

The Resilient Career

By Kim Dority

For most of us, freedom to choose the paths of our lives is critical to our sense of well-being. Choice means we can leave an unsatisfactory job or decide to stay and try to improve it. It means we can decide to explore new career paths or go after a more responsible but challenging job. Perhaps we could switch from, say, special librarianship to school librarianship to reflect changes in personal circumstances. In a time of devastating budget cuts across all types of libraries, choice means we're still able to continue to develop our careers, still able to contribute in new and exciting ways, still able to pay our mortgages.

An MLS degree can deliver just such choice through a multitude of opportunities. Those opportunities are based not on a place (the library) or a profession (librarianship) but on an understanding of the breadth of our skill sets. Librarians have many highly useful skills when it comes to information. The challenge is to step back from our preconceived notions of what a librarian does and instead focus in on where and how a library skill set can be reframed.

For starters, we can find, gather, evaluate, organize, and provide access to information. We can analyze, summarize, and make recommendations based on it. We can use it to help individuals, organizations, and communities make good decisions and improve lives. Along the way, we've learned critical professional skills such as project management, group collaboration, budgeting, visual presentations, team-building, marketing, grant-writing, web content development, contract negotiation, and leadership.

This skill set can be deployed within all types of libraries—school, public, academic and special libraries. Additionally, it can be at least equally valuable (and sometimes better compensated) in settings with no library connection whatsoever. Some of these positions can be found on job lines, via friends, and through active networking among colleagues. However, another option is to create your own job or project by identifying a need and using your skills to meet that need.

There are a number of ways librarians are reframing their skills in nontraditional ways. Some of these creative approaches are discussed in the following sections.

Doing nontraditional things within a traditional library setting. Why not take a more entrepreneurial approach to your career by combining a subject expertise with a functional expertise to create your own professional niche? Do you have a knack for creating highly effective outreach programs for underserved populations? Why not put your ideas into a best-practices idea bank that can be made accessible to public librarians throughout the region, if not nationally? The goal is to create a new role based on your specialized skills, one that adds unique value to your contribution as well as establishing your expertise among potential employers, clients, or audiences.

Doing traditional library roles but within an organization whose mission is not librarianship or education. This is the traditional special librarian's role, in which an individual or a team of librarians acquires or licenses, organizes, distributes, and maintains information resources that support the

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strategic goals of the organization. Although the centralized corporate resource—alternatively called the business or corporate information center, the knowledge center, and/or some other variation thereof—is losing popularity to a distributed or functional-team-based model, there are still a number of highly successful special libraries in the state. Also, many organizations such as associations, non-profits, and cultural institutions continue to employ librarians to support staff and membership inquiries as well as the information-gathering and distribution mandate of the organization.

Doing nontraditional things within traditional special library roles. Many special librarians find their opportunities to align with organizational strategy have been increased as they're asked to help build learning portals, take on records management, and set up centralized competitive intelligence monitoring systems through the library. The focus here is increasingly on collaboration with key functional units within the organization, and the ability to understand and support the group's strategic mission.

Doing nontraditional activities embedded in operational units. Although an increasing number of special libraries are falling prey to budget cuts, many smart companies are nevertheless holding on to their intellectual assets by embedding their information experts into functional departments such as marketing (market research skills), business development (competitive intelligence and industry analysis skills), product development (patent searching, usability studies), information systems (web portal development, knowledge management systems, information architecture), training and development (online tutorials, best-practices research, best-in-class topic resources), communications/PR (speech-writing, statistics, quotes), and executive decision support (executive information services, environmental scanning, futures forecasting).

Doing library-focused activities outside of—but for—the library community. Anyone who's worked in a school, public, or academic library for a length of time knows how they work, which makes him or her an asset to organizations that market products or services to libraries. A quick check with the online The Librarian's Yellow Pages <<http://www.librariansyellowpages.com/>> identifies thousands of publications, products, and services under the headings of audio & video; automation; books and periodicals; CD-ROM/DVD-ROM and software; equipment, furnishings and supplies; services; children's, YA, and school librarians' resources, and law librarians' resources. All of these vendors employ individuals in product development, marketing, sales, and management, and they frequently prefer hiring professionals with a working knowledge of the library market. In addition, a number of consulting and outsourcing organizations that work with libraries offer another career alternative that often provides a high level of scheduling flexibility.

Building on skills honed in a library-based job to bridge those skills into a new, non-library functional role. Have you developed an expertise in project management, team-building, innovative marketing programs, content development, web design and implementation, community relations, or training? These are all skills that are readily portable into new organizations not necessarily associated

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with librarianship. A library director has the same skills necessary to run a non-profit; a public-library webmaster can be equally valuable for a start-up company; an instructional-services librarian in an academic library can port these skills into another organization's training department.

Going the independent route. This option can be as simple as doing the work you've previously done as an employee as a newly-minted contractor. It can mean starting a new product or service business—alone or with colleagues—based on expertise you've gained along the way as a library professional. Options might include freelance cataloging, creating and maintaining research guides and online tutorials for virtual libraries; developing web portals and online communities for clients; launching an information brokerage or freelance research company; providing current awareness services for start-ups in emerging industries; being a consulting editor for one of the library-focused publishing companies; or doing freelance prospect (i.e., donor) research for a non-profit.

Listed below are examples of how these options might work for someone who works in a public library doing reference and patron Internet training who also has a background in medicine. These activities could be done full-time, part-time, or as a sideline to a regular job.

- Become a corporate librarian or information specialist for bioengineering, veterinary medicine, pharmaceutical company;
- Become a consumer-health specialist for a public library system, developing patron programs, online research guides, and a collection-development alerting service for all of the system's libraries, and/or create a service based on these components that can be offered to all public libraries;
- Create a research-oriented service for vets and/or doctors, creating information guides for their patients describing illnesses, treatments, and recommended resources (print and online) and/or create an alerting service for the vets and doctors on topics specific to their practices;
- Become a librarian or information specialist for a medical/healthcare-oriented trade or professional association, and/or do "on-demand" research for the organization's membership;
- Do research and analysis for a market research or investment firm specializing in the medical, healthcare, and/or consumer health industries;
- Create and teach an online course on medical research for one of the online nursing programs.

Obviously, not all of these are appropriate for everyone, but they illustrate ways of thinking about possibilities. Keep in mind that none of these require a lifelong commitment or a permanent change away from a traditional library career. Instead, they may simply be steps in developing a dynamic and resilient career. The goal is to design a career flexible enough that it can grow with you, rather than keeping you from growing.

The examples above are but a few ways we can consider porting our existing skill sets into new opportunities. The goal is to expand the universe of possible career paths enough to ensure that we

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always have other choices. Will this require that we take the initiative to re-configure how we describe our skills? Absolutely. However, that is a better option than remaining stuck in jobs no longer perfect for us.

As George Bernard Shaw said, "Hell is where you just drift – heaven is where you get to steer." Having an MLS gives us one incredible skill set with which to steer our careers.

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