Petite Perspectives:
Three Small-Library Leaders Share Their Stories

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Laura L. Barnes, Illinois Sustainable Technology Center, Prairie Research Institute, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

I've been an information professional at the same organization for more than twenty-five years, most of this time as a solo librarian. In that time, I've gone from managing a physical collection to directing a virtual regional information center for pollution prevention (which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency funds), while also providing information services to the Illinois Sustainable Technology Center's (ISTC) researchers as an embedded librarian. Throughout my career, I've often been the only information professional in the organization.

During this time, library services have changed dramatically. When I started at ISTC, the library mainly focused on acquisition and management of print materials. We sent students to the university's campus libraries to physically photocopy articles and mediated literature searches for our researchers using citation databases. These days, I'm more likely to be building information-finding aids, curating web content, organizing information literacy training for ISTC's researchers, teaching pollution prevention engineers how to find information, or working with my project team to analyze data on the environmental and economic impact of the manufacturing sector in the Great Lakes states (read our analysis at http://go.illinois.edu/glrpprdatareport).

The tasks I spend my time on have changed, but my underlying philosophy is the same as it was when I started my career. The right information, in the right place, at the right time, has incredible value. It's my job as an information professional to get people the information they need, before they know they need it, and help them turn that information into insight. My tools for putting that philosophy into practice are to think like an entrepreneur, be flexible, and seek out networking opportunities so I can stay up-to-date on new resources, technologies, and trends.

Thinking like an entrepreneur has changed the way I approach library service. It has made me see that I was asking the wrong people the wrong questions. Instead of asking myself what to change in order to convince people to visit the library, I realized that I should be asking my users, "What can I do to help you do your jobs better?" Those initial conversations led to the development of new services, including Environmental News Bits, my news blog (http://envnewsbits.info). Responding to inquiries on specific topics from the public led me to develop subject pathfinders for our website, many of which are now University of Illinois Library LibGuides (http://go.illinois.edu/lbarneslibguides). Continuing to ask this question over many years has helped me remain proactive when developing and delivering services.

Being entrepreneurial has forced me to be strategic about my activities and time. It's taken me a long time to realize that when I start something new based on user needs, there's a strong likelihood that I'll have to stop doing something else. Failing to do so has occasionally led to overcommitment, which eventually results in burnout. One key to my adaptability has been to resist the temptation to continue doing something simply because I've always done it that way. Assessment data and other analytics have been useful tools when deciding what activities to modify or stop entirely.

I quickly learned that flexibility is a critical component of solo librarianship. My job includes a little bit of everything, because I'm the only information professional in the organization. "That's not in my job description" isn't an option. This also means that every day is different. Often, it also leads to learning new skills on the fly, which is one of the most satisfying, and occasionally frustrating, parts of my job. When I take on something new, I often have to fight through a bout of imposter syndrome (and the associated procrastination). Pushing through that feeling to finish the task has helped me upgrade my skills and made me a stronger professional.

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Finally, it's critically important to stay connected to other information professionals, both inside and outside of the traditional librarian channels. I've done this by getting involved with professional associations and attending networking events and conferences. Serving on my regional library system's board of directors taught me that librarians in all settings face similar challenges, so I seek out opportunities that expand my view of the profession. I also participate in a variety of online discussion groups and read widely, both inside and outside of professional library literature, because I never know where I'll find new ideas.

The traits that define a successful solo librarian are also critical for librarians who work in larger institutions. Defy the traditional librarian stereotype. Push yourself past your comfort zone. Reinvent yourself. Do things that make you scared and uncomfortable. Hone your entrepreneurial skills. Get to know all types of librarians, and pay attention to what they're doing, because their projects might spark something that will work for you. Go to networking events sponsored by your regional library system or your chosen professional association. Volunteer for a committee. Attend a conference, and talk to people you don't already know. Find other librarians in your area and start a discussion group. Be nimble. Be adaptable. Most important, be curious and open to inspiration from everywhere.