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Real-life story - Helena Korjonen

Helena started work in a medical information role, and during that time studied for an MA in library and information studies. She then moved on to a clinical research role, becoming head of information services. As a director of research and information services with the UK Health Forum, Helena completed her PhD.

Helena Korjonen

Director of research and information services

Employer or university

UK Health Forum



If you have a wide area of interest and want to work in a fast changing in a rewarding environment to make a difference, then the third sector is absolutely a great career option for you.

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**How I got into
the role**

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I was born and brought up in Sweden and Finland and when I was 16 I spent a year in the USA. I have always had a great interest in travelling and living abroad and so I came to the United Kingdom (UK). In the UK I worked in a variety of roles, ending up working in patient safety in the pharmaceutical industry. I also worked for the British Forces in Germany supporting their health promotion and special needs. I funded myself through university and achieved a BSc (Hons) in international studies and then moved into a medical information role, during which the organisation supported me to study for an MA in library and information studies. I then moved into clinical research and became head of information services and started my PhD part-time before moving to the UK Health Forum as director of research and information services where I completed my PhD. The UK Health Forum is a third sector organisation and is part of a charitable alliance of professional and public interest organisations in the UK.

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What I do

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My role is to develop research and information services to support two public health topics: reducing health inequalities and reducing the risk factors of avoidable chronic diseases. A large part of my role is to seek out funding for the organisation through tenders and grant applications. Most charities have no guaranteed funding, and we are not a typical charity in that we do not ask the public to donate money. Our existence, jobs and our work programmes are entirely dependent on securing new funds in each year. We have to find a careful balance between seeking out new funding opportunities and actually doing the work that we have already secured funding for. Our projects can range from policy and advocacy research (on topics like alcohol marketing to children, or the knowledge of dementia in the public health workforce) to building a national website for obesity and delivering current awareness services.

I commute into London most days, so a typical day for me is to get to the office by 8am and deal with urgent emails, prepare for that day's meetings and prioritise my work. Working in the third sector we have to be reactive to recent news, consultations, funding opportunities and last minute requests that come from funders.

The organisation is small, 20 people, but we have incredible expertise in policy, modelling and information services and we all work together well. Some projects are short term (weeks or months) and others can be as long as three years. In most of my projects I work closely with people working in government departments, academia, the NHS, local government and other third sector organisations. We also undertake international projects and have close working relationships with public health experts around the world.

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The best bits and challenges

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The biggest challenge is ensuring that we secure funding for the work that we do, and it can be stressful to meet very tight funding application deadlines. Job security in the third sector is also a big concern. Another challenge is managing the expectations of funders, there are often tight deadlines for projects and shifting priorities and needs, so flexibility in remodelling projects and timescales is needed. A further challenge that I've come across is that people think that those who work in charities are unpaid volunteers! The third sector is very broad with different types of organisations within it and there are different funding models. Charities need to cover staff salaries, rent and rates, just like a commercial organisations; the difference is that charities do not aim to make a profit.

Despite all the challenges, or possibly because of them (!), I enjoy my job. There is great variety in the new and different areas of work, meeting people from different sectors and working on a wide range of topics. I find that working in the third sector I have more freedom in coming up with ideas and being creative, which suits my personality. I have an opportunity to plan out entirely new projects from scratch and lead them through to completion. It's extremely "hands-on." We have quite a lot less bureaucracy than many other organisations, and the third sector environment is rewarding and supportive of career development and exploring new personal interests. What is particularly great within the third sector is that my colleagues and I have completely different backgrounds and different qualifications which are all useful in public health. My qualifications in human geography, international studies, human health, environmental studies, and information studies have all proven useful in our projects. I work with dieticians, statisticians, economists, psychologists, IT people, etc. All of them are part of our small team.

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Career plans and top tips for others

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I want to stay in the third sector: I like it, as it is always evolving and there is great variety in the subject matter. I am a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and am currently mapping human interaction in parks and green spaces - trying to understand these links.

I would suggest that someone interested in this kind of role should get involved in charity work, maybe by becoming a volunteer initially and involve third sector organisations in their work, by linking to them and their activities. People should attend third sector events to network, and join professional organisations.

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