

"I get a great deal of satisfaction in finding the information and resources that meet their needs."

Matt is the one and only ambulance service librarian in the NHS. He runs a national library, the Library and Knowledge Service for NHS ambulance services across England.

Matt Holland

Librarian

Employer or university

North West Ambulance Service NHS Trust

Matt Holland

How I got into the role

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I graduated in History and Archaeology in 1982. Originally, I wanted to be an archaeologist and spent two years working on archaeological sites in England and Wales. After one very cold and wet winter dig in York, a weekend volunteer said to me, "Why don't you get a job in a library and then you can just dig at weekends?" It sparked my interest and I applied for a postgraduate diploma course in library studies at Newcastle Polytechnic (now Northumbria University).

Looking back, I had been a pupil volunteer in the school library, a role which came with a red enamel badge that said 'Librarian' on it. I once completed a careers questionnaire and was informed that being a librarian was my ideal job, so maybe it was fate!

After graduating, I took my first job as a library assistant at Bristol Polytechnic. I went on to work at Bournemouth University for 20 years but, through a change in personal circumstances, I moved to the north west and took the first job I could get. That happened to be as a librarian for North West Ambulance Service NHS Trust, the first and so far only ambulance service librarian appointed.

I now run a national library, the Library and Knowledge Service for NHS Ambulance Services in England (LKS ASE).

What I do

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On a typical day where I work from home, my day starts with going through my emails. I weed out the ones I don't need and tweet out anything that I think will be useful to users. Then I go through any administrative tasks and finally I am left with enquires and searches. I try to deal with these on the day I receive them. Running alongside these, I have various projects to manage and meetings to attend.

Enquiries come from students, researchers and paramedics. One or two topics may come up more often but all the enquires are varied and challenging. I also work with colleagues on projects and support the revision of national guidelines.

As I have a national remit, I attend conferences and exhibitions around the country where I get to meet users and network with key people, which I really enjoy. The library has no books, so I work almost exclusively on a computer, but I also take time out to think about current and future projects and work out ideas on paper.

The best bits and challenges

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The really important thing about my job is that all the enquiries are from real people and I get a great deal of satisfaction in finding the information and resources that meet their needs. I enjoy writing and creating content as well such as guides on how to tweet and blog. As a virtual service, being active on social media is important as well as communicating with users about what the library service does.

The biggest challenge I have is how best to communicate with colleagues because they are always busy and often on the move. For that reason, most prefer to communicate via

email.

To be honest, I wouldn't change a thing about my role! I thought that working alone, from home, would be the exact opposite of the work environment I wanted. As it turns out, working from home suits me perfectly and I have complete control over what I do and how I do it. There is pressure to achieve and be productive, so I need to be self-motivated. I choose the projects I do carefully to ensure they benefit the library and users.

Life outside work

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I spend most of my spare time with family and our black Labrador, Jobe.

I can't honestly say this has helped me in my career but Jobe's relentless search for food above all things is a lesson in perseverance and optimism! The many hours I have spent waiting for Jobe to follow me on our walks has provided time for reflection and in fact given me some of my best ideas.

Career plans and top tips for others

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The most useful qualification I took was a Master's in Library Studies by Research from Birmingham City University. It led to some journal article publications from my thesis and contributions to an edited book. As a result of that experience, I wrote and regularly published on professional issues, and went on to edit two books with library colleagues in higher education.

Studying part time and working was a good experience for me. I felt that I valued those courses more than full time education. I also met people I wouldn't meet in the normal run of work, and their ideas and stories were as influential for me as the course itself.

At this point in my career, I have very specific skills that I need to update, currently around website design and searching. To be honest, I think work is a constant learning experience. If you encounter problems or gaps, solving them is the fun part! NHS healthcare libraries have an extraordinarily strong culture of mutual support, co-operation and networking. So, learning always starts by asking colleagues.

Having worked for over half my career in higher education and the remainder in the NHS, the biggest difference I think is the size of the libraries. In the NHS, healthcare libraries are smaller with much more opportunity to show initiative, take responsibility and see the effects of your work.

You also get a lot of satisfaction in working for patient care. I have been able to create a new way of working virtually and start a new library service from scratch. I enjoyed my work in higher education but, reflecting back, I have gained greater satisfaction and achieved more in NHS healthcare libraries.

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