

Column Title: The Specialist

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Special libraries share concerns with their more general academic, public, and school counterparts, but they also have unique characteristics and concerns which merit separate consideration. Libraries of all types are evolving, and just as special libraries can learn from the general literature on libraries, practitioners in all types of libraries can learn from the experiences and best practices of special libraries. “The Specialist,” appearing in even-numbered issues of this journal, addresses the administrative concerns of special libraries. The column’s scope is a broad umbrella of specialized librarianship and includes corporate, non-profit, government, and independent libraries, as well as the specialized departments and branches of academic and public libraries. Contributions from practitioners and scholars on any aspect of special libraries are welcome. Interested authors are invited to contact the editor at tmurray@stamps.org for submission guidelines.

Contribution Title: Hidden Leadership in Small Special Libraries

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ABSTRACT. “The Specialist” addresses the administration of special libraries, however identifying the administrator of a small special library is problematic. In these small libraries within organizations, the librarian often works alone and the library is overseen by a non-librarian manager. In these cases, it is not as easy to identify or define the library’s administrator as it would be in a public or academic library, or even a larger special library. This column introduces a model where the administration of small special libraries is a collaboration between librarians and non-librarian managers. In this model, information professionals exercise hidden leadership and management skills without leading a staff or possessing a management title. The column also suggests ways information professionals without explicit management responsibilities in the workplace can develop these skills and apply them in their jobs.

KEYWORDS: special libraries, competencies, management, leadership, career paths, solo libraries, one-person libraries

INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges of writing about library administration from a special library perspective is identifying or defining the special library administrator. In even the smallest public or academic library, it is clear that one person, usually a professional librarian, is in charge of facilities, collections, budgets, and personnel, even if the collection is small and the personnel is limited to part-time staff or volunteers. This may be the case as well in some special libraries which are included in the scope of this column, such as the specialized branches or departments of academic libraries, independent libraries, or larger corporate libraries. The titles of these leaders may vary, including branch manager, library director, information services manager, and dean, among others, but the level of authority is clear. In the smaller special libraries of corporate or non-profit organizations, however, the role of library administrator is not as clear. In fact, many special libraries are “solo” or one-person libraries. This is demonstrated by the fact that within the Special Libraries Association (SLA), the Solo Librarians Division has been one of the most active units, providing those working alone with a network of colleagues and also a place to ask questions and get ideas.

These small special libraries are usually technically, if not overtly, overseen by non-librarians. Those managing a library alone, without staff, and reporting to a non-librarian likely do not consider themselves managers or administrators. The non-librarian manager controls the library’s budget and other resources and represents the library to the organization’s management team, leaving the information professional to do the day-to-day work of the library.

In these small, specialized libraries situated within non-library organizations, who really administers the library? Is it the librarian, though lacking a management job title or direct authority and often without any staff? Or is it the non-librarian under whose domain the library

falls? To answer these questions, we might consider that administration of a special library is in fact a responsibility shared by the librarian and the non-librarian manager. In an ideal model, the librarian can leverage his or her professional expertise to inform the manager about how the library can be most effective, and the manager can help the librarian understand how the library fits into overall organizational goals and priorities. To achieve this ideal, the challenge for the information professional is ensuring that this productive, two-way relationship exists, especially in cases where the non-librarian manager is not invested or actively involved in the library.

These solo professionals without management titles are indeed managing libraries, and leadership and management skills are crucial to their success. Though they may not lead a team or perform other traditional management activities, their hidden leadership is essential to a strong and successful library.

LEADING WITHOUT A TITLE

SLA's bimonthly journal, *Information Outlook*, dedicated its March/April 2017 issue to "Leading and Managing Libraries." The articles in the issue dedicated to leadership and management do not address typical management topics we might expect from similarly-themed issues for other audiences, such as leading teams of employees. Instead the topics include managing the outsourcing of library functions (Poot 2017) and managing solo libraries (Fite, Hysong, and Yang 2017). Leadership and management may have different connotations for special librarians than they do for other types of librarians, but that does not mean that they are unimportant.

Even for those who do not supervise a staff or have a management-level job title, in special libraries leadership and management skills are necessary. Editor Stuart Hales acknowledges this in his introduction to the issue: "No doubt some librarians may prefer not to

manage people, but running a library by oneself poses its own peculiar challenges, not the least the need to learn a wide variety of skills.” (2017, 1) The solo librarian manages a collection and services, and—even if a non-library manager is the one with a seat at the meetings and the ear of executive-level management—is responsible for assessing the value of the library and communicating that value to decision makers.

Special librarians manage many things in addition to, or even in place of, staff, budgets, and facilities. In many cases, information services have been outsourced, leaving the librarian to manage a contract with a remote team instead of managing a team of library employees. Though it differs from traditional management, managing this relationship requires just as much skill as managing an on-site team. The librarian must ensure the remote team understands organizational objectives and that end users are getting the support they need when they need it. The librarian must also work to make end users aware of the service being provided to them. When problems arise, the librarian must evaluate the outsourcing arrangement, and, even if he or she has little decision-making power in the organization, provide a recommendation for change with appropriate rationales.

Much has been written about the rate of change in information discovery, access, and delivery, and managing this change also requires skill. The librarian must not only stay abreast (or ahead) of changes in the information landscape, but must help reluctant end users to navigate these changes while keeping up with their primary job responsibilities.

Many special libraries are providing non-traditional services such as knowledge management, library as platform, and competitive intelligence. Again, introducing these services and ensuring their effectiveness requires leadership.

Writing about her own career experience, and the skills needed to be a successful solo librarian, Liz Fite, librarian and archivist at Mt. Cuba Center, a botanical garden near Wilmington, Delaware, asserts, “In addition to networking, training in project management should be required for everyone in our field, especially solo librarians.” (Fite, Hysong, and Yang 2017, 7) It is interesting to note that Fite sees project management as *more* essential for solo librarians than for other librarians. The information professional in a small special library needs leadership and management skills just as much as his or her counterparts in larger libraries, but the emphasis and the way these skills are applied will differ.

COLLABORATIVE LIBRARY ADMINISTRATION

Recognizing that non-librarians often control special libraries and the resources allocated to them, and that special libraries depend on the support of management, and not just library end users, in 2011 SLA invited C-suite level executives to its conference. The association offered a special registration rate and events for these non-librarian attendees. However well-intentioned, the experiment was apparently not successful enough to repeat. More recent efforts have turned instead to preparing information professionals to communicate directly with these executives on their own turf, in their own language, and in the context of organizational priorities. For example, in 2013 SLA collaborated with the business newspaper *Financial Times* to study the value of information professionals. (Financial Times Corporate 2013) The resulting report focused on encouraging information professionals to communicate their value to these executives and equipping them with the tools to do so. This approach recognizes that these executives are unlikely to attend library conferences or read the library literature, and that it is incumbent on the information professional to communicate this value upward within the organization.

Since the publication of the SLA/FT report, numerous articles have promoted the idea of aligning library services with organizational goals and communicating the value of these services to upper management. (See, for example, Anderson 2014a, 2014b; Murray 2013b; Van Boetzelaer 2016; Vilches 2017.) When thinking about determining and communicating the value of libraries in the context of organizational goals and priorities, it is important to note that these goals and priorities are rarely static. Successful organizations are constantly evaluating and adjusting their priorities. In turn, the successful information professional will, even if he or she does not have a management-level position, strive to stay informed of these shifts and align library services with them. “The adage ‘knowledge is power’ applies not only to what information professionals have to offer, but also what they stand to gain by tuning in to an organization’s key drivers.” (Van Boetzelaer 2016, 6) Most special librarians will need to work proactively to stay abreast of these drivers. This work might include reading available documents—those for internal audiences, but also those documents intended for external audiences, such as investors; participating in meetings; and engaging stakeholders in informal discussions. (Van Boetzelaer 2016) For those without management titles, access to information and audiences cannot be taken for granted. It might be necessary to seek out or request documents, to ask to be invited to meetings, and to get outside of the library to talk to active or potential library users and decision makers in the organization.

Most library administrators eventually report to someone who is not a librarian—a college president, a corporate executive, or a government official, for instance—but in the case of the small special library, the librarian is often far removed from upper management, and the library is a relatively small part of the larger organization. Imperiled as academic and public libraries may feel or be these days, their traditional position within their respective communities

is not in doubt. We expect cities and universities to have libraries as part of their infrastructure, and not having them is considered outside of the norm. This expectation does not exist within other types of organizations, and in fact the concept of the special library is comparatively recent, dating back only a little more than a century (Murray 2013a). It stands to reason, then, that special librarians need to be savvy leaders to ensure the continued existence of their libraries.

ACQUIRING LEADERSHIP SKILLS

For many information professionals, leadership and management will be new skills, or skills in need of practice. In his editor's introduction to the *Information Outlook* issue dedicated to "Leading and Managing Libraries," Stuart Hales writes:

Managing a library frequently means managing people—mostly other librarians, but also administrative staff, volunteers, students, and so on. The challenges of managing people are as varied as the people themselves, yet few librarians receive any formal training in managing people. The consequences of this void can be dramatic: a 2015 survey of roughly 1,400 employees by U.K.-based B2B Marketplace found that more than 40 percent had left a job because of a bad boss. (2017, 1)

If the typical librarians' training does not adequately prepare them for management responsibilities, then how can special librarians acquire these critical skills? In larger library systems, entry-level librarians have the opportunity to learn these skills from their supervisors and mentors, but such opportunities do not exist in small special libraries. Though an information professional in such a situation may have access to strong non-librarian leaders within the

organization, the relationship is not the same as that with a fellow librarian. Where the library is a small piece of an organization focusing on something other than information—manufacturing or advertising, for example—the librarian is not usually viewed as an employee with potential for internal promotion and advancement, and thus the organization does not invest in leadership or management training for that employee or provide opportunities to practice these skills.

Luckily there are many opportunities for the information professional who is willing to invest in himself or herself to acquire these skills outside of the workplace:

Conferences. Recognizing that leadership and management skills are in demand, most library conferences dedicate at least some programming to helping attendees gain or hone these skills. For example, SLA's annual conference includes a leadership stream, and the association is hosting a leadership symposium in 2018.

Webinars. In between conferences, or for those who are unable to travel to conferences, there are an increasing number of webinars, both free and fee-based, on a wide variety of topics. Information professionals may even look beyond those geared specifically to librarians for general skills like project management or running a meeting.

Volunteering. As helpful as conference sessions and seminars may be, there is no substitute for real experience. For those who do not get this experience on the job, or those who want to be more prepared for their first on-the-job leadership experiences, volunteering can be a relatively safe way to practice. Opportunities abound within library associations at the national, regional, and local levels. With the advent of virtual meeting technology, travel is often not a requirement to volunteer even for a national association. There are also many non-library organizations where one can learn applicable skills. Consider joining a community organization's board or working with a non-profit on a fundraising event. Many communities

even offer programs for those interested in gaining leadership skills. The skills learned through these experiences, like event planning, leading or influencing a group you do not directly supervise, and project management, are eminently transferrable to the library. In fact, volunteer leadership is similar to the hidden leadership practiced by the solo information professional, as in a volunteer situation the leader rarely has direct authority over those he or she is attempting to lead. Rather than applying negative consequences or offering concrete rewards, the volunteer must follow an influencing model of leadership.

Previous experience. Many librarians are on their second or even third career. Even if the librarian's current position does not include management, he or she may have a previous management experience to draw on. Just because the experience was not directly information-related does not mean it cannot be applied in an information setting.

CONCLUSION

In an exploratory study looking at whether librarians at Ohio State University (OSU) had prior experience in public or special libraries, it is interesting to note that five of the eight librarians in the study who had previously worked in non-academic libraries had landed in managerial or administrative positions at OSU. (Franks 2017, 18) It is tempting to conclude that these librarians with experience in special libraries were more inclined toward, or more qualified for, managerial positions because of their special library experience, though the study is too small and lacking in contextual information (such as the number of years of total librarianship experience for those who had worked outside academia) to draw any firm conclusions. The author published a broader study with a larger pool of respondents, but this subsequent study lacked any information about what kinds of positions in academic or public libraries those with

special library experience transitioned into. (Franks 2016) Nevertheless, as we have seen, leadership skills will help the special librarian be successful.

In lists of the skills required to be a librarian in the twenty-first century, people skills nearly always appear, along with technology skills and adaptability to change. (Kenney 2013; Cragg and Birkwood 2011) Management and administration skills do not often make the cut, even though they are essential for many special library jobs. Management skills are not even included in the Special Libraries Association's new report on professional competencies published in 2016 (although "leadership, management, and project management" are included as "enabling" competencies shared by professionals in other fields). (Special Libraries Association 2016)

Some level of management skills will benefit nearly every information professional. Just as most library and information science graduate programs require all students to take introductory cataloging and reference courses, regardless of their planned specialties, many also require a management course. Wise students would do well to continue developing these skills throughout their career. Writing about where their respective library schools prepared them well and where they felt their education and training was lacking, two librarians said that "[w]hile the majority of librarians never reach upper administration, at some point most librarians will find themselves in the position to supervise people and manage resources. ... Whether one is responsible for a library, a department, or just their own work, planning is a valuable skill for a librarian." (Spillers and Bates 1990, 221) Although both authors landed in academic library positions, the advice rings true for special librarians as well.

Eventually all library administrators report or are otherwise accountable to non-librarians, whether they are members of a library board, local government officials, or a university provost.

“Top administrators appear to have absolute decision making power but the reality is that every leader is in the middle and is accountable to another level of decision making or power.” (Farrell 2014, 691) However, most special librarians have less autonomy and report more directly to non-librarian managers, putting them at a farther remove from the organization’s top level of administration than public or academic library administrators.

Because the need for information spans the entire organization, it is often the case that the library is situated in one department within the organization but receives requests from many departments with different functions throughout the organization. For example, the library might be administered by the research branch of the organization, but also receive requests from the marketing department. Early in my career, I served as the librarian for an engineering firm. I reported to the head of the process engineering department because the majority of the library’s collection consisted of product catalogs and manuals, but many of my requests for information came from architects looking for building codes or environmental engineers looking for federal grants. Even though my role was in no way managerial, I found it important to marshal the support of these various departments to demonstrate the value of the library, or perhaps more accurately, the librarian, since the majority of the resources I used to answer these questions were not located in my library’s collection.

This type of hidden leadership is important for the special librarian, and contrary to what many believe, most essential to those working alone in small special libraries. As the special library environment continues to evolve, and information professionals increasingly turn to alternative models for providing information, such as embedded librarianship and consulting, these skills will only become more important. Leadership and management should be

emphasized in the training and preparation of special librarians, and honed throughout the information professional's career.

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