

EMERGING CHALLENGES

Tense, nervous headache? Relax, you're a librarian!



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Usually this column is edited by myself or invited guest editors. This time I'm proud to reprint a blog post over which I stumbled by chance. It's a wonderful piece from Sarah Stamford. Even if this text was posted on the blog on 18 June 2011, I believe it is still very valuable for coping with stress. Oliver Obst

We've reached the end of another academic year. The library is silent, the desks abandoned, just the piles (and piles, and piles) of paper, odd socks and dried up felt pens remain to remind us of the exam period. A colleague told me recently her GP had identified that her blood pressure was too high and asked her what she did for a living. As she replied, he looked at the reading from her cuff and said "As soon as you started talking about your job I noticed your blood pressure shot up".

Now, you're thinking, surely running a Library can't be stressful? It's not like being a surgeon, or a social worker, or even a top footballer, any of whom would know a lot more about being under pressure than a librarian. So, what creates stress in our job? Here are a few thoughts, based on my experience at Cambridge. Is it to do with expectations? It seems to me that librarians exhibit two characteristics. We are organisers, and at heart we remain perfectionists, Kontrolmeisters obliged to operate systems which have to be 100% consistent and accurate. Then we are also descended from generations of Keepers of the Knowledge; so we're disappointed when our collection fails to supply a key book for an eager student, or get him into the online Ohio Journal of Tagmemics or whatever. Especially if he departs saying "It's cool, I'll use Google instead".

Keeping up with our professional development can be daunting. "Live in multiple worlds", "Re-invent your career", "Find out what your stakeholders value", "Benchmark your service". Librarianship is changing faster than Wayne Rooney's hairline because we are churned up in major, intersecting changes – see Dymvue's post *Libraries at the crossroads* (1). Yes, we need to develop new skills and to apply them appropriately but, in Cambridge especially, we're often limited in what we can achieve not just by the resources available, but also because our institutional structure and/or technology dictates the shape of developments, rather than being able to establish processes the other way round. Perhaps also, because we can see what we might be able to achieve in different circumstances we tend to undervalue the work we do now. In fact, we don't always realise how much we are appreciated. (Is your blood pressure rising? Don't worry, I'm nearly done. An interlude is called for: here is a calming picture of the sea) (*Figure 1*).

Back to the post. I guess I have enjoyed just about every minute I've spent working in libraries, but I also think I have an advantage in having previous convictions, at the BBC, in publishing, advertising, at IBM, and so on – even for a short while at the gloriously named Film Cooling Towers (1929).

The experience I gained in those jobs (and some of them were stonkingly mundane) taught me some useful



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tricks to help me organise my work and my time efficiently, to work in teams and value everyone's contribution, not to over-complicate matters, or to become too dependent on work for my self-esteem; and I'm afraid I've seen colleagues succumb because they foundered in these areas.

There are two bits of advice I've found especially useful.

One, from a producer I worked with in BBC TV was, "Get the script right first". (If you watch the extras DVD of *Middlemarch* you can even see him saying it). He was absolutely right. Whatever you do, get the first bit right because if you don't, the rest of it won't work. It's surprising how many people bash on with something even though they know the groundwork isn't secure, lacking the confidence to admit the mistake, to go back and change it while there is still time. The other piece of good advice I received from a friend, especially applicable to the *Kontrolmeisters* among us, is "You can't do someone else's job for them" *i.e.* if someone else is determined to make a balls-up of something and won't listen to advice, it isn't your responsibility.

Having worked elsewhere also makes me appreciate the good bits about Being a Librarian. I'm lucky enough to have a job with plenty of variety; covering archives, rare books, ebooks, textbooks and odd books like the recently unearthed Church Bells of Leicestershire. I am fortunate in having superb, supportive staff, the College is a well-run and considerate employer, and the students are interesting and engaging. There is nothing to beat the job satisfaction of noticing on the returns trolley a book bought for the Library on the hunch that it would be useful, or the delight of opening up a box of new books, or of retrieving a book from the stacks which has been long ignored, and has finally found someone with an interest in it.

So if you're feeling stressed, adjust your expectations, recognise what is beyond your control, and make a list of the good bits about your job.

Or just blast off a blog post.

REFERENCE

1. Stamford S. Libraries at the crossroads. *Dymvue Blogspot* 7. May 2011 <http://dymvue.blogspot.com/2011/05/libraries-at-crossroads.html>

* Published as a blog post at <http://dymvue.blogspot.it/2011/06/tense-nervous-headache-relax-youurre.html> and reproduced with kind permission from the author

† Someone who behave as a Master Controller