

SOLO LIBRARIAN: JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES

Member discussion facilitated by:

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Abstract: Solo librarianship offers both rewards and challenges. During this session, we discussed how small libraries manage to provide the range of services needed by patrons, and how several solo-librarians have addressed the challenge. Open for discussion, the best way to maintain and develop your professional contacts, how to keep up with developments in librarianship, and methods to measure the success of your efforts.

Results: A group of approximately 16 librarians met to discuss the challenges, opportunities and concerns of being the only professional librarian in their organization's library. The librarians were a mixed group from small research organizations and academic special libraries. Some were the only staff in the library, some had student assistants, and some had paraprofessional staff but each was the only professional librarian trying to juggle all the responsibilities of a fully functional library while dealing with staff problems, increasing responsibilities, and decreasing budgets.

The group first discussed the following broad categories and what subcategories should be included in a discussion about one-person libraries (OPL).

1. Budgets and collection development
2. Marketing, managing and relating to your organization

3. Services to patrons
4. Career development and continuing education
5. Staffing concepts

A vote was taken as to which subtopics the group would like to concentrate on during the rest of the time. The following subtopics and comments were made during this discussion and although no solutions were apparent all felt a little better after sharing their viewpoints and realities with like-minded individuals.

1. Teaching versus pampering (when to wean).

All agreed that some pampering was necessary either with certain important staff or first-time students but the goal should be to teach each individual how to use the library. Libraries have different levels of service they allow patrons to perform, some allow ILL and circulation without any library staff onsite, others have staff at all times so the level of teaching varies in each situation. The problem with the best teaching is that it is labor intensive and requires one on one interactions. Sometime it is necessary to pamper because there isn't time to teach.

2. When to say "NO."

This varied greatly among the group. Some have been asked to answer phones and make copies for bosses. Some have successfully said NO while others do anything requested of them, mostly for political reasons. In the group it seemed institutions took advantage of females more often than the men with secretary type requests. This is the reality no matter how wrong it is; each librarian has to make a judgement about what to say no to and how to say no without offending.

3. Image and Respect.

This topic ties in with the last about whether the librarian at small institutions have the respect of staff and the professional image. If there is professional respect there won't be the secretarial responsibilities. Some felt this was a red herring with the librarian misreading the attitudes within the institute. Most would agree that the scientific staff has a great deal of respect for what the librarian can do to further their research. The requests may be just because there is limited staff in small organizations. Our professional image is in our hands to make or improve by analyzing our place or possible fit in our organizational levels.

4. Library without a librarian.

In small organizations there are many times when the library has no staff such as weekends, nights, vacations and IAMSLIC conferences. How a librarian deals with that is determined by how much confidence they have in the staff or students to follow the rules. Some have no problem with leaving the library open and some worry constantly. The only thing the librarian can control after the decision is made is to have policies in place for all possibilities and to prominently display in easily understood terms these policies. If there is a problem a security camera may be the answer.

5. Building a "Core" Collection.

Many librarians go into a small organization and find there is no core collection or it's out of date. How does one find out what to put in a core collection? All agreed that figuring out what should be in a core collection of past and present items is a problem for the special marine librarian since not much has been published and the only time to discuss this is at the IAMSLIC conference or regional meetings. It was decided that this would be a good topic for discussion on the listserv since none at this group meeting had a ready list of core collection items.

Most of the group left the room happy to have confirmed that they were not the only librarians in the world with these types of concerns and problems. Also the challenges one person libraries face are international and never-ending so hopefully more of this type of group meeting will take place in the future.

Attached is a bibliography, which may help librarians face the challenges and future of the one-person library.

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