers are expected to be in post within days. Contracts are won and lost on whether or not a candidate is ready when the employer wants the gap filled. It is also expected that the interim manager would be able to work with a minimal amount of training, beyond an orientation and housekeeping.
- **Seniority.** Normally, interim managers operate at a senior level within an organisation, at head of department level or above. Many interims have worked at least one level above the role where they may be deployed, and the organisation can benefit from their breadth and depth of knowledge and experience.
- **Neutrality.** Interims come in new to organisations and therefore tend to be separate from institutional power play and politics.
- **Responsibility.** Interims are not consultants, although they may perform this role in other placements and share some of the same skill set (including high-level analysis, project management and well-developed soft skills, including coaching). Instead interims are expected to be able to take on the full range of managerial duties: including project leadership, policy implementation, budget planning and service development. For the duration of the placement, they operate with the full authority of the post. The post may be a role linked to a specific project or programme, or it may be a core leadership role.
- **Credibility.** Interims are normally highly experienced managers and leaders and bring a depth of knowledge and expertise in both management and, normally, the specialist area they are leading. Interims also bring in their own knowledge and networks to the organisation, and can leave a positive legacy in terms of organisational development.
- **Results-focused.** Interims need to be successful in each placement, as the future of their own career is determined by what is achieved in each placement.

Benefits of working as an interim

To counter-balance the lack of employment security, absence of holiday pay and the other benefits of employment, interims tend to be paid at a higher day rate than the substantive post. They may also negotiate some flexibility during their contract: many interims are part-time or agree home-working arrangements, especially as placements may be a considerable distance from where they are normally based.

Many interims pursue a portfolio career, acting as Trustees or non-executive directors in other organisations or developing consultancy and training businesses alongside their interim work. Interim work broadens our leadership and management experience, by providing opportunities to work in different kinds of organisations. Although expectations to deliver are high, there is also variety and challenge.

Qualities of an effective interim in higher education

The section above outlined the general qualities of employing an interim. To succeed in this role in higher education library and information services, some additional skills may be of value:

- Cultural awareness. Universities are heterogeneous institutions with quite distinctive cultures. To maximise your opportunities as an interim, you need to be able to observe, analyse, interpret and act on your understanding of local organisational culture. If you do not, all kinds of barriers can be set up, which limit your effectiveness during the contract.
- Commitment to equality and diversity.
- Communication. All new leaders and managers need to focus on their communications strategies, inside and outside their immediate team. If managing library staff, you need to be especially mindful of the size and scale of your staffing responsibilities and how you might establish your role and build support when in post.
- Change management. An awareness of how to effect organisational change is essential. You may be leading a change project, or be leading an organisation through a period of transition. You need to understand drivers for change, what the barriers and resistance may be, and how to address them. This element is closely linked to cultural awareness, and how your understanding of mission, vision and priorities.
- Leadership. Interims need to embody effective leadership.

Concluding thoughts

I recently completed a six-month contract working three days a week as an Interim Head of Library Services in London. I was able to balance my time at the university with other professional activities, and to draw on my experience working in the sector for over twenty years. Interim offers an opportunity for me to draw on my strengths as a manager and leader but also to work part-time. Financially it is perhaps uncertain, but this can feel like a positive change after many years of continuous employment, as it means you need to reassess and review your skills. The opportunity to get critical insight into organisations and to make a positive difference to a service, its staff and, most importantly, its users, led to a happy conclusion to my contract, and I hope the new University Librarian is able to get some benefit from the work I did while I was there.



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