

# Back into the Fold: Strategies for Attracting and Retaining Information Professionals within Libraries

By Marcy Phelps

In library school, I often was asked about the type of library work I would seek when I graduated. I usually responded, "I'm not sure, but I know I don't want to work in a regular library." I instinctively knew I wanted to work in an entrepreneurial environment from the start. In keeping with that response, I founded my own research firm. Apparently, I'm not alone in my thinking. According to the Association of Independent Information Professionals <[www.aiip.org](http://www.aiip.org)>, more than half of their members who participated in the AIIP 2004 annual survey indicated that they hold a master's degree in library science.

Why would someone spend so much time, effort, and money earning a graduate degree in library science and choose to become an independent researcher rather than to work in a library? It is important for library professionals to understand what is driving these choices since a strong roster of talent is being diverted into independent research arenas that might otherwise be applied to the management and evolution of libraries. To get a sense of what's driving the exodus to independence vs. full-time employment in a library, this article gathers insights from four independent information professionals and then provides suggestions for what libraries can do to continue to attract and retain top talent. A quick look at each of the participants and their backgrounds follows.

Before starting her own business in 1991, **Mary Ellen Bates**, president of Bates Information Services <[www.BatesInfo.com](http://www.BatesInfo.com)>, worked in special libraries for twelve years, including research firms, law firms, the federal court system, and a large corporation. Bates has literally written the book on being an independent researcher: *Building & Running a Successful Research Business*, published in 2003.

**Marcia Rodney**, corporate librarian and independent researcher, returned to full-time work as a corporate librarian for Ball Aerospace & Technologies Corporation after running RSL Research Group <<http://www.rslresearch.com>>. However, she still maintains her research business on a part-time basis.

**Marcy Dunning**, president of Access Information <<http://www.access-information.com>>, brings the viewpoint of someone working at a larger research firm rather than the "one-person, home office" business. Founded in 1981, Access Information has four employees in addition to the three partners.

I am **Marcy Phelps**, president of Phelps Research <[www.phelpsresearch.com](http://www.phelpsresearch.com)>. My viewpoint is that of someone who started an independent research business right out of library school. While in school, I briefly worked as a reference librarian at a small, liberal arts college and as a part-time personal librarian for a Denver family. Upon graduating, I started Phelps Research and built a network of other independent researchers who can assist with very large or fast-track research projects as needed.

The personal stories of each person interviewed vary greatly, except that each person opted to be an independent information professional rather than to work in a library setting. For this group of professionals, there are four common motivations for doing so: 1) the challenges (and satisfactions) of entrepreneurship, 2) flexible scheduling, 3) the desire to work outside a traditional employer/employee

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structure, and 4) a desire to have variety in their work life. Let's explore each of these a bit further as key reasons why some people are being diverted from a library setting.

## **REASON NO. 1: THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT LIVES**

In reviewing comments from these various professionals, taking risks, driving an organization's direction, and being one's own boss prevail as common themes. Dunning simply said, "I like to hoe my own row. Owning my own business allows me to set my own goals and take the company in the direction I want to take it." Bates added, "I get enormous gratification from knowing that I've built a successful business from scratch and in knowing that my clients keep coming back because they're happy with the services I provide. In addition, info-entrepreneurs must have a high tolerance for risk and be able to develop and build a business with services for which people are willing to pay \$75, \$100, or even \$200 an hour."

Personally, I also have come to enjoy all the activities that go into running the business—from administrative work to strategic planning and more. I actually enjoy the marketing process now, too.

## **REASON NO. 2: FLEX TIME—A PRECIOUS COMMODITY**

In this day and age, time seems to be the most precious commodity—at least in the United States. yourself and, within reason, you can take time off for critical things like doctor's appointments and fun things like your family and hobbies.

Schedule flexibility has been one of the biggest benefits of running my own company. I work just as many hours as the next person, but I often choose to work on Saturdays so that I can ski with my husband on Tuesdays when the slopes are less crowded. Rodney adds, "The one thing I miss about being a full-time consultant is being able to take a break and go for a bike ride at two in the afternoon."

## **REASON NO. 3: WORKING OUTSIDE OF "THE BOX"**

Another reason people say they are leaning toward independent employment is that they don't want to work within a traditional employer-employee structure. Many see it as confining, or they don't want to deal with traditional hierarchical structures and people management. "I am not a good manager of people, a skill that is essential in order for most special librarians to advance in their profession," Bates said.

## **REASON 4: VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE**

On top of the freedom and exhilaration (and sometimes terror) of running your own show, many independents are mad for multi-tasking—because it keeps life and work quite interesting. Whether you're a one-person shop or have employees, as does Marcy Dunning, independents typically take on the roles of CEO, CFO, Marketing Director, Sales Manager, and VP of Strategic Planning—as well as Researcher,

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File Clerk, and Office Manager. In between all of these activities, they still need to keep up their information skills.

Rodney found the best of both worlds as a corporate librarian, which is proof that variety exists and can be enhanced within a library setting. "I like to wear many hats, and the corporate library environment, especially in one the size of Ball Aerospace's library, allows for that," she said.

## **DRAWBACKS TO INDEPENDENT WORK CAN HIGHLIGHT THE BENEFITS OF LIBRARY WORK**

While the independent researchers and librarians talk mainly about the benefits of working independently, there are drawbacks to be explored that can be used to encourage professionals to choose libraries as their career path. These drawbacks often include long hours and late nights during deadlines, iffy benefits, no paid vacation or sick time, no administrative support, and loneliness.

For example, Rodney doesn't miss working late at night on a regular basis in order to meet deadlines, and since returning to Ball Aerospace, she now has a solid corporate benefits package, including support for her involvement in professional associations. She also finds that she no longer gets lonely. "I absolutely need people around me," she added. Bates noted, "Getting paid to go on vacation was a nice thing, rather than knowing that the time I spend on vacation is time I'm not earning money." Dunning misses having somebody else worry about administrative tasks. I tend to worry about balancing billable time with non-billable time spent on administrative tasks and business development.

There is also no question that, when you get a group of people together to work on a project, the combined brainpower can often be more productive than working alone. There's simply an excitement and energy to working as part of a team. Rodney added, "My creative juices definitely get energized by talking and brainstorming with other people."

## **CREATIVE LIBRARY MANAGEMENT CAN MIMIC INDEPENDENT FIRMS**

After interviewing this small sample of independent information professionals, it is clear that many of them believe a traditional library setting cannot offer what they get from running their own companies. In some cases, this may be true. If you're the CEO, you get to make the decisions. If you're not, then you don't have final decision-making authority because you are working for someone else.

There are, however, plenty of creative management techniques that can be applied to libraries that would likely attract and retain more talent. Let's look at the top four reasons why these professionals choose to remain independent, and briefly explore ways these needs could be more successfully fulfilled in a typical library setting.

**Entrepreneurship.** Every organization out there is taxed to do more with less. Entrepreneurial skills would be enhanced and further developed if the staff were encouraged to be entrepreneurial in their thinking. For example, is there a way to change procedures, policies, or business practices that could

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make the library run more efficiently and free up resources for some exciting new project? Is there a way to structure the organizational teams so that each workgroup is functioning as part of the whole but also works independently within the organization on special projects? Encouraging entrepreneurship within an organization is a great way to satiate people's taste for it if organizations are willing to make changes in how they operate and truly permit some entrepreneurial thinking.

**Flex Time.** While most libraries keep specific hours and librarians are needed during those times, it is certainly possible to implement flex time policies that might include job sharing or allowing people to work at home on certain projects. As long as the work gets done by the deadline, what does it matter when and where the work occurs?

**Traditional Structures and Hierarchies.** While organization charts, chains of command, and protocols have their value, many people still chafe under them and perceive them as restrictive of freedom and creativity. So perhaps it would be of value for libraries to explore what other libraries and organizations are doing to throw traditional hierarchy out the window and implement alternative methods of running an organization. An exploration of flat hierarchies, distribution of authority lower into the organization, or a team approach certainly are worth pursuing and could be modified to fit the needs of a specific library. Again, the organization must be willing to make meaningful changes in the ways it operates for this to succeed.

**Multi-tasking.** Without question, people are different. Some prefer to focus on one thing at a time, and there's a certain beauty in seeing a project through from start to finish. But for multi-taskers who thrive on variety, that scenario is deadly. This is an easy fix. Give the folks who work better on one project at a time, one project at a time. Identify the multi-taskers who need variety, and then organize their workload so they have to jump in and out of a multitude of tasks before they get bored and their eyes glaze over.

In summary, there are a great many information professionals opting away from library work because of what they perceive as specific scenarios within the library setting that don't work for them. However, most of the reasons indicated in this article can be implemented by libraries themselves as a way of continuing to attract new talent into their collective fold, thus evolving libraries as the needs of business and the public change over time.

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