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Change Is the Only Constant

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“Once upon a time you worked for one organization your entire working life, got a promotion or two (you hoped), and retired with a gold watch.” That was the workplace dream I was told, growing up in gritty 1970s Detroit, amid the auto factories where some of my family worked. My mother worked for ATT as a billing clerk (before and after deregulation). The workplace reality I saw was quite different; strikes, plant closings, and layoffs were more the order of the day. We all know what happened to the U.S. auto and telecommunication industries, as well as our economy in the subsequent years. As a young person, I witnessed two of the big upheavals of U.S. capitalism up close.

I share this because those early experiences shaped the way I look at work and the decisions I have made about my own career as a librarian. What I saw growing up shaped my perspective on the permanence, or impermanence, of work. I have cultivated an attitude that any job is finite, and therefore should be enriching and beneficial for all parties involved.

Because I loved books from an early age and grew up in a rich cultural blend of Mexican, Puerto Rican and U.S. cultures, I had a strong calling to experience other countries and overseas work. The end result has been a career in librarianship that started as a researcher at the Library of Congress, a sabbatical in Costa Rica with the ALA Library Fellows Program, and a six year hiatus to work in international development at the Peace Corps. My current position as the Neighborhood Libraries Director at Multnomah County Library has allowed me to use all the skills I learned along the way as I oversee operations at 16 branch libraries and library services to language minorities.

Watching my family and neighbors struggle with these massive changes drove me to look at work with a unique perspective, and shaped my philosophy,

outlined in this article. My observations have helped me learn to manage my own moments of imminent burnout and to stay focused on the big picture. I have identified six elements that have helped keep my work life dynamic and virtually burnout proof.

1. REFLECT ON YOUR OWN EXPECTATIONS OF YOUR JOB AND YOUR EMPLOYER.

Being able to have a solid sense of how you look at work, what role that has in the larger scheme of your life, and the attitudes you bring to that environment will help ensure that you stay grounded.

2. IDENTIFY WHAT EXCITES YOU AND KEEPS YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT YOUR WORK AND PURSUE IT.

Make sure that you keep that flame burning. From a young age, I was a news junkie interested in politics. I took a position at the Library of Congress's Congressional Research Service, where I was immersed in the makings of public policy on a daily basis—soaking up the energy of serving Congress. In my current job at Multnomah County, one of my joys is connecting with community members. No matter how busy, I make sure that I build in a visit to a community organization, a talk to high school students, or tape a radio program that plugs library services. These moments keep me energized and focused on why I love libraries and the impact we have in our community.

3. BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF.

When you notice the first twinges of burnout, boredom or diminished performance, let honesty surface the information you need to make the needed changes. Where is your dissatisfaction coming from? Can it be changed without leaving? What would make a difference? It is up to you (not your boss) to work toward making the changes needed to end or head off possible burnout, whether it is finding a new



job, getting training, etc. After five years at the Library of Congress, I felt restless and recognized the early signs of burnout. Although the job was interesting, I wanted new challenges and a new environment. Still, I was not quite ready to say goodbye to my current position. By taking a one year sabbatical to work overseas, I came back renewed and equipped with new skills and confidence to switch careers.

4. BE A RISK TAKER.

I do not think it is possible to expand and grow without pushing yourself out of the “comfort zone.” Both the Library Fellow position and my career change to work at Peace Corps headquarters were risks that pushed me out of my comfort zone into jobs where nearly everything was unfamiliar. Taking risks and seeking change has been my way of making sure that I am growing and expanding my skills. When I arrived in Costa Rica, I knew virtually nothing about the Internet, yet my host library badly needed someone who could train them on this new tool that was going to transform libraries. I taught myself how to use various Web technologies to navigate the Internet and developed a training curriculum and materials in Spanish. My new expertise opened the door to exciting consulting opportunities in Panama, El Salvador, and Uruguay, which naturally developed my skills as a trainer who could operate in a cross-cultural context even further. It also led me to a decision to change careers so I could focus my energies on working in international development in Latin America—a latent passion that blossomed with my experiences in Central America.

5. RECOGNIZE THAT WORKING FOR ONE ORGANIZATION AN ENTIRE CAREER MIGHT NOT GIVE YOU ALL THE GROWTH AND PROMOTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES YOU WANT AND NEED.

Organizations and communities change constantly. Your career should be the

same. In many organizations where I have worked, I saw staff who expected the organization to “take care of them” by providing them with a clear path of advancement and a cradle to grave work environment that remains static. I believe viewing your employer with that attitude can be a setup for disappointment. Competition for the always limited opportunities for advancement is real. Your organization might offer those chances infrequently, and if you are at or approaching burnout, you need to take action, rather than wait and hope a promotion will materialize. When I left the Library of Congress for the Peace Corps (a limited appointment), some colleagues were amazed I would leave the security of a permanent position for something finite and unknown. About seven years later, my former department underwent a major reorganization and was eliminated, with many colleagues retiring or being dispersed to other locations, with a loss of many promotional paths that once existed. It was a painful lesson that highlighted that what seems secure is generally not.

6. MAINTAIN A GOOD LIFE BALANCE.

I cherish a rich community-based life, volunteer, stay active (finished four marathons) and use my vacation time to see the beautiful corners of the world. That is in addition to having a strong grounding in my family and faith tradition. When you hit a patch when the job is not fulfilling you, you have an array of other places to turn for inspiration, joy, and stress relief.

As Andy Warhol put it:

They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.

