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## Not Your Traditional Librarian

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# Not Your Traditional Librarian

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## Currently Reading

*The Signal and the Noise:  
Why So Many Predictions Fail—but Some Don't*  
by Nate Silver

I am proud to call myself a librarian. But I often wonder why, since the title captures very little of the reality of what I do day-to-day. Sure, I help people access and make sense of information. I can find the answer to most any reference question. I can quickly evaluate the credibility of a resource, either online or offline, and I can query a database like nobody's business.

But I can also lead a several million dollar Profit & Loss statement, write and present 6-digit research and analytics proposals to Fortune 500 companies, develop methodologies and solutions that require the combination of human and computer intelligence, and create a 3-year business plan for a team of 40+ information professionals. But I could not and would not be where I am without the foundational theory, practical skills and general frame of thinking that comes with being a librarian.

So how did I get from librarian to here? My path is not as convoluted as it probably sounds. I simply learned how to apply the same skills that drew me to the field of librarianship in a context that is very different from a traditional library—an integrated communications agency focused on media relations.

During my first term of library school I was fortunate enough to be offered the position of Library Assistant at Waggener Edstrom Worldwide. When I was hired the dot-com bubble was still growing and the Web was a very different world. Wikipedia was not around. Facebook was 4 years from launching. Blogs were still referred to as “weblogs” for the most part. Twitter was not even a glimmer in Jack Dorsey's eye.

Upon hiring, my duties were mostly limited to managing print periodical subscriptions, routing copies and maintaining a small physical library for what was then known as a high-tech focused public relations firm. I answered a few reference questions, and did my share of database searches via Dialog, Nexis Lexis and Factiva. But a good part of my day was spent delivering newspapers, business magazines and trade journals to the account staff in my office.



When I think about how I got from there to “here,” I can identify some guiding principles that I think could help any library or information professional not just find a job outside a traditional library setting, but to find a role where they can really bring critical, even transformative skills to bear.

But first, what are some of the skills and capabilities I am referring to? Probably most obvious is our innate ability to make sense of vast quantities of unstructured data, information or ideas. Identifying structures or patterns that can create frameworks that facilitate accessibility and understanding is a skill that can be valuable to most any organization. Equally, the ability to be self-directed and independent in ambiguous, sometimes uncharted territory is something I see many librarians exercising. Again, organizations across the board can benefit from this.

Still, even armed with skills that have very broad appeal in the employment landscape, it's rarely easy to find these non-traditional opportunities. It's not a secret that traditional library jobs can be hard to come by in Oregon, particularly Portland, so some of us are simply forced to look elsewhere. But I firmly believe and have actually witnessed that our skills and strengths are applicable and valuable in more organizations and situations than any one of us can possibly imagine, so it is worth the search.

But where does one start? First and foremost, know that the type of positions I am referring to will not be advertised under “library” or “librarian” on employment websites. Many of the organizations that can benefit from our skills don't even know to be looking for someone with an MLS/MLIS degree (if they even know that the degree exists in the first place). Who would immediately think that a librarian can play a key role in mapping the social connections of sustainable energy pundits? Or identifying the critical success factors in the way that a multi-national aid organization approaches innovation? Or completely re-imagining how an organization works through technology assisted efficiencies?

But each of us can be empowered to overcome this oversight and limited thinking. My recommendation is to start with the following:

**Be bold.** Even if you've technically never done something, if you think you have the right mix of skills, ambition and motivation to succeed, dig deep for the confidence to volunteer, apply, or ask for a new and challenging opportunity. I know we are a profession that takes great pride in our intelligence and ninja-like problem solving skills. Now it's time to show the rest of the world what we already know. We can bring value to almost any situation.

**Anticipate and adapt.** Be ready for what is coming next and think about how you can help others be prepared. By leading into the change versus waiting to see how new developments will impact our world, you are positioned to anticipate and even shape the impact. Think about the current buzz around Big Data for example. This presents a huge computational processing and data structuring challenge for organizations. Librarian and information professional skills are undoubtedly relevant.



**Get creative.** While we can organize and categorize most anything, don't forget the creative side of our minds. Black and white thinking is what we are known for, but think about how creative we are when faced with never heard before questions. Or when we have to cut our budgets by one half or more. Apply this same sort of nimbleness and creativity to problems or challenges outside of the library world. You will be amazed at what you can solve.

**Think big.** Sure, the typical librarian is an introvert, but that doesn't mean we should shy away from leadership roles. Increasingly, organizations operate with multiple, self-managed teams of independent knowledge workers. Soon to be gone are the days of massive organization hierarchy. This presents introverts a great leadership opportunity as they are more likely than extroverts or ego-driven leaders to let these teams chart their own course while providing the necessary mentorship, empowerment and development opportunities to keep them on track. No longer is it true that you have to be loud to lead.

**Remain curious.** I probably don't have to tell most librarians this, but it is possible to get complacent and even a little bored when you are well established in a position and everything seems to be relatively on track. So I will say it: always feed your curiosity. Never stop reading outside your profession. Challenge yourself with new ideas and different ways of thinking. Avoid the tendency to create an echo chamber of your own beliefs and knowledge by adding opposing minds to your Twitter feed or reading a blog about needlepoint when your fingers have never even made a stitch.

I am sure that there are many more actions to be listed here and I encourage all of us to keep thinking and talking about what these might be. My not-so-secret fantasy is that librarians will eventually infiltrate organizations far and wide. So the sooner we begin, the sooner this may be a reality, at least here in Oregon. 

