



## Using the ISBL Professional Standards and my network to help my career - by Christine Bellchambers

I came into the education sector from engineering in 2012, just as academisation had gained momentum. I came in as a Finance Assistant with 25+ years in Project Management & Sales and a degree in engineering management which covered production management, quality assurance, project management, budget management, marketing and HR. These areas have proven very useful in my various school business roles and I have now been in my current Finance and Business Manager post in a special academy in Dorset since September 2018. I stayed in my first school for 4 years, moving from Finance Assistant to Senior Finance Officer within a year.

As well as being an ISBL member I belong to several networking groups, one run by my auditors and one for Dorset special schools. My school is a member of a Special School Teaching Alliance and last year the SBP's decided to start meeting regularly to discuss various aspects of our jobs that are peculiar to our sector, namely issues with how we are funded by the LA but also as a valuable source of information and support in increasingly tough financial times. Alongside this I joined the *#SBLTwitter* and *#WomenEd10%braver* scene last autumn and took myself off to Bristol to meet up with other South West SBP's one cold Saturday in November. I met a group of incredibly professional and supportive people, some of whom had written an abundance of articles that I had read.

Whilst this role can make you feel isolated, this wider group membership is helpful for togetherness and provides a platform where we can discuss career development ideas and issues. This online networking has given me the motivation to consider where I am at in my own career as well as providing inspiration to push for recognition at a higher level.

I have always valued and used the ISBL Professional Standards since the first edition was published in late 2015 and in preparation for my recent PDR I consciously decided to use these, and the self-assessment toolkit, as a way of tracking my progress over the coming years and putting in writing the areas which I need to consider for additional learning.

As a result of meeting my new network of colleagues and my review of the Professional Standards, I felt that my previous qualification in engineering management had taken me so far and that I should now look to gain a qualification in school business leadership and I began to look at Level 7 qualifications. I put this forward at my recent PDR and, in addition, I also pushed for membership on the SLT to ensure I can assist in the leadership of the school and be able to have full inclusion in the decisions being made by and for the school. When I took on my role in September 2018 I understood that I would not be a part of SLT but having been through such a challenging time I felt that I had proved my capability and was fully confident that I had something to offer and that I would also learn a lot more about the education landscape in doing so.

I was also aware that my job description (JD) had not been updated since 2005. Clearly, this even predates academisation and needs attention in the longer term where the JD was historically LA derived. Again, this makes the point about my pushing for my own development and career both for the benefit of the wider school and my own future. Having the ISBL Professional



Standards there allowed me to say what I needed to and what is expected from me as a professional operating at a specific leadership level.

I am a person who is not afraid of trying something new. When I first encountered the finance system, I felt it was something that needed changing, and so I did this within my first 6 months in the role. I work on the basis that most things can be reversed anyway, in which case, what's the fear? Similarly, I work on the 'wanting to challenge, wanting to be challenged' approach. I really feel that this mindset is necessary for a role on the SLT and equally to stay on the SLT. As a result of being confident in my approach to assessing myself, with the help of the professional standards, I am now a member of the SLT, and we are scoping out which qualification I might wish to pursue.

Not only have I undertaken some personal and professional self-reflection, I have recently carried out PDRs with my two finance officers. I found this extremely useful ahead of my own PDR, and it made me see how I would want someone to carry out my review. The two finance officers in my team include someone who is near to retirement and another who is about to go on her second maternity leave. As they are both AAT qualified, I am keen to keep developing them and their roles; whilst also maintaining their loyalty and engagement in our school.

Wellbeing and mental health are also a priority in our school and therefore new starters get more frequent probationary checks. Partly driven by the nature of our special school setting we now have checks at 2 weeks, 6 weeks, 16 and 26 weeks, so I am able to check on my new starters and was checked upon myself early in my role and I am glad that these checks extend across to the non-teaching and learning staff. As far as I am concerned, it's crucial within your current role and longer-term career that you have regular points along the way to reflect and the opportunity to utilise resources like the ISBL Professional Standards.

There have been times where I felt like giving up, such was the burden of dealing with deficits and cutting the resources that provide potential opportunities for our young people, however I have kept going as I love what I do and care deeply about what we are helping our children and young people to achieve. Ultimately, I want to ensure the long-term viability of our school and its place in our community.

Reflection has become my new friend and has really helped to inform my decisions regarding how to choose my way forward.