
Midlife Career Choices: How Are They Different from Other Career Choices?

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ABSTRACT

IT WAS 1963 when Candy Start began working in libraries. Libraries seemed to be a refuge from change, a dependable environment devoted primarily to preservation. She was mistaken.

Technological changes in every decade of her experience have affected how and where she used her M.L.S.

Far from a static refuge, libraries have proven to be spaceships loaded with precious cargo hurtling into the unknown. The historian in the author says that perhaps libraries have always been like this. This paper looks at a midlife decision point and the choice that this librarian made to move from a point of lessening productivity and interest to one of increasing challenge and contribution. It is a personal narrative of midlife experience from one librarian's point of view. Since writing this article, Candy's career has followed more changes. After selling the WINGS™ system, she has taken her experiences and vision to another library vendor, Gaylord Information Systems, where she serves as a senior product strategist.

INTRODUCTION

Initial career choice is usually driven by youthful dreams, personal interest, personal talents, market availability, geographic preferences, and likelihood that the career will support one's lifestyle. It is a forward-looking choice. In some ways, it is the most open of all career choices.

Lateral and interim career choices are usually made for personal reasons (having to move, for instance) or because the current position has an unpleasant atmosphere, declining prospects, an incompatible boss, or because a better opportunity opens up elsewhere. These are generally future-oriented choices tempered and driven by accumulated experience.

Midlife career choices are a different matter. Boredom, plateau blues, family changes, success, fewer family obligations, burnout, restlessness, and mental fatigue all tend to drive career choices at this point. These are generally here-and-now choices.

The fact is that midlife choices are made from a position colored by both experience and mortality. This foundation makes them different from earlier career choices, more final in some ways, less “responsible” in other ways, more frightening, more liberating, and ultimately less predictable.

Not every midlife career choice is driven by dissatisfaction or unhappiness. There are many librarians who are flourishing in their positions and who have no intention of changing direction. For them, their career is blossoming as desired, and they are enjoying the fruits of their training and choices. Midlife career choices for them tend to be choices in maximizing returns along the current path.

Others find themselves in midlife suddenly and unaccountably restless, bored, dissatisfied, disconnected, tired, fed up, irritated, depressed, or otherwise short on the job satisfaction they want. For them, midlife career choices loom large. The current path is usually not the one they wish to continue following.

Yet dissatisfied librarians are usually old enough and prudent enough to realize that they have assets tied up in the status quo—retirement is within sight, family obligations exist, health and retirement benefits are increasingly important, and they are beginning to be concerned about age discrimination.

What choices exist for the dissatisfied librarian in midlife? Accept the status quo? Endure somehow until retirement? Revel in emotional guerilla warfare? Join a gym? Do outside charity work? Run for political office? Mentor a younger worker? Take up a hobby? Retire early? Write that book or novel or play? Take an extravagant vacation? Spoil the grandchildren? Learn a new language? Start a collection? Redecorate the house? Relandscape? Buy a sports car or motorcycle? Start all over again in something completely different?

Wait a minute—what was that last one?

That’s what I did. I left a comfortable, established, and successful position as a librarian at a major library automation vendor for the dubious joys and undeniable excitement of starting a new business and learning to be both its president and a programmer.

For me, it was absolutely the right thing to do. At least, so far. Check back with me in a decade . . .

THE CONTEXT

I began working in libraries as a high school student in 1963. At that time, it was a fully manual environment, with a form for every purpose and a well-choreographed workflow. I was fortunate enough to work in a library

for six years and, over that time span, to be trained in all aspects of library work—from shelf-reading to reserve room to serials to interlibrary loan to original and copy cataloging. This foundation has served me well.

I enjoyed the quiet, well-ordered deliberate bustle of the library. I viewed the library as a very pleasant refuge from a changing and challenging world.

I received my M.L.S. from the University of Michigan in 1973, after finishing an M.A. in my intended career—medieval history. I never intended to be a librarian. My youthful vision of my future was as a medieval historian, tenured, publishing happily, and doing on-site research projects in various rare-book collections around the world.

That did not happen. My funding ran out in 1970 when I finished my M.A., and I found myself in Ann Arbor, Michigan, with no prospects of moving elsewhere for another five years and a need to support myself and my graduate-student husband.

I found that my previous library experience qualified me for work in the university library system, where I happily reentered the library world, took classes part-time for my library degree, and learned a lot about the impending changes that library automation of various sorts was bringing my way. MARC was being hotly debated for nonmonograph cataloging in those days.

For a variety of reasons, I have worked most of my professional life in the offices of library automation vendors rather than in libraries themselves. I find it ironic that the love of libraries I gained when working in them as a nonprofessional was responsible for my becoming a librarian at all. Yet I have spent only a few years as a professional librarian in a “real” library. This was a stint as the audiovisual librarian at the Art and Architecture Library at the University of Michigan from 1973 through 1975.

In 1975, I took a five-year hiatus to start a family. It was upon my return from this “rest” in the early 1980s that I discovered the library automation vendor world.

This was a career development that I stumbled upon rather than sought. I applied for work in “real” libraries. I had missed some crucial work experiences in my family-starting hiatus, though, and the library world was changing due to automation. It was in following up a newspaper help-wanted ad for a completely unrelated job that I accidentally found myself at a company that had a side business in library data conversion. It was in this capacity that I entered the library automation vendor world.

It fit me well. Suddenly I was in a comfortable environment again, working with card catalogs in all their peculiarities. My training and facility with languages (learned during my medieval historian days) were of value in this world. I started to learn MARC standards as a byproduct of my data conversion duties. In a relatively short time, I became involved in designing programming specifications for data manipulation and verification.

I felt at home, happy in the use of my training and experience. Because of the work I have done for library vendors, I have remained in close contact with a variety of librarians coping with various stages of library automation throughout my career.

I found that I had an orderly mind coupled with a delight in puzzle-solving. These traits predisposed me to the technical and programming side of the library vendor world. My specialties became data conversion, authority control, MARC standards in their grittiest detail, and writing program specifications. At first, these specifications were for specific data manipulation purposes, but eventually I authored a batch authority control processing service and became involved in writing specifications for the maintenance of existing programs, as well as adding features to these programs. In time, I was one of three architects involved in the design of an entire brand-new integrated library system.

THE CHALLENGE

It was at this point that midlife malaise hit me hard. It was completely unexpected. Objectively, my career could not be going better. I was using all the depth and breadth of the library knowledge I had accumulated in almost four decades. I was deeply involved with programming and program design. I worked closely with librarians at customer sites. I held a position of respect and authority within the company. I was involved in creating the new as well as maintaining the old. I was on MARBI subcommittees. I attended other standards meetings. I was very busy doing things I had always enjoyed doing.

Yet I was suddenly and emphatically not happy. More than that, I was restless. The design phase on the new integrated library system was ending and my role was changing again—moving away from close program design and toward more standards development involvement. I did not like the change.

I wanted to spend time figuring out new ways to use new technologies, not how to bring another standards document to revision or to a vote (important though that is to both librarians and vendors).

I found I was getting less patient with myself and even less patient with the world in general. I was working a strenuous schedule and getting little satisfaction from it. I was feeling both too old and too young to be so dissatisfied. Reason did not help the situation. My life felt unbalanced, although reason declared it to be going remarkably smoothly.

I could not understand why this was happening. I fought it. I tried to adjust my attitude. I could not imagine working anywhere other than with a library automation vendor. Even work within a traditional library did not appeal to me any more. My experience was so highly specialized that only a few places in the entire country could really make use of it. I did not want to relocate. So I was stuck. There were no other options open for me. I

would have to learn to like my job again or find a way to endure it and make a life for myself outside of work that satisfied me. Unfortunately, I had no artistic or creative or altruistic yearnings that could serve as safety valves for my discontent.

THE CHOICE

Literally out of the blue, a close friend (eventually to become my husband) suggested that we pool our talents and start a new company. I laughed. But there was something solid to consider. We had an opportunity to take a new look at solving some old library-related problems in a very different way with some new (and some old) technologies. It was a real stretch, but we had the skills to try it. I took a week to think about it seriously.

That was a very difficult week. I knew it was not a reasonable or prudent or sensible thing to do. But I knew it was rare to get an opportunity like this. I had certainly spent decades up to now without stumbling across anything like this opportunity. I knew I wanted to try it. Most of all, I knew I was not getting any younger. If I passed up this opportunity, how would I feel five years from now? Ten? Would I continue growing more bitter and unhappy? Would I say thank goodness I was sensible and still had my comfortable job? Would I have moved on from that comfortable job anyway into something else I might or might not like?

I inventoried my assets, turned in my resignation, took a deep breath, and plunged headlong into the completely new world of the entrepreneur.

THE SHOCK

We immediately incorporated Pigasus Software, Inc., in November 1997. Suddenly everything about establishing and running a company needed to be done by only two people. And these two people were creating a brand-new product with the intention of exhibiting it at the midwinter ALA to be held only twelve weeks after we were founded.

How we missed office-support personnel! We needed to buy furniture, work with lawyers and accountants to set up the corporate structure, register our Internet domain, open a corporate bank account, get equipment, decide on the architecture of the new product, select the database, purchase the necessary development software, design the company logo, print business cards, create handouts for ALA, file all the necessary papers to go to ALA, and then find the energy and time to design our product and program it into existence. And we needed to attend standards meetings. From the very birth of Pigasus Software, we have been members of IPIG (the Interlibrary Loan Protocol Implementers Group). Our first meeting in December 1997 was memorable because neither of us could remember where we had made reservations. We imposed an office management-safety net system of sorts because of that glitch.

Programming. Now is as good a time as any to point out that, up to this

point, I had never programmed more than a single FORTRAN program in the early 1970s. I knew a fair amount about programs and had worked designing program specifications long enough to understand how to approach problems in a generally programmatic way. But I had never written any actual code in anything other than ancient FORTRAN.

I assumed that my cofounder, a computer engineer, would be doing all the programming from designs and specifications that we both created. Wrong. It was too large a project for a single programmer, no matter how energetic, to code alone. It was time for me to learn to program.

There was not time for me to learn what I call "heavy-duty" languages like C++. We had already decided that the user interface would be Web based. Art would do the database and communication work. I would do the user interface.

I was to write it in HTML. But since we were using CGI forms a lot, I really ended up writing the entire user interface for patron and staff in Perl CGI scripts that generated the HTML for display and executed SQL queries to retrieve information from the database to be displayed. I was learning all of these (Perl, HTML, SQL) at once. I learned mostly by example, but I learned. It was one of the hardest things I have ever tried to do, but it worked. We went to ALA with working production code. And I found that I REALLY like programming.

We released the full version 1.0 of the WINGS™ request management system in June of 1998. UCLA was our first customer.

By version 2.0 in the fall of 1999, we had changed the user interface completely, and I wrote that one in ColdFusion, another new language for me. In my prelibrarian days, I had enjoyed learning languages (French, Latin, Greek, German, Spanish, a little Russian), so it is perhaps not so surprising that I enjoy learning nonhuman languages, too.

By April of 1998, we had moved our company into commercial office space. By July 1998, our staff had doubled when we hired a sales person and a technical support person. By June 2000 we had more than twenty customers internationally, three resellers, and had hired another programmer. Version 2.1 was due out by late July 2000. We were starting to look for new, larger office space with a move planned for the following spring. The search for yet another programmer was on.

REFLECTIONS

I am no longer bored or restless. I have learned more than I ever wanted to know about contracts, office management, leases, taxes, health insurance, marketing, and accounting. I have worked harder than I ever did for any other company or library. I have learned more in a shorter period of time than at any other time in my life except perhaps in my earliest childhood. I have less time to myself than ever. I feel I am living at hyperspeed and that everything is changing faster than I can manage to keep up with.

I am often exhausted. I still am not getting any younger. But I am having more fun getting older.

And I am seeing library puzzles in a wider view all the time. Oddly enough, the training that often comes to the fore is my earliest library manual-based procedural training. It is the habit of seeing reasons behind the process, of seeing process as a safety net of its own to ensure that a series of steps is completed, and of having a respect for the goals driving the process, if not for the current state of the process itself.

Each new technology gives us new opportunities to reconsider current solutions. New technologies may well offer a better way—but they equally well may not. Only by looking at both the problem and the reason for the current solution can a sensible decision be made.

I am startled at how much less “specialized” or “isolated” the library world is these days. The Internet is a leveler in many ways and one of them is in opening quick and easy access to all types of information (both good and bad, organized and chaotic) directly to the user.

People sometimes ask why I chose to work with interlibrary loan/document delivery software. Interlibrary loan is often seen as a backwater of library automation—full of labor-intensive processes and duplicate files, low on budget or statistics that impress. From my point of view, interlibrary loan librarians have been doing heroic work holding together the various pieces of their jobs with their own brains and paper files because comprehensive and capable tools have not existed until very recently.

Not only do I see it possible to put new solutions together to address the problems of interlibrary loans offices, I see the opening of the information access provided by the Internet and other Web-based tools as a trend. Rapid and accurate information provision and management should be a growth market for libraries in general. Physical items will always be important, and libraries will always be natural centralized archives and storage facilities. Many things are not best used electronically. But electronic access is quick, convenient, and usually reasonably priced enough to be attractive. I may not be interested in a particular work but in a particular piece of information. Those who know how to find that information efficiently and provide it most conveniently will prosper. Why should not that be the library?

Interlibrary loan librarians have many of the skills most needed in the Web-based information world. They have a propensity for learning technologies that help them locate or provide information (fax, ariel, online databases with complicated and proprietary search algorithms, Z39–50 searches, MARC record understanding, e-mail, Web forms, etc.). They have a natural networking environment with other institutions. They have a history of cooperative and collaborative behavior. They are dedicated to serving the information needs of their clients. They exercise professional judgment on the quality of resources. They balance cost, speed, and access needs

to select the best source for any particular request. Their tasks typically touch every aspect of library automation (cataloging, serials, searching, accounting, patrons, reporting, statistics, copyright compliance) and, in addition, have to reach out to network with other institutions—libraries, document suppliers, publishers, etc. Interlibrary loan offices know a lot about scheduling and managing resources over which they have no direct control.

For me, the interlibrary loan office is an exciting place. From powerful solutions to the problems ILL offices face may indeed rise the next generation of integrated library automation (and information management) solutions overall.

I intend to be there. I have a lot of time left in my career, more energy than I had in my forties, and less patience for the status quo. The clock is ticking. I am still not getting any younger, but I am very happy with the choices I have made thus far.