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A Day in the Life of a Special Librarian

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Areas with growth potential in librarianship

Leadership and management will be the growth areas for librarians. As many in the profession retire, there will need to be others willing to take on the issues of managing the library. This includes managing other people, developing budgets, marketing services, responding to facilities issues (buildings and grounds) and working with other government administrators.

Another area is collection development. While more and more collections are being built using standing orders and third party vendors, there is still an art to developing a collection that meets the community's need.

—EDWARD HOUSE
Director,
Beaverton City Library

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“So how would you like to write about a day in the life of a special librarian?” This invitation seemed like a fun and perhaps easy to write piece to write for OLAQ. What a great way to introduce a research library to other librarians, I thought.

For the next couple of weeks, I tried to map out a typical day for me in our small library, but with frustrating results. Gradually, it dawned on me: there is no such thing as a typical day. How the heck do I write about my job, in a way which would make sense to anyone who reads my article?! I was doomed, it seemed, even before my very first published article was ever finished. Then I wondered: are there typical days in libraries? In the introduction to the book *A Day in the Life: Career Options in Library and Information Science*, Jessamyn West of librarian.net commented, “there is no typical day just as there is no typical librarian. Sure, everyone checks e-mail (almost), and everyone goes to meetings (mostly), and we all work with various sorts of information” (Shontz and Murray 2007). Now, that was a bit more helpful. So feeling as though there are no “typical” days in a library isn’t that unusual after all.

One might argue that in a library such as the one where I work, my work day might be more regular and typical because I don’t interact with the general public. My patrons are my colleagues; researchers who know what they need but not always where to find it. Most days contain similar elements which could, in a stretch, be considered typical. But it is within each week or month, not each day, that my work contains elements of typical or standard library work: circulation, reference, collection development, acquisitions, serials management, cataloging, and interlibrary loan.

NWREL, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (“The Lab”), is one of

10 Regional Educational Laboratories in the United States. Originally mandated by former President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966, the Labs “serve the educational needs of a designated region by providing access to high quality scientifically valid education research through applied research and development projects, studies, and other related technical assistance activities” (IES 2008).

There are four librarians on staff at NWREL. Each of us provides an element of library service to staff researchers. We assist with literature reviews, systematic searches, document delivery, archiving, writing, and reference. I am primarily responsible for document delivery and collection maintenance.

The main Lab library, called either the Information Center or Professional Library, contains over 5,000 books and periodicals. Its focus is primarily as a professional reference collection, with additions based on current contractual subject areas and research trends. There are three smaller collections, each managed by separate departments. Only one of our collections is a lending library; the Professional Library and two smaller libraries lend only to Lab staff.

Blogger and reference librarian RickLibrarian spent a day mapping out his activities before, during, and after work. At the end of his post he observed, “As I look back on the list, I see some universal themes recurring: death and taxes and chocolate and the Internet. Tuesday will be much the same but different” (RickLibrarian blog comment posted December 13, 2005). As an experiment, I spent a couple of days listing everything I did while at work. What universal themes would appear for me? Probably not death and taxes, since in my job we don’t deal with taxes—nor death, thankfully. Chocolate doesn’t occur much either, although trips to local coffee

shops for lattes do happen more often than they should! Here, then, is an amalgam of entries, which give an overview of my days.

1. I turn on my computer and log onto the Intranet. No new postings today. This reminds me that I need to write a brief article about a recent videotaping.
2. While eating my breakfast I read my work e-mail. Most of the new e-mails are listserv postings. One from my boss, another from my coworker reminding me of books which I need to return by Friday. Another e-mail is from a patron thanking me for the directories which I had borrowed via ILL.
3. I spend about a half hour reading news, blogs, and checking my Gmail account.
4. Send purchase requests off to be processed and turned into purchase orders.
5. E-mail the facilities director, following up on a problem encountered yesterday with buying a book online. Explain I've found the same book at a library so my patron can use the borrowed copy for a while, which simplifies the purchasing process.
6. Send an e-mail to the corporate rep at our local Borders, about the same book
7. Talk with a researcher about the directories which I loaned her yesterday.
8. Talk with my coworker about the same directories. She'll look at them when the researchers are done with them. We're considering buying the directories.
9. I open the mail. Or rather, sort through

it and set it aside. Depending on current projects, I might ignore all but the critical pieces of mail for a day.

10. In today's mail is a book which I ordered from Amazon for our new webmaster. Must catalog it this afternoon and give to him.
11. File checkout cards. Quite a stack has accumulated.
12. In my e-mail are three e-mails, each with approximately 20 citations. I've been asked to find the full text articles for each of the citations, by the next day. This is a rush job and I feel a bit panicky, but ultimately they're all located by the next morning. Whew!
13. Cataloged new book which arrived in today's mail. Took to Lab webmaster, who was very happy to receive book.
14. Cataloged a second book which arrived later today, and checked it out to my boss.
15. Sent an interlibrary loan request to Clark College.
16. Get a last-minute rush request for an article. Am pleased I find and e-mail article within five minutes. There's a bit of personal pride in being able to quickly fill document delivery requests!
17. Read part of the most recent issue of *Information Outlook*, SLA's journal.
18. Read this week's ResourceShelf, and explored their posting of a site called KnujOn, which looks really intriguing. I sign up for a free personal account.



Advice for new librarians

Diversify. Get involved in projects that stretch your skills and expertise. Demonstrate a commitment to the profession (through service or publications). Don't "hunker down" into your own comfortable setting. Be visible. Pay attention. Ask questions. Care.

—DEB CARVER
Dean of Libraries,
University of Oregon



Hopefully this will combat some of the spam I get in my personal e-mail accounts.

19. Answered a question about citing an article downloaded from an online journal.
20. Go for a walk at lunchtime, returning books to PSU and Multnomah County libraries. We have an account with PSU which allows us to borrow books from their collection, and access their electronic databases. This is a lifesaver.
21. While reading the NEWLIB listserv this morning, I see a posting about an upcoming NISO webinar, “Demystifying Library Standards.” I forward the e-mail to my boss, asking if I can register to attend. She approves, and suggests I check with my coworker (I already sent her an e-mail, she also wants to attend).
22. Get an e-mail request for two books, one of which I can find locally. Submit an ILL request; ask the researcher about the other one, which will cost \$18 to borrow. He declines that one.

RickLibrarian discovered general themes of death, taxes, the Internet in his daily work. From my own list of tasks completed, the major theme which jumped out at me is that of customer service. If a Lab member asks for help, their request moves to the top of my priority list. In her introduction, Jessamyn West also observed, “Librarianship is a process. We are the translators between our resources and our patrons, each constantly changing and evolving. This can mean amplifying the dusty whispers of almost-forgotten books or toning down the steady cacophonous drone of a frequently updated RSS feed. At

the end, the results are like a gift: ‘I found this, for you.’ The work is never done, and yet for many of us, we would be doing it anyhow, without the job, without the position.” (Shontz and Murray 2007)

If, as Jessamyn stated, librarianship is a process, it must be a flexible one. Being translators between information and patron demands flexibility, the ability to bend and twist with each new request. There will always be materials to shelve, checkout cards to file, subscriptions to renew, a dusty corner to tackle. But first and foremost is the need to fill a request, and ultimately the pleasure in connecting a patron with the information which they require. My days are rarely—if ever—typical. They are, without fail, interesting, intriguing, and an endless source of new things to learn. 🌿

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Areas with growth potential in librarianship

Administration and management
Digitization, preservation, special collections
Design and delivery of full text information
Public services
Instruction
Library consortia
Digital curation

—VICKIE HANAWALT
 Library Director,
 Reed College Library