

HOW TO STAY FIRED UP IN TIMES OF CHANGE

by Sara Tompson

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Abstract

Ms. Tompson discusses strategies for staying on top of the change curve and enjoying it! Drawing from recent professional literature, as well as anecdotes from colleagues, she will present suggestions for keeping up to date and “fired up” as information professionals in a rapidly changing world.

SPEECH

Change is Rampant

Hi! I’m here to talk to you about Changes! Its time to “turn and face the [strain]”(with apologies to David Bowie!)¹. Today I hope to give you some tips for facing right into Change! Change can be a strain. But don’t let Change be a stranger, you can manage and work with Change, rather than letting Change manage you!

Thank you to Lian Ruan and to everyone of inFIRE for inviting me to speak at this annual conference! Our Library is a new member of inFIRE this year, so I am especially pleased to be here. I have been a special librarian for about 15 years, since I received my Masters in Library and Information Science from the University of Illinois. I have always worked in physical science and/or engineering libraries. Working with a collection that has a significant portion dedicated to fire and arson topics is new to me, and I am grateful to be learning more about the topics from other inFIRE members.

As I noted in this morning’s roundtable, I am currently the Library Director at Packer Engineering, a multidisciplinary consulting engineering firm. Our engineers do failure analysis, accident investigations and reconstruction, cause and origin investigations, product safety and liability studies, and provide other services to industry and business. We have increased our fire-related business in the past year, especially with the addition of a fire investigator to our group of chemical and process engineers. If you did not get a copy of our Packer Fire Investigations brochure this morning, I’ve brought some along this afternoon!

We all know we are in a time of rapid change, both globally and in our profession. In some ways I think rapid change can be harder for us to deal with in our professional than in our personal lives. It seems more natural — at least to me! — for personal, family life to be hectic and changing than for our jobs to be so. Lyndon Pugh, a British library and information science researcher, has said that our profession has, “...always represented a stable and perhaps unchanging mien, and maybe it has been a little slow to take up some of the innovative approaches to management”². Consistency and regularity in thesauri, cataloging, etc., have after all been hallmarks of our profession. Attention to detail is typically a good thing in librarianship, but the down side can be the clinging to old details when new paradigms are really necessary.

In his recent text *Change Management in Information Services*, Pugh makes a statement earlier on that sort of denies his title! He notes that, “We cannot predict the form of the challenges that will face libraries. So it is not a case of **managing** change. It is more a matter of organising ourselves to cope with anything that might come along” (p. 2). I think this is the key — **flexibility** — the ability to quickly change gears and deal with what comes along.

Pugh maintains that typical library automation, at least early on, “...had arguably little impact outside the boundaries of the conventional housekeeping systems [the automated systems] it replaced.” He adds that, “...it took the collision of a number of ideas about technology and other issues in the mid-to-late 1980s to begin to produce holistic change as a result of technology” (p. 1).

I agree. I think the rise of digital library resources is the main catalyst that brought change to our profession. Last summer — for a chapter on digital libraries that will be out soon in the 8th ed. of the British *Handbook of Information Management* — a colleague and I surveyed a number of librarians in the US and the UK on how digital library resources had affected them and their staff. One significant change noted by our respondents was this: staff responsibilities had been increased with the addition of digital resources.

It seems that the more digital resources, the more we have to learn, and strive to keep up! While we may be able to almost instantaneously download standards as PDF files for our customers, we also raise their expectations for lightening-speed turnaround. That is still not always possible! Often, the material is not available electronically (an increasing problem), or we have other priorities that must be juggled first, and we are already overloaded with juggling material!

A number of articles on “technostress” have appeared in the library literature. I agree with Katie Clark and Sally Kalin, who state in their August 1996 *Library Journal* article that: “What many regard as technostress is really resistance to change”³. The iconic Michael Gorman has an article “Technostress and Library Values” in the latest issue of *Library Journal*. Here Gorman takes his familiar stance of cautioning against being too quick to embrace technology, noting that. “Increasingly the transition from automation to digitization results in a discontinuity in which the tool becomes larger and more important than the service”⁴. In some sense he is in the “turning one’s back on change” camp, but later I will note some of his good points on dealing with technostress and change.

There is significant literature on librarians’ reluctance to embrace change. Much of the literature focuses on public library settings, but doubtless this issue affects many in specialised library settings like ours. Many information professionals (managers as well as staff) value order and stability. The rapid pace of change in the digital age can be upsetting and render librarians unable to proactively deal with the myriad of digital services potentially available and the impact they inevitably have on library operations and services.

In his June 2000 column for *Information Outlook*, SLA's Executive Director David Bender makes a practical point, noting that:

“... change, like knowledge, is something that can't be completely 'managed.' We can jump in the saddle and ride with it, we can be run over by it, or we can be dragged kicking and screaming along with it. And maybe in either scenario, we can say we are 'managing change.' In the end, though, change always occurs, just as time cannot be stopped.”⁵ Or, to paraphrase Bowie again: “time [WILL] change me, but I can't trace time”!

How Do We, Enthusiastically, Ride the Change Wave?

So, how do we deal with change instead of letting change deal with us? And how do we go one step better, and stay fired up, that is to say, enthused, as we ride the change curve? Well, I have gleaned some ideas to share with you, and if we have time at the end, I hope to hear some of your ideas!

I hope some of you have already heard of the Special Libraries Association's “Competencies for Librarians of the 21st Century.”⁶ Developed in 1996 by a sterling panel of SLA members, the competencies are still vital and valuable. My colleagues and I use them as part of the framework of the special libraries administration course we teach at Dominican University every year, and we do not anticipate ceasing to use them any time soon. Several of the SLA competencies relate to change, and others suggest ways to proactively work with change. I want to take a few minutes to review these competencies, as I think they are a key tool for staying fired up in times of change.

SLA Competency 1.10 states: “The special librarian continually improves information services in response to changing needs.” Your customers' needs are changing just as rapidly as are your resources, and if you cannot respond to their information needs, you could be without a job!

2.2 says that “The special librarian seeks out challenges and sees new opportunities both inside and outside the library.” This is both about change and how to address it - be being proactive and thinking beyond the usual confines.

2.13 is really key regarding change: “The special librarian is flexible and positive in a time of continuing change.” The illustration of this competency provides some practical ideas on how to be flexible (there's that favorite word of mine again!) and positive. It reads:

“The special librarian is:

- Willing to take on different responsibilities at different points in time and to respond to changing needs.
- Maintains a positive attitude and helps others to do the same.
- Never says it cannot be done.
- Looks for solutions.
- Helps others to develop their new ideas by providing appropriate information.
- Always on the lookout for new ideas.
- Sees and uses technology as an enabler of new information ideas, products and services.”

Some of the other competencies that provide some answers to cheerful change dealing include:

- 2.11 – “The special librarian has personal business skills and creates new opportunities.” The illustration of this competency notes such an information professional: “Recognizes that, in the changing world of work, entrepreneurship and the ability to function as a small business professional are essential skills.”
- 2.6 – “The special librarian has effective communications skills.” Without good communication skills, an information professional cannot well serve her or his customers, let alone work well with staff, colleagues and management!
- 2.3 – “The special librarian sees the big picture.” If, as the illustration suggests, you, “monitor major business trends and world events [and] anticipate trends and pro-actively realign library and information services to take advantage of them,” you will be riding at the top of the wave of change!
- Last but not least, competency 2.12 – “The special librarian recognizes the value of professional networking and solidarity.” That is why we are all here today! To learn from each other and grow. Our profession is fantastic for sharing problems and solutions with each other and that is one of the things I most value in being a librarian!

The competencies are available on SLA's web site at www.sla.org if you want to read further. Moving on, here are some more suggestions for how to deal well with change.

In a recent issue of the SLA's journal *Information Outlook*, Steven Denning was interviewed about using **storytelling** as a device to forward change. The effectiveness of **narrative** in presenting ideas in a popular theory these days, in our profession and in business circles. As a former English major, I am all for storytelling!

Denning advocates “springboard” stories that, literally, spring the listener to a new level of understanding. These stories are always about a single individual— in other words, a hero or heroine. In the story, the heroine is in a predicament, and to have the story and the change idea it presents resonate in an organization, the predicament should be one that is typical in that organization. The idea is that the story is a bit of a moral, or a metaphor, and the listener can picture her or himself in such a situation, and then play with ways to deal with the predicament.

Here's an illustration, including some excitement and heroics (!) which I pieced together from several colleagues' stories:

One of the engineers needed a standard right away, and I was working late to find it for him fulltext online. Once I retrieved it, I sent it to the large, workhorse network printer, since it was several hundred pages. No way could the library printer handle it within the engineer's brief timeframe! I hastened down the three flights of stairs to that printer, and discovered to my dismay that someone else was working late! One of the administrative assistants was making 35 copies of a 75-page report for a 7:30 am management meeting. I knew I could not ask her to interrupt her work, as she was also under the gun. Trudging back upstairs, I wondered how to handle this? Print out the report in sections to our small, slow printer? That would probably work, but it would take a good deal of time, and my daughter was already waiting for me to pick her up from flute lessons.

Then it hit me! The company has hired me in part to bring more electronic processes online. The CEO is enamored of technology, and knew enough to know it could be used more effectively in the library. So why not deliver the standard electronically? I compressed the file with the company's standard zip program, then e-mailed the document, as well as the unzip utility, to the engineer at both his work and his home e-addresses. He'd mentioned he'd be working at home that night after he left the office. In the cover message, I said that I thought he might want to have a copy of the full document himself, so he could share it with the client in full or in part, as well as extract sections from it for his report without having his secretary retype them. I was getting ready to logoff, hoping he'd be pleased, wondering if I should wait around. Ding! Incoming mail! He was ecstatic, thanked me profusely, and copied the CEO! Whew! Nothing like pressure to force innovation!

Denning makes a really good point towards the end of the interview about storytelling. He says: "...I would say that libraries and information professionals will be facing the challenge of sustained and profound change in the coming decade and beyond. So, [SLA] members either can be leaders and helpful in communicating and facilitating needed change, or they can be part of the problem and try to keep things the way they are."

Practical change management, according to British author Lyndon Pugh, whom I cited earlier, requires new skills. He says: "The present core of professional skills will shrink" (p. 12) and we must all adopt: "...skills relevant to practical change management —

- Team working
- Social interaction
- Problem-solving
- Conflict resolution" (p. 98)

In his article from this month, Michael Gorman says: "We can achieve harmony and balance in our work if we concentrate on two things: an understanding of the evolutionary history of our profession and of technology and a collective belief in our central and unchanging values" (p. 50). He reiterates the values cited in his enduring values text recently published by ALA:

- Democracy
- Stewardship
- Service
- Intellectual Freedom
- Privacy
- Commitment to Literacy and Learning
- Rationalism, and
- Equity of Access⁷.

Roy Tennant, the founder of the Web4Lib discussion list and a columnist for *Library Journal*, has said that the most important management decision is, "...hiring staff for the new millennium." In his list of personality traits for librarians in the new century, he notes one in particular for managers: "Skill at enabling and fostering change - since change is constant, organizations need staff who can guide it, using judgement and communicating well"⁸.

Tennant also notes my favorite, flexibility, as a key trait for staff dealing with digital resources and services, adding that staff, "...most likely won't be doing the same thing for long."

I have been consciously trying to practice "just-in-time" rather than "just-in-case" librarianship since at least the mid-1990s, and I think this approach is another way to stay flexible and more easily change one's services to meet customers' changing needs. The just-in-time, or JIT approach, as many of you probably know, comes from the retail distribution arena, and was pioneered in the 1980s by Sam Walton of Walmart, and others. An article in the December 2000 issue of *Purchasing* magazine gives a decent overview of the practice⁹. I think Jan Ison, the Director of the Lincoln Trail Libraries System in central Illinois, was the first person I heard using this concept applied to library service in the automation, if not digital age, and it struck me as so functional.

The concept is this: providing materials (and services, too, especially in the case of libraries) **just** when the customers need them, **not** "warehousing" materials **in case** they need them some day. To further illustrate, to me this means being very judicious on what one purchases to actually sit on one's library shelves — only purchase materials that are likely to be used again and again. If a resource in a very specialized topic is needed for a project and it is unlikely the parent organization will get involved in the topic again, get the material on loan, and return it when done with it. A number of interlibrary loan transactions, even including the overhead of staff salaries, can be performed before reaching the cost of purchasing many types of specialized, and therefore usually expensive, materials.

JIT is clearly cost-effective, which is important in special libraries. Furthermore, if one focuses on this connecting of one's customers' with the information they request and thus need, rather than collecting materials in areas in which they **may** be interested at some point, one can more easily change one's mindset and approach. You won't have to trash a specialized collection development policy and rebuild if you maintain a broad but not very deep set of shelf resources, and access as many other resources as possible electronically and/or on loan.

In closing, I want to quote outgoing SLA Executive Director David Bender again. In that June 2000 column mentioned earlier, he offers two good approaches for dealing with change:

- Life-Long Learning, and
- Communication.

Regarding life-long learning, he says: "Fear (which many of us experience as a result of change), is the result of ignorance, meaning the condition of being uneducated, unaware, or uninformed." Therefore fear is the result of being uneducated. Education can overcome fear. Communication is a key part of learning and overcoming fear. Bender notes: "fear of change will occur unless we are informed and aware."

I hope this talk has communicated some ideas to you today, to help you overcome fear and turn around and look change right in the face! Thank you very much!

Notes

1. Bowie, David. 1971. "Changes" Lyrics:
<http://www.teenagewildlife.com/Albums/HD/C.html>
2. Pugh, Lyndon. 2000. *Change Management in Information Services*. (Aldershot, UK: Gower Publishing, 2000), p. 1.
3. Clark, Katie and Sally Kalin. 1996. "Technostressed Out? How to Cope in the Digital Age." *Library Journal* (August 1996), p. 31.
4. Gorman, Michael. 2001. "Technostress and Library Values." *Library Journal* 126:7 (April 15, 2001), p 49.
5. Bender, David. 2000. Executive Outlook Column: "Change and the Information Professional." *Information Outlook* 4:6 (June 2000), p. 5.
6. "Competencies for Special Librarians of the 21st Century." 1996. Submitted to the SLA Board of Directors by the Special Committee on Competencies for Special Librarians Joanne Marshall, Chair; Bill Fisher; Lynda Moulton; and Roberta Piccoli. Full Report May 1996. On the Web at:
<http://www.sla.org/content/professional/meaning/competency.cfm>
7. Gorman, Michael. 2000. *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, ALA Editions, 2000).
8. Tennant, Roy. "The Most Important Management Decision: Hiring Staff for the New Millennium." *Library Journal* 123 (February 15, 1998), p. 102.
9. Milligan, Brian. 2000. "JIT Works, But Still Has Bugs." *Purchasing* 129:11 (Dec. 22 2000), p. 23-34.

Biographical Sketch

Sara Tompson is a graduate of the Library and Information Science School at the University of Illinois, and an adjunct faculty member of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Dominican University. She has worked in physical sciences and/or engineering settings since receiving her Master's in 1987, currently serving as Library Director at Packer Engineering, a consulting firm in Naperville, IL. The Packer Engineering Library is an inFire member. Tompson is Past-President of the Illinois chapter of the Special Libraries Association (SLA) and Secretary-Elect of the Engineering Division of SLA. She is the author of numerous articles and a book chapter on digital libraries forthcoming in the ASLIB (British) *Handbook of Information Management*.