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# IN PRACTICE

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**Focus** *Julie Nightingale* learns that whatever your skill set, there is a position for you in the sector

# Look beyond traditional job roles

When people think of a career in museums, the first jobs that normally come to mind are curator, director and gallery guide. But for those entering the profession, it pays to think beyond traditional roles.

The sector offers a wide range of jobs, encompassing the broad work that museums do – covering collections, education, events, audience development and community engagement. And then there are the departments that support this work, including human resources, facilities and marketing. Within each job family there are different roles, from junior assistants to officers, team managers and heads of department.

As the sector develops a greater focus on social justice and the climate crisis, backed up by the ever-changing use of digital technologies, the wide range of jobs on offer, each with its own approaches and skills, continues to grow.

**‘I’ve spent my career in the business of storytelling, and museums have the best stories to tell’**  
*Alice Wyllie*

**‘Make note of different tasks as you do them, so you remember examples of experience and skills you have acquired’**  
*Sofia Lazaridi*



How museums engage with audiences is vital, and public relations is a key part of this. Alice Wyllie is the communications manager at National Museums Scotland. The former magazine writer has found her written skills to be incredibly useful – from bringing an exhibition to life by distilling a complex piece of research into something a general audience can engage with to carefully outlining an organisational position on a tricky issue.

“I’ve spent my career in the business of storytelling, and museums have the best stories to tell,” says Wyllie. “Last year, I was involved in the announcement of a major acquisition – a silver casket believed to have belonged to Mary, Queen of Scots.

“Revealing that this exquisite object had been saved for the nation was truly memorable but one of the more special moments came

when I overheard an excited visitor ask a member of staff where to see the ‘casket that was on the news’. It’s a privilege to be a cog in the machine that creates those experiences for our visitors.”

Many people also engage with museums through their learning programmes. Ellie Chambers is the secondary and post-16 science learning co-ordinator at Manchester Museum – her second official museum job, although she has done lots of volunteering.

“One of the best things about the role is that I am trusted to use my own ideas and experience to create an engaging learning programme addressing big questions like the climate crisis, decolonisation and systemic racism, but to make them understandable and not terrifying for a young person,” she says.

“Last summer, for example, I took part in the

Green Bees climate assembly, a two-day programme of activities by Manchester City Council for students with special educational needs and disabilities. The event was based on the climate crisis and used the idea of what kind of world we wanted to live in and how we might achieve it. It was such a hopeful, positive experience.”

Volunteering was key to finding opportunities in the sector, says Chambers.

“I got this job partly because of my archaeology degree but mainly because I volunteer with Girlguiding,” she says. “I had experience of planning activities, safeguarding requirements and all that comes from working with young people in a voluntary capacity. I was working with young people every week, so I knew I could do it as a career.”

Fundraising is another key role that is becoming

increasingly important because of ongoing cuts to public funding for museums.

Sofia Lazaridi is a development officer (trusts and foundations) at Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales. Her core role involves writing and submitting applications to trusts and grant providers, liaising with project teams across the museum, and dealing with the terms and conditions that come with funding from grant providers.

After gaining an art history degree and a master’s, she took part-time jobs in arts organisations and museums, doing a bit of everything, from front-of-house to collections work, before moving into a full-time role. That early variety was important in helping Lazaridi to progress.

“It allows you to talk about having breadth of experience in your application or interview,” she says. “Make ▶

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PHIL WILKINSON (ALICE WYLLIE)



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## In Practice

note of different tasks as you do them, so you remember examples of experience and skills you have acquired.”

Freelancers are a vital part of the museum workforce, and many who choose to tread this path enjoy the freedom and variety it offers.

Kathleen Lawther is a consultant specialising in decolonisation of collections documentation. She has a collections management background, and her work as a freelance consultant focuses on documentation and decolonisation, identifying where different voices, perspectives and experiences have been overlooked.

Her most recent work was with the Powell-Cotton Museum in Kent – funded by a Headley Fellowship – to catalogue and digitise a collection of photographs from Somalia.

“I was looking at how the museum could approach its cataloguing in a more people-centred way,” says Lawther, who is also a Museums Association board member. “We thought about the users of the collection – how information about the people represented in the photos was recorded – as well as those instrumental in making that collection.”

Critical-thinking skills are key to this kind of specialist work, she emphasises, alongside the knowledge of collections management and museum practice.

“I gradually realised that the documentation of some of the collections left a lot to be desired in terms of the way things were described. Other documentation was simply missing, which prevents the museum from being able to use the collections to their best potential.”

Many people working in museums are concerned about the key challenges that society faces – and the sector offers lots of opportunities to make real change. Alex Smith is Museums Galleries Scotland’s (MGS) first climate officer, a post that was created to meet the need for expertise on the climate crisis and sustainability matters, and to communicate their value across the institution.



‘One of the best things about the role is that I am trusted to use my own ideas and experience’  
*Ellie Chambers*

“There’s a real need to explain those issues in the right way, connecting them with people – and that’s what culture can do,” says Smith, who has a science policy background.

“It can sometimes seem a distant global problem, but we’ve seen fantastic work across Scotland with museums that have explored global warming through, for example, the effect it will have on the biodiversity of the natural landscape where people live. Being able to make that connection is the key skill.”

He advises colleagues interested in a similar role to reflect on the skills they already have and see how they can be deployed in terms of climate and sustainability.

“Climate is often thought of as the domain of science or economics, but it’s a growing element across the cultural sector.”

Whatever issue museums

‘There’s a real need to explain issues in the right way, connecting them with people – that’s what culture can do’  
*Alex Smith*

‘I wanted to get into museums because I liked the combination of disciplines’  
*Scott Billings*



are trying to engage audiences with, having staff with excellent communication skills is vital. Such expertise can often be developed in other sectors, such as marketing or publishing.

Scott Billings, the digital engagement manager and redisplay project manager at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, wrote about the museum world as a journalist, before deciding to volunteer in the sector in his spare time.

That led to a job working on an education project supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. He then became the Oxford University Museum of Natural History’s digital engagement manager – a role that has been extended to project managing a major collections redisplay.

“It involves everything from working with collections staff, identifying specimens to display and

liaising with the design consultancy to managing the budget, working with the case contractors and editing the text,” says Billings.

His creative skills proved useful when changing career a decade ago. “I wanted to get into museums because I liked the combination of disciplines. In exhibition design, you have the mix of graphical and physical things – the spatial and conceptual.”

Billings took his writing and communicating skills for granted, but realised when he joined the museum that not everyone had these attributes.

“People here realised that their skills can be turned to so many things, from writing a funding application to putting in for an award to writing exhibition text or sequencing the elements of a digital interactive. They’re all versions of communication.”

*Julie Nightingale*  
is a freelance writer

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PHOTO: JOHN CAIRNS (SCOTT BILLINGS)

## In Practice

**Experience** Looking outside the sector can help to advance your museum career. *Rebecca Atkinson* speaks to two people who have flourished by doing just that

# Thinking outside the box



The courtyard in spring time at Coughton Court, Warwickshire, one of the National Trust properties managed by Gurminder Kenth

**Rebecca Morris-Buck, project manager, Bridging the Gap Project, Friends of Bennerley Viaduct**

Rebecca Morris-Buck leads a project to develop Bennerley Viaduct in Nottinghamshire into a community asset and heritage attraction. She is also the co-founder of the Safer Museums Network and is studying part-time for a master's in site-specific theatre at heritage sites.

"My first job, at 18 years old, was as a costumed interpreter at a museum," she says. "It taught me a lot about how museums work and I'm still in touch with some of the friends I made. From there, I didn't follow a 'typical' museum career path: I studied English at university, then everything, including my career, stopped for a decade as I was trapped in an abusive relationship.

"Fast forward to when I was 29, and my contacts and previous experience helped me back into museums, this time combining costumed tour guiding with education

delivery. I have no museum qualifications, but skills and experience count, and I worked my way to officer-level roles at two museums.

"But after five years, I craved a permanent full-time job, as I was getting married and getting a mortgage. So I utilised transferable skills – communication, volunteer management, audience engagement – to move to a role in higher-education alumni relations.

"In that role, I took advantage of all the training and networking opportunities available. I remained part of the heritage sector by interacting on Twitter, reading *Museums Journal* and being part of my local heritage forum. I also maintained my personal network via LinkedIn. After two years – having had time to rest and reflect – I was offered a senior management role in heritage, which I heard about via my network.

"I've not looked back since. I've learned not to see the sector as something you're

either 'in' or 'out' of. The boundaries are permeable. There are skills that work well in other sectors, where you can gain perspective and new skills. And you don't have to leave your network behind: museum people love to stay connected and to share their work. Make the most of that, in real life and through online networks. It's not a failure to move 'outside' of heritage, it's just a step along the way to finding the role that is the best fit for you."



**'I have no museum qualifications, but skills and experience count'**  
*Rebecca Morris-Buck*

**Gurminder Kenth, general manager, North Warwickshire Portfolio, National Trust**

Gurminder Kenth began working in the heritage sector in 2000, after graduating with a BA Hons in art and design. She volunteered at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham before joining the visitor services team. Kenth worked at Birmingham Museums Trust for 20 years: as a curator manager at Aston Hall and Park during a capital project; and as museum manager at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery. She left to join the Vegan Society in 2021, but returned to heritage last year as a general manager at the National Trust.

"I left the sector because the pandemic gave me time to reflect," she says. "I wanted to make a proactive difference with the climate agenda. Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery's closure for major works also helped me decide.

"I joined the Vegan Society as head of operations – a new role in which I used my operations skills and knowledge. My people management skills were a core part of this role, as were leadership and the ability to be a self-motivator. I gained a lot in my time at the society, developing my skills and expanding my knowledge.

"While there, I also became aware of how the pandemic had highlighted isolation and loneliness, and how this was affecting individuals across the board. Losing my mum suddenly in early 2022 meant family time and making memories became even more important to me.

"Heritage plays an important part in our changing nation, with outdoor spaces becoming ever more valuable. Climate change and wellbeing are high on my agenda, and having safe spaces to have fun in during hard times is crucial.

"My advice is to persevere, but not to dismiss roles elsewhere that will build experience. Leaving can often cement what you really want to do and channel what type of organisation you want to work for that aligns with your ethics and core beliefs."

**The guide** *Tamsin Russell* offers some advice on how to improve your chance of getting a job in a museum

# How to get your foot in the door



The museum sector has always been competitive. We've seen an explosion of postgraduate courses in recent years alongside vital work by museums to become more socially engaged, accessible and attractive to employees. But public funding cuts and the removal of the statutory retirement age have meant fewer vacancies and less turnover.

There are jobs in the sector, but the supply is outweighed by the demand to enter it. This reality check is critical to focus attention and to help manage expectations, whether you are joining the sector at the beginning of

**'The key is to ensure that you are learning and growing on your terms – and moving on when a job no longer meets your needs'**

your working life or moving into it from a different sector.

There is no silver bullet but there are things you can do to realise your ambition.

## **Job searching**

Identify the museums you want to work in. This can be a function of geography – how far you can realistically commute, taking into account time, cost and convenience? Listing all the museums within a specific area can help provide focus and support organisational research, as well as relationship building. If you are willing to relocate, then apply a similar approach to other areas. You might also want to identify museums based on collection type, their values and programming. The sector is broad, so don't discount jobs at related organisations – suppliers, funders, consultancies and development agencies – or working as a freelancer.

## **CV and applications**

The first step to getting a job is to successfully present your experience. Invest time in creating a master CV from which you can cherry pick the evidence to best match a job description or person specification. Using evidence-based statements in applications will increase your attractiveness for the next stage. A powerful positioning statement or covering letter outlining your motivations, interests and most-salient experience will also ensure you contextualise your ambition and give a sense of who you are, what you stand for and what you could bring to the role.

## **Networking**

Networking not only supports your career ambitions but is an important part of partnership and other engagement activities. When you're new to a sector, it can be intimidating, so a good starting point is to list the relationships you already have in the sector: people you went to school or college with, those you have met at courses or events, friends or relatives and those more removed (for example, those you

interact with on social media). These people can be your eyes and ears to vacancies. They can review your applications, run mock interviews and give you feedback. They can introduce you to others and to opportunities, and support your professional development.

## **Interviews**

Enjoy the success of being shortlisted for a role and use that confidence to fuel your preparation for the interview stage. Prepare evidence, examples and opinions relating to the requirements of the job. You should be able to talk about your achievements, but also the achievements of others in the field. This demonstrates your knowledge and awareness of the sector – and highlights crucial critical-thinking skills. Practising the interview alone or with support will help you talk more readily and instil confidence. Consider asking for as much detail about the interview and selection process as possible.

## **Professional development**

Unless you are applying for an apprenticeship or traineeship, it is likely that the museum is selecting for competence, not potential. This means you will need to demonstrate awareness, understanding and experience in the sector or in the tasks related to the job. Gaining these takes time and money, so having a focused and targeted approach will help. Read books and articles, visit museums and their websites, watch recordings from conferences, listen to podcasts, and join groups and events to support your development. Volunteering can provide opportunities to develop skills. The key is to ensure that you are learning and growing on your terms – and moving on when a job no longer meets your needs.

*Tamsin Russell is the Museums Association's workforce development officer. For more information, visit [museumsassociation.org/careers](https://museumsassociation.org/careers)*

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## In Practice

**Career voxpops** Museum workers share their advice on having a successful and fulfilling career in the sector

# Help! I want to work in museums

**Shahnila Shafiq, gallery assistant, Glasgow Life (Museums)**

“Have perseverance, pragmatism and be courageous – do not let rejections deter you from your path. Protect your dreams and your positive energy. Coming from a lower socioeconomic class or marginalised group does not define your intellectual capability or dedication; instead, it gives you an edge and resilience. It makes you work harder, be more determined. Be the positive change you want to see in the world of museums, and do not let anyone tell you that your dreams are too big. Lift as you climb! Dedicate some time regularly for learning and self-reflection. Remember your values and what drives your passion.”

**Sarah Checkland, project delivery coordinator (exhibitions), Science Museum Group**

“There is such a range of roles in the museum sector that all require a varied skillset, so never dismiss any experience you have as irrelevant, whether you gained it from within the sector, outside it, or through voluntary roles. Make the most of opportunities to network and take part in training, as you never know where these will lead. Don't forget to keep a log of everything you're doing, no matter how small, so you have a handy reminder for interviews and applications of all the great things you have achieved and can bring to the sector.”

**Richard Gough, director, Soldiers of Shropshire Museum**

“When looking for roles, be

**‘Showcase your transferable skills and learn as much as you can’**

*Helen Atkinson*



**‘Remember your values and what drives your passion’**

*Shahnila Shafiq*



**‘Listen to your gut feelings. If a job feels wrong, get out’**

*Richard Gough*



museums studies degrees to show your transferable skills and learn more about different roles.”

**Christina McMahon, deputy director, Garden Museum, London**

“If you're working towards a museum career, I always suggest looking for jobs right across the arts. While at university I got a job in the box office of my local theatre. This gave me the skills in databases and audiences that enabled me to get my first job in a museum, as a graduate trainee in the development department of the British Museum. Since then, I've tried everything from fundraising to learning and events, which has culminated in my current deputy director role. It's really worth being creative and flexible when getting your foot in the door: you never know where it will lead.”

**Melissa Maynard, consultant, Melissa Maynard Heritage**

“Don't be afraid to reach out to people in the sector (no matter their level or size of organisation). If you are interested in finding out about projects or programmes run by other people do send them an email or give them a call. If they can help with an opportunity to shadow an activity, provide you with some information, signpost you to different work or have an in-depth conversation over a cup of coffee then they will. In general, people are very willing to share their approach and ethos of their department or organisation.”

**Heather Thomas, head of learning and engagement, The Lightbox, Woking**

“Find the things you love doing, whether that is in the sector or not. There are so many routes into working in museums and galleries and being able to use those transferable skills can make you much more likely to find the thing that you enjoy. Don't worry about directing your efforts into the one sector as you may find a role that is linked that you also love.”

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prepared to be fleet-of-foot early on and later in your museum career. You'll probably be anchored to a geographical location by life/love/economics in the middle bit. There's no failure. Accepting why something didn't work is the root of a growth mindset. Learn to take praise – you'll soon find it can be in short supply. And give praise warmly, properly and often. Career 'progress' is not often linear or logical, so be prepared to take sideways steps. And listen to your gut feelings. If a job feels wrong, get out.”

**Helen Atkinson, operations manager, Jewish Museum London**

“My advice to anyone starting in the museum and gallery sector is to showcase your transferable skills and learn as much as you can from different departments early on. Offering help and getting stuck in with different tasks helps you develop in all aspects of museum work. From shadowing front-of-house colleagues, to knowing how to switch on different displays, it all comes in handy and helps you figure out what area of museum work you want to be in. You do not need



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## In Practice

**Step by step** Tamsin Russell offers tips for writing a sparkling CV that could help ensure you secure that crucial job interview. Illustration by Wendy Wong

# Stand out from the crowd

Whether you're applying for your first museum job or looking to move up the ladder, writing a good application is essential if you want to get through to the interview stage. CVs and application forms help organisations understand the skills, experience and motivations of prospective employees. Well-crafted CVs enable them to make informed decisions about who to bring forward to the next stage of the process.

Competition in the sector is high and the first hurdle is to get shortlisted, so you can impress in person at an interview. There are several ways in which you can write an application or a CV to increase the likelihood of being shortlisted.

### Know your worth

Before you start writing or tweaking your CV or application, take a moment to reflect on your achievements. Feel a sense of satisfaction and pride – these feelings will affect your writing style, so you can more readily communicate your value.

### Top tips

- Summarise who you are in a profile statement.
- Use “I” not “we” when discussing your work.
- Be clear about your role – don't share the credit.
- Use active and direct language. For example, replace “I was asked to audit our volunteer programme” with “I audited our volunteer programme”.

### Think about your reader

Your aim is to be shortlisted for interview, so you need to influence whoever is reading your application. Ensuring it is as understandable as possible is the key to success.

### Top tips

- Use the present tense for



Tamsin Russell is the workforce development officer at the Museums Association



your current role, and past tense for previous roles.

- Always spell out abbreviations and avoid sector-specific jargon.
- Present information in a logical order. This might be by date or starting with the most relevant experience. And make sure you are consistent.
- Consider using bullet points, but do balance these with prose.
- Use language that resonates with the organisation's priorities and values.

### Matching the requirements

The key to being shortlisted is to demonstrate how you meet the requirements of the job. You don't need to meet every aspect of a job description, but providing evidence-based examples of your experience is essential.

### Top tips

- Look at the criteria of the job you're applying for and share examples that show you match it.
- Include clear outcomes and metrics as evidence of your achievements. For example, if you are responsible for an organisation's social media,

share the stats that illustrate how you've increased traffic or engagement.

- Make it easy for the employer by presenting your evidence in the same order as the criteria are presented on the job description.

### Structure

Consistency in how you present your previous roles can help you focus on providing the relevant information. It also helps the employer understand your employment background and experience.

### Top tips

- Always give the job title and dates of previous roles.
- Include a couple of lines summarising the intention of the post. You can often find this in the existing job description.
- Include your responsibilities – this gives a sense of the scale and scope of the role.
- Share your achievements as evidence of your track record.
- Don't be afraid to include metrics. For example, the number of staff you manage or the budget you look after.

● Including your reason for leaving a job can be a good way to communicate your ambition and values, as well as explaining any fixed-term roles.

- If your career includes volunteering, then consider sharing these chronologically as part of your career history, rather than in a separate section.

### Be prepared

In my experience, the perfect job advert comes along when you are about to go on holiday, you are unwell or you have a big work deadline looming. So having prepared content can really help.

### Top tips

- Create a primary CV that includes your achievements over your career, and draft a covering letter that positions your CV.
- Identify generic competencies and prepare 200-word responses to them outlining your experience. You could use job descriptions from jobs you've previously seen advertised to help you decide which competencies to focus on. Alternatively, look at the Museums Association's competency framework for inspiration.
- It's easy to forget projects you've worked on or smaller achievements, so keep a record and update it on a regular basis. Also make sure you update your primary CV and covering letter.
- It should be noted that while written CVs and applications remain the norm in the sector, museums are increasingly looking at how to make their recruitment more inclusive, and are accepting filmed applications or audio. However, many of the principles shared here remain true whatever the recruitment process.