

# A Foot in Each World: Maintaining a Full-Time Library Position While Developing a Free-lance Business

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STRADDLING TWO WORLDS requires an incredible sense of balance, as well as a large amount of energy, flexibility and ingenuity. Maintaining a library position while developing a separate free-lance career can be difficult for both the individual and the library institution. However, this arrangement can also be advantageous for both parties and is a good method of making the transition from library employee to free-lance professional. In this article I will discuss the positive and negative aspects inherent in such a situation as they are exemplified in my own experience.

I am currently maintaining two professional positions: (1) Children's Librarian at the Champaign (Illinois) Public Library and Information Center. Until six months ago, I worked full-time for the library. Presently, I work thirty hours per week. As one of four children's librarians, I select materials, plan and implement programs (which sometimes include storytelling), give readers' advisory and reference assistance, and participate in providing these and other services for children from infancy through grade eight. (2) Free-lance Professional Storyteller. As a free-lance storyteller, I maintain a schedule of at least one booking per week; each booking may involve as many as four programs per day and extend any length from one day to two weeks. My programs include performances and workshops for children, teens and adults. Also, I commonly spend from two to ten hours traveling to and from each booking. All time devoted to my storytelling business is in addition to the thirty hour per week commitment to my library position.

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At this point, my career goal is like that of many other free-lance professionals currently employed as librarians: to develop my free-lance storytelling into a full-time, self-supporting business. I seek this goal for several of the same reasons that other librarians seek to develop other free-lance businesses:

- I particularly enjoy one specific aspect of my library position (in my case, storytelling) much more than other aspects.
- I see a need for this aspect of library work and see that it is not being adequately met by libraries. Although libraries devote as much time and effort as they can to this service, it sometimes is insufficient to satisfy the public demand. There is enough demand to create opportunities for a completely separate business offering this one service.
- I prefer the independence of operating my own business to working within an institution.
- Many of those creating their own businesses also see the opportunity monetary gain. I doubt that I will enjoy as high a salary as a storyteller as I currently do as a librarian, but many librarians find that those in need of other services are willing to pay more for them than the library institution.

### **Potential Problems**

The transition from library employee to independent business-person is not always immediate. For financial reasons, one is not always able to leave the security of the steady income and benefits provided by a full-time job in an institution without having already fully developed one's independent business. Building a free-lance business is a gradual process, and therefore, one often finds oneself in the situation of building that business while still holding onto library employment. When an individual is at the point of maintaining two positions, as I am, potential problems for both the individual and the institution arise and must be dealt with.

### *Fatigue*

The largest problem for the individual is the overwhelming amount of time and energy required to maintain two jobs. I cannot emphasize enough that there simply is not enough time in a person's day to competently perform two full-time jobs. Attempting to do so often results in frustration and fatigue. Constant frustration stems from the fact that one cannot devote as much time and effort as one would like

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to either job. Fatigue results from attempting to do so anyway. Leisure time is rare or nonexistent. It is not uncommon for me, for example, to work three or four weeks in a row without a single day off. In addition, each individual day is packed. I often rise at 5:30 A.M., work two hours on my storytelling business before going to my library job, continue to work over my lunch hour and then devote another two to four hours in the evening. Weekends are almost always spent on the business, either in presenting programs or in doing paper work.

This kind of schedule can soon drain one physically, emotionally and creatively. In addition, it can wreak havoc on one's personal life. An understanding and supportive family is essential, but even a patient and flexible family will feel the strain. The library institution can suffer from this drain on the individual's time and energy as well. If an employee is overtaxed and tired, chances are that he or she will not be as alert, creative or effective on the job.

In order to avoid these potential negative effects, the free lancer must learn to budget time efficiently and must make time for relaxation. Otherwise, he or she will quickly suffer burnout. I chose to reduce my library hours to deal with the exhaustion and frustration resulting from holding the library and storytelling positions. One extra day off per week provides me with a little more time with which to conduct my storytelling business as well as some breathing room in my personal life. As a result of this change I work more effectively in both my library and free-lance jobs. However, as my independent business grows, I continue to feel the pressure to reduce my library commitment.

### *Clear Boundaries*

It is very important for the free lancer to maintain a clear boundary between the institutional job and the independent business. He or she should not conduct free-lance business while at the library and vice versa. For example, the library suffers if an employee constantly receives free-lance business-related telephone calls or speaks with clients on library time. On the other hand, the free-lance business suffers if the library expects its employee to take work home. No matter how careful the individual is about maintaining a strict separation between jobs, however, a potential problem exists. Because there is an overlap in services between the library's and the individual's independent business and because the individual is physically located at the library, the public often confuses the individual's free-lance business with his or her duties at the library and vice versa.

Several difficulties may arise as a result of this confusion. The most common problem for the free lancer is that the public often assumes that

the individual only offers those services offered by the library and that he or she does so at no charge. In my particular case, potential clients often assume that I present storytelling programs exclusively for children and that the programs I present outside of my library work hours are done so as a hobby rather than as a business. At the same time, the library experiences problems because: (1) library patrons request services from the library that the free lancer provides, but that the library ordinarily does not, and (2) patrons may request normal library services but specify that they be provided by the free-lance staff member when other staff members are equally capable of providing those services. For example, an adult organization may have heard about a librarian who tells stories, so it may call the library requesting a storytelling program. This is a service that I provide on a free-lance basis for a fee, but that children's departments of public libraries customarily do not. Confusion and ill feelings may result when such a group learns that this is not a free library service. Or a teacher may call the library to arrange for a class field trip and may specifically request that I present the library tour and program. This may cause hurt feelings among the other children's librarians because they are just as capable or more capable of providing library tours and programs to classes.

The resulting ill feelings can be avoided by maintaining open and frank communication among staff members. The staff must realize that such confusion is going to occur and must decide upon a consistent policy in order to cope with it. At the Champaign library, for example, we answer requests for nonlibrary services by consistently stating that the library does not offer the services, but that there are free-lance individuals who do. We then give the patron a few names, including my own. At the same time, we consistently respond to requests for library services to be provided specifically by me by stating that the library employs four qualified children's librarians, all capable of providing library services and that we assign such programs according to our work schedule. As a free lancer, I reduce potential confusion about my services by maintaining a strict fee policy and always clearly stating my fees and services in all printed publicity and personal contacts. At the Champaign Public Library, ill feelings also tend to remain at a minimum because the other three children's librarians are confident, capable professionals who support my free-lance work and understand when confusions arise. In addition, some confusion has been alleviated by the expansion of my storytelling business beyond the immediate community. Individuals beyond the Champaign-Urbana area do not associate me as closely with the library.

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### *Scheduling*

Balancing two schedules is extremely difficult for the individual free lancer, particularly when both require that much of the work be done during the normal business day. Many of my storytelling bookings, for example, require travel and on-site work. I may travel to a school system and work in it for one or two weeks at a time. Because I cannot work such a schedule around my 9:00 A.M. week-day schedule at the library, I must request vacation time before accepting such a booking. Thus, I quickly deplete my vacation time and find myself hunting for ways to obtain a day off in order to conduct my storytelling business. I must also put the storytelling booking on hold until I am able to clear my vacation request with the library's schedule. In addition, I often receive requests for storytelling jobs and find that I cannot accept because I am already committed to do a program at the library.

Another scheduling problem arises for the individual from the fact that most business transactions are conducted during normal business hours. Therefore, the free lancer often has difficulty carrying out routine business transactions such as making or receiving telephone calls. For example, because I do not initiate or receive storytelling telephone calls on my library time, I must do so before work, during my lunch hour or after work. However, I am continually frustrated by the fact that the person I am attempting to reach is only available during regular business hours and therefore is not available at the times I call. In addition, it becomes quite expensive to make long-distance telephone calls from the library when I have to then charge them to my home telephone number. This simple business routine of telephoning became such a scheduling problem for me that I finally alleviated it by putting a telephone answering machine on my home telephone for incoming calls, and reducing my library work load by one day per week, making one business day available for returning telephone calls.

The simple logistics of maintaining two schedules not only causes problems for the individual, but taxes the library administration as well. The free-lance staff member who makes repeated special scheduling requests creates headaches for his or her supervisor. If the supervisor and administration are not supportive of the free lancer and are not willing to juggle the work schedule, it may simply be impossible for the individual to maintain two positions. However, if the supervisor and the administration are willing to be flexible, alternatives to the normal work schedule can be investigated. In my own case, the Champaign Public Library has agreed to designate my position as an experimental time-shared one, thus allowing more scheduling flexibility.

Another potential disadvantage to the library is that the free-lance staff member is not going to be willing, as he or she may have once been, to occasionally take work home. Many children's librarians, for example, read new children's fiction in their personal time in order to stay current with the new literature and in order to better assist library patrons in selecting reading material. However, when one takes on a commitment as time-consuming as a free-lance business, one's priorities will be rearranged. Because the library cannot regulate the employee's nonlibrary time, it is best for the administration to work with the employee on scheduling time at work for all library-related duties. My supervisor and I, for example, arranged for me to spend the final one-half hour of each working day reading new children's literature.

### **Advantages**

Given the problems I have discussed above, one might justifiably ask why a person would attempt to maintain what could easily be two full-time jobs. Similarly, one might ask why a library would support a staff member whose goal is to develop a free-lance career. The answer lies in the fact that there are several advantages to both the individual and the library.

#### *For the Individual*

One of the most obvious advantages to the individual is the financial security provided by an institution. The institution also provides benefits such as health insurance, paid vacation and sick leave that cannot be obtained by a free lancer without significant expense. This security is particularly important when making the transition toward an independent business.

The free-lance business also profits from contacts made through library work. As a librarian, one becomes familiar with networks within the community and establishes rapport with different community members. As one develops a free-lance business, these contacts become extremely important. Quite often a person will hear me tell a story at the library and then will hire me to present an entire program for their organization or school. There is a fine line between benefiting from these contacts, however, and abusing the integrity of one's library position. One must be careful not to promote one's business at the expense of library services or the library's reputation.

By maintaining contact with fellow professionals through library employment, the free lancer also overcomes one of the biggest disadvan-

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tages of working independently—isolation. The constant professional stimulation from other children's librarians at the Champaign Public Library is extremely important to me. With them, I am able to discuss ideas, practice stories and explore new storytelling possibilities.

An additional benefit for the individual is the ready availability of current literature in the field through library employment. Through my position as a children's librarian, I read all of the current journals in the field, several of which contain information about storytelling materials and conferences and about new collections of folk and literary tales. I am also able to view the actual books, films, records and tapes as they come into the library. This opportunity is invaluable to me for keeping abreast of new story and storytelling materials. Therefore, although financial security may be the most obvious reason that one might want to maintain a professional library position while building an independent business, there are other important benefits as well.

### *For the Library*

Any library institution has the potential of becoming stagnant, especially with the current austere financial situation which makes it difficult to send staff members to professional meetings and conferences. The free lance, traveling and working in different locations and situations, is exposed to a variety of ideas and experiences. By bringing these back to the library, the free-lance staff member introduces new ideas to the library staff, leading to the creation of innovative services. For example, the children's librarians at the Champaign Public Library recognized the current "mini-baby boom" and the increasing demand for services to toddler-aged children. Although we partially met the demand through materials, we were reluctant to initiate programs. Through my free-lance storytelling experiences, I acquired knowledge about and enthusiasm for conducting programs for two-year olds. Consequently, we have initiated story and craft programs which have been met with great enthusiasm by our library patrons. In addition, I attend many conferences and workshops at my own expense in order to improve my storytelling skills and business. My work at the library significantly benefits from the knowledge I have gained and the contacts I have made through these meetings.

Another advantage to the library is that the free-lance staff member spreads an awareness of the library through his/her independent work. I have found this to be true both within and beyond the immediate community. When I present a free-lance storytelling program, I am often introduced as a professional storyteller who is also a children's librarian at the Champaign Public Library. Time and time again, an

interest in my storytelling performance or workshop motivates an interest in the Champaign Public Library. Therefore, not only do those attending my programs associate their positive experience with the library, but many learn about its specific services as well. Thus, I am indirectly providing a public relations service for the library.

These advantages to the library can be overlooked and underestimated by a library administration that only sees the negative aspects of employing a person developing a free-lance business. They are significant, positive influences on the library and their importance should be recognized.

### **Conclusion**

Because of the problems involved with straddling two worlds—and the attendant fatigue, job boundary confusion, and scheduling difficulties—I recommend it only as a temporary transition for the individual interested in developing a free-lance business. However, if the individual is able to handle the temporary frustration and fatigue and if the library is willing to be flexible about problems that might arise, both will benefit. The individual will benefit from financial security, community contacts and professional stimulation, and the library will benefit from creative, innovative input and from positive public relations.