

## Change It Up: Growing Your Career in a Wildly Different Organization

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# Change It Up: Growing Your Career in a Wildly Different Organization

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## Abstract:

The authors have worked in academic libraries (large and small, public and private); for library vendors; and in public libraries of varying sizes. This paper discusses their perspectives on the opportunities, surprises, and lessons learned via a substantial change in organizational type, structure, and/or size. In addition, ideas for evaluating job applicants with experience in a much different setting are provided.

## Paths to Today

*Tina:* I've been a technical services librarian throughout my career, in public libraries of varying sizes, in a regional service center that served all types of libraries, and in academia. For nine years, I was the technical services librarian at a small, private university with a full-time equivalent (FTE) of 4,700. The library had 15 employees and a technical services department of four. I worked with monographic materials in all formats, including acquisitions, cataloging, and record-loading, plus heavy involvement with the integrated library system (ILS) and the discovery layer.

Toward the end of those nine years, I knew that job inside and out, as well as much of the work of my fellow tech services librarians, but there were gaps in my knowledge and experience. Therefore, when I started looking for a new position, I sought out significant learning, growth, and a new kind of environment rather than a larger version of what I had.

I am now an electronic resources librarian at a very large state university, with a total student population of 63,000 and an FTE of about 39,000. There are differences between my current institution and previous ones, but my past experience—in different types and sizes of libraries—has prepared me well for this job.

*Betsy:* My early career experience is mostly in a large academic library. I spent four years learning basic electronic resource librarianship skills, including licensing and state contracting and procurement, acquisitions, knowledge base management, and managing work flow among several positions in a variety of different departments.

I gained soft skills such as organizational leadership from the middle: I was accountable for processes that required the actions of colleagues. The scope of job was narrow, as I only completed portions of the electronic resources life cycle myself. However, the scale of the job was enormous. I had responsibilities for nearly 1,000 databases, all e-book collections, and all streaming media. I negotiated or re-negotiated about 80 to 90 licenses a year.

I was ready for change for two reasons. First, I outgrew the narrow scope of the position. Inspired by the NASIG Core Competencies for Electronic Resources Librarians, I realized that I had no write-access to systems in this position. If I wanted to focus my career in electronic resources, I required more experience in those systems than I could gain in a narrowly scoped position. Second, I outgrew being the only remote staff member in the organization. I moved to Austin four years into my six at this Virginia organization. This move initially provided me with more to learn in terms of communication and management skills, but eventually the energy required to preclude isolation was considerable.

*Carol:* In graduate school, I worked on retrospective/reclassification projects and union listing as the library world moved to machine-readable cataloging (MARC) and Online Computer Library Center (OCLC). This helped me learn about the cataloging as I matched up cards to records, traced back serials, and how to do complex holdings. This early training set me up extremely well for everything I've done since. Having the knowledge of how the base works enabled me to easily translate this to search skills and automation skills.

I have worked in public, academic-medical, consortia, and vendor. I have worked in cataloging, serials, acquisitions, automation, circulation, reference, and training. In each job, I picked up new skills and knowledge and built upon the knowledge I had. Most moves I've made in my career path have been lateral. I have repeated jobs a few times, working for the same company, library, or consortia more than once. Never burn the bridge!

## Opportunities at Larger Institutions

*Betsy:* Bureaucracy sometimes works in your favor. Written, official policies can preclude confusion and promote consistency. For example, the flexible work policies in the large, overarching organization provided me the opportunity to telework once a week. Even though it was no secret that the library administration disliked telework in theory, they benefited from it in practice.

I had the opportunity to become an expert and a specialist. I learned licensing, negotiating, and budget management under ideal educational conditions: A large budget, a team of lawyers ready to assist me, and a wealth of knowledge from a fabulous accounts payable office.

*Tina:* Coming from a technical services department of four, I'm happy to have so many more colleagues, both in my department and across the universities' libraries. In addition, we're part of a statewide consortia, so there are colleagues at the other institutions as well as at our consortia hub. My small university library was independent and without strong connections to other libraries, so creating relationships with colleagues at other institutions was an individual pursuit.

The second opportunity that I'd like to mention is as much a product of institutional culture as size. There is an expectation that we will present and publish if we want to get promoted. Even for those uninterested in promotion, you're expected and encouraged to pursue professional development and to serve on university and external committees. The professional development, scholarship, and service that I pursued at the small university was due to my own initiative and encouragement from a couple colleagues. There was no encouragement from the institution and not much from library administration.

## Opportunities at Smaller Institutions

*Tina:* At the small library, I enjoyed being able to work a whole process from start to finish and improve it until it was efficient and accomplished all the goals. For example, I could help the collection development librarian acquire a collection of e-books, write the load table for MARC records, load those records, handle the invoice, and track what we purchased. I knew when we needed to create new item types to reflect new formats and when we needed a new vendor record in the ILS and in the university's ERP system, and I could make all those things happen. I saw the whole process through, and that was very satisfying to me.

On the flip side, in my first years at the small library, I was expected to do reference and be heavily involved in instruction in addition to my technical services roles. That let me see how things worked and gain perspective and experience, but ultimately, it left me spread too thin. As our electronic collections grew, I had to step away from public service in order to do justice to my primary responsibilities because I was the only person who could do that work. In a small institution, there's a constant need for people to fulfill a variety of roles. That presents an opportunity but also a risk if you're not monitoring yourself.

*Betsy:* There is less hierarchy. I can just do things. For example, in my first month, I negotiated, ordered, paid, and activated a new resource *in three days*. That is unheard of in a larger public organization and essentially impossible due to contracting guidelines and the number of people required to handle each document.

Fewer people need to come to consensus for decisions, so I have more control regarding my work. For example, I made a unilateral decision to change the way we reported print usage data recently. It required communication to the three people *after* I made the decision.

## Opportunities with Vendors

*Carol:* There are several types of vendors. Consortia could be considered "vendor-light"—several consortia exist to help libraries. They are often very small-staffed and tightly budgeted. EBSCO is the only vendor that has the position I have: Account

services. My job is to ensure the customers are getting what they need, to prevent and/or resolve any issues, and to train and provide detail on all the services that come with your purchase. EBSCO, and other vendors, also have trainers, catalogers, technical support, and developers.

Generally, you have more resources with a vendor, but you must be able to justify why you need that resource. In every corporate environment, you have structure and policies. I tend to have to do more reporting, such as expense reports and notes about what happened with a meeting or issue, than I did in any library.

I am both a generalist and a specialist. I need to know the requirements for different types of libraries in different states. Additionally, I need to have a broader knowledge of libraries in general and how my piece fits into their library.

You are your company. When I visit a customer or see someone at a convention, they see EBSCO rather than me as an individual.

Most vendors encourage their staff, especially librarians, to be active in library organizations. I am always seeking out ways I can participate by serving on committees or speaking at conferences.

### **Changes in Moving From Small to Large**

*Betsy:* Expect communication changes. Things you decided and ran with may need to be studied by a task force. For example, when I started at the larger institution, I made what I thought was a slight change to a fund designation for journal packages to better align them with a usage metric I wanted to use. That change confused several colleagues across many departments. I ended up rolling it back.

Seek out all departments, and find out what they do. A great supervisor had our department interview every other department in the library. I highly recommend this in any new environment, regardless of size or type. It helped me understand what others do and how my position fit.

*Tina:* At a small place, you run into everyone every day. In a large place, you have to make an effort to know colleagues who are outside your department because you're less likely to interact with them.

Likewise, at my large library, a lot happens that I don't know about. I need to make an effort to be aware of events, even at a superficial level. At the small library, I knew about most of what was going on because almost everything came up at every meeting, and almost everyone attended every meeting.

Another significant change for me has been adjusting to the size and the scope of the libraries' collections and of the variety of what's being studied at the institution. It dwarfs anything I've known before.

### **Changes in Moving From Large to Small**

*Tina:* In a smaller institution, you may have fewer resources. Here are three examples:

- You may not have a legal department to help with contracts.
- You may not have scholarly communications support. My small library often struggled with copyright and fair use questions.
- You may have to serve on a search committee every year. In nine years, I was on nine or 10 search committees, and I chaired most of them, with very little human resources guidance or support. I had quite an opportunity to choose my colleagues, and I learned a lot about crafting a good cover letter and resume, but the time commitment was overwhelming.

*Betsy:* There is less need for consensus among your colleagues to make decisions or changes. If the decision is in your area and doesn't directly impact someone else's day-to-day routines, just do it. When you complete a process from start to finish, no one really cares about the "how" as long as it is done well.

You will be asked to do things that in a larger institution would have been fielded by experts. At the large organization, there was a chemistry liaison librarian with a master's in chemistry and a wealth of expertise. In the smaller organization, I'm the natural sciences liaison, and when asked to teach a series of chemistry research classes, I'm the one who has to deliver. This can be daunting, but it is also fun. I'm learning more about instruction than I would have if I had remained in a larger institution.

## Changes in Moving From Library to Vendor

*Carol:* Depending on the position, you may be working in an office or at home. You may also be traveling a great deal. You need to feel secure with traveling alone and staying in a variety of hotels. With working from home or on the road, you need to be able to work independently. You need to be comfortable being alone. You need to be self-disciplined, organized, and have follow-through.

If you work for any vendor in any aspect, you are part of sales. You represent your company wherever you go and whatever you do in the library community (posting on list-servs or serving on committees). You need to be cognizant and act accordingly.

Then, of course, is the corporate environment. It moves rather faster than the academic library. Decisions are much quicker, and changes in structure occur often. Be flexible and adaptable.

## Transitioning to a Different Type

*Tina:* For technical services positions, I think transitioning to a different type of library is about skills and being willing to learn new ways to apply those skills. If you know, for instance, cataloging, acquisitions, or e-resource management, then you can do that in another type of library. The priorities will differ, and the types of resources you'll work with will differ, but the skills transfer. Your task is to ask questions about the priorities and about the larger context until you're fluent in your new environment. Don't assume that you know what is important.

*Carol:* Just like moving from one type of library to another, when applying to work for a vendor, all the skills you learned in the library will be useful. When I got my job at the medical library, I had no medical experience. I did have lots of experience training. I had all sorts of technical skills as well as search skills. The director wanted someone who had this. She didn't worry that I had never searched medical databases and did not know the terminology. She said, and I agree, if you know *how* to search, you can learn the terminology. Working for a vendor, my inside knowledge from working in a variety of libraries and positions has helped tremendously in understanding and communication with customers.

*Betsy:* I made the case for remote work at a time that made a lot of sense for both me and my organization. Among the things that made it work:

1. We clearly delineated responsibilities in a formal agreement, such as working hours, equipment, who-pays-for-what, and back-up technologies that would be used should something break.
2. I quickly and proactively addressed the minor resistance to my working off-site by modeling the behavior/habits I wanted my on-site colleagues to adopt. If someone didn't want to bother me during my working hours, I made a point to contact them the way they should have contacted me.
3. Focus on the advantages to the organization. I didn't get snow days when there were blizzards at that university, so there was some continuity of operations during closures each winter. We also became accidental experts in videoconferencing technologies, which enabled our consortia partners to attend more meetings without unnecessary travel.
4. Stick to your scheduled hours as much as you can. Resist the urge to finish a loose end that you would have left for tomorrow if you were on-site, or you may burn out and create impossible expectations for yourself.

Observations for going back to on-site work:

1. Remind yourself to talk to your colleagues. The email-the-person-next-door impulse was *very* strong the first few months. Resist it!
2. It takes some time to get used to the rhythms of working in an office again. For example, if your kitchen is steps away from your home office, you may not realize you graze all day.
3. I learned how to ignore office drama while working remotely. Now that I habitually stopped caring about that stuff, I still don't take it personally.

## Evaluating Applicants With a Very Different Background

*Tina:* I've changed types and size of libraries a few times. So why did my current library recognize my potential while other search committees seemed spooked by a candidate who was coming from a different kind of place? For example, in my latest job search, I interviewed with a big research library who obviously didn't want someone who wasn't coming from a big research library. I interviewed at an urban public that was uneasy about someone who wasn't currently at an urban public, even though I'd done that in earlier years. This isn't to say that I was the perfect candidate for either of those jobs, but it came through clearly in the interviews that my immediate background in a different kind of institution was an issue. I think that there is a natural bias toward people who are like you, and it's worth making a conscious decision about whether that's a valid or necessary filter, every time you fill a position.

Look for someone who has seized opportunities to learn and grow beyond the basic definition of their

job title, and who can engage with you in a discussion about the work even if the details are different. Many of my experiences at the small library and in my public library life have translated very well to my current position. I think having people with different work experiences is as valuable as having people who are diverse in other ways.

*Betsy:* The smaller institution isn't as different from the larger institution as it sometimes thinks it is. I've had to disprove assumptions that I wouldn't be able to achieve success in contract negotiation without a large budget. I know how to ask for what we want in a way that a vendor can deliver, thanks to my expertise gained at the larger institution. Let's strike "cultural fit" from our vocabularies. New staff should not "fit" in our libraries. We extend the organizational culture in a new and useful way. Will the candidate you are considering bring something that your organizational culture is currently missing? For more thoughts about this idea, see Meredith Farkas's September 2015 blog post about this topic.

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