

# THE ONE PERSON LIBRARY: SUGGESTIONS FOR BUILDING GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** Patrons of small or “one-person” libraries require the same range of services offered by larger facilities. The solo-librarian is called upon to provide all of these services, a challenge underscored by the fact that many small libraries are remotely located and have limited collections and resources. While librarianship is evolving into a profession of specialization, the one-person librarian, out of necessity, must remain a generalist. This paper evaluates literature resources, explores barriers to professional development and discusses ways solo-librarians can evaluate their achievements and performance.

## INTRODUCTION

When solo-librarians describe what they like about their jobs, they invariably say they enjoy having a variety of responsibilities, they are never bored and they like being in charge. Many authors contributing to a *Colorado Libraries* issue devoted to one-person libraries echo these same sentiments. Discussing the demands placed on solo-librarians, MacNeil (1989) writes “What I didn’t know is that librarians in a one-person library do it all. We’re directors, reference librarians, children’s librarians, media specialists, catalogers, nurses, baby sitters and janitors. We check out books and shovel snow with a smile.” The average IAMSLIC one-person librarian will not encounter all these situations, but the example illustrates the unconventional roles sometimes undertaken by solo-librarians out of dedication to their jobs. As Zimmerman (1989) writes “the one universal quality of one-person libraries is the librarian’s commitment to serving patrons and the community.” She goes on to address the solo-librarian’s love of independence saying “The one problem never mentioned in the one-person library and the one that makes it all worthwhile, is personnel. There is no bureaucracy, no chain of command. Each librarian has sole responsibility for the success of his or her library.”

In order to provide a library building, a library collection and library services, the solo-librarian must, to some degree, know about disaster preparedness, building access standards, reference, collection development, acquisitions, cataloging, access services, interlibrary loan, technical services, electronic services, preservation, and systems and automation. Solo-librarians deal with these demands in two ways. Some recognize that a person working on her own cannot be an expert in all aspects of librarianship (Baker 1989; Yersin 1989). Others prioritize their responsibilities. For instance, some one-person public libraries will only process interlibrary loan requests once or twice a week (Hoganson et al. 1989). What we see in the literature profiling one-person operations is an acceptance that not everything can be done, or that not everything will be done well.

Considering the requirements of their jobs, it is not surprising to find that many solo-librarians feel inadequate or have feelings of doubt about their performance. As an example, Cunningham (1989) writes "Occasionally, I must replace my "librarian" hat with that of a "dunce". This is how I feel when I am unable to quickly locate information to fulfill a request." My review of the literature and discussions with fellow IAMSLIC members leads me to conclude that these feelings of "professional doubt" pervade the ranks of solo-librarians. I reviewed literature resources to determine if appropriate training materials exist for persons working in small or one-person libraries. I also investigated avenues of professional development open to solo-librarians, and surveyed other one-person librarians to see how they establish goals and evaluate their own performance.

## LITERATURE ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF SOLO-LIBRARIANS

There is a body of literature addressing needs of small or one-person libraries. An OCLC search using the term "small libraries" retrieved over 950 citations. A more conservative search of the term "one-person library" produced twenty-two citations and a similar search in Library Literature yielded seven citations. Many of these publications were produced by and designed for specialized libraries (e.g. law, medical or public libraries). Two organizations commonly sponsoring such publications are the American Association of Law Libraries and Special Libraries Association. Unfortunately, more items existed than could be examined for this paper. Some of the items I would like to have seen were not available through interlibrary loan, therefore, the list of references following this paper is incomplete, and represents only a cross section of the literature available to solo-librarians.

### TYPES OF LITERATURE AVAILABLE:

#### **Time management:**

The efficient use of time is critical to one-person librarians and many publications designed to help them perform their jobs more efficiently deal, directly or indirectly, with time management.

*Coping in the One-Person Library* is a taped session of an American Association of Law Libraries annual meeting featuring four speakers, each providing time management suggestions. One of the speakers, Betty Spencer, stresses the need to establish goals, change priorities when necessary, and establish the level of service your library can provide. She cautions not to overextend to the point where your reliability is compromised. She says we should identify time wasters, look for better ways to accomplish a job and make full use of resources and people both inside and outside of our organizations. Another speaker, Doug Shipman, is an information broker who suggests we learn when to ask for help and learn to use vendor services, such as his, to our advantage.

*Time Management in the Small Library* by Andrew Berner, published by Special Libraries Association, is available in two formats: a computer-assisted study program and a self-study program. As with many time management references, Mr. Berner's contains a time-log exercise. He makes the point that time management is actually self management, emphasizing the need to define goals and objectives clearly, establish priorities, delegate responsibility and overcome

procrastination. Solo-librarians should be aware of what Mr. Berner says are common reasons for procrastination:

- Uncertainty as to where to begin
- To escape an unpleasant task
- Fear of failure
- To excuse substandard work
- Lack of needed information
- To appear busy
- As a form of delegation
- Overcommitment
- Lack of focus provided by deadlines

*The One-Person, Or Less, Library* is a recorded session of the 1986 National Public Library Association meeting concerning rural libraries. The speaker, Ms. Feye-Stukas, is from Minnesota where 45% of the libraries are one-person operations. While much of what she said addressed needs of public libraries, she emphasized the advantages of making your small library part of a larger unit and having a central library handle as many of your library functions as is appropriate. She offers some of the same suggestions as previous authors, but also includes good signage and effective use of volunteers as time management hints. She advises remotely stationed librarians to maintain professional contacts, suggesting they should keep in contact with their state library; keep abreast of the library literature; develop pride in their professionalism; attend workshops and conferences; and trust their own judgment.

#### **Organization and operation:**

Donald Sager has authored a work entitled *Small Libraries: Organization and Operation* published by Highsmith Press, designed to update an earlier similar publication (Bernhard 1975). Designed for readers without any formal library training, this workbook discusses planning for the library building, library collection and user needs. Also covered are basic procedures such as ordering library material, organizing the collection, circulation, reference, resource sharing, personnel and library development. Chapters on public, school, and special libraries are included as is a list of resources for each topic covered. Sager notes the benefit of belonging to a cooperative library system, using the services of larger public and college libraries and contracting with information brokers. Reference services can take up a great deal of time, so Sager suggests establishing a reference policy describing the amount of time which can be devoted to individual questions. He advises solo-librarians to explore the possibility of having their parent organization absorb some routine library tasks. Solo-librarians should pay particular attention to his recommendations that we continue to obtain additional training and focus on the library's mission, examining our routines accordingly.

Frances Davis' article entitled "A Plan For Evaluating a Small Library Collection" suggests devising a plan and selling that plan to your users. She includes a collection evaluation worksheet and advises enlisting faculty support as part of any collection review, since faculty who have participated in such reviews are much more aware of library resources.

In his article "Automation Concerns of Smaller Libraries" Robert Bocher acknowledges that while small libraries face the same concerns as larger libraries, the options open to them can be dramatically different. Rather than discussing the automation options available to small libraries, Bocher discusses the underlying basis of the automation decision including the nature of the market place, the nature of technology and the nature of small libraries. I believe IAMSILIC member librarians would be more interested in reading reviews of various automation systems, but it should be noted this article is one of a series appearing in *Computers in Libraries* and part of an ongoing discussion of the topic.

Many IAMSILIC members manage branch academic libraries, and for that reason, "A Model for Reviewing Academic Branch Libraries Based on ACRL Guidelines and Standards" (Madison et al. 1994) warrants our attention. The number of branch libraries is on the rise, but in an era of budget shortages, when administrators see such services as duplicative, the need for branch libraries comes into question. The guidelines, as revised in 1990, emphasize the importance of a unified library system. The shift in focus from ownership to access, advances in library automation and improvements in document delivery technology may decrease the need for branch library services. According to the authors, the national discussion on branch libraries will focus on how well they meet the needs of primary clientele and how well they mesh with the larger library system. As solo-librarians, and often managers of branch libraries, it would seem prudent to maintain our libraries as viable parts of the central library system and advertise the specialized subject based services we provide our clientele. This article also contains an appendix which details a potential review process and report outline.

#### Management:

An important resource addressing the management information needs of solo-librarians is the Special Libraries Association information kit entitled *Managing Small Special Libraries: 1992*. This publication is a collection of articles reprinted from *Special Libraries* covering all aspects of library management including budgets and fees; time management and human resources; public relations; quality service; and general management issues. Selected references are also included.

#### Periodicals:

*One-Person Library* is a monthly newsletter that began publication in 1984. Typical issues include profiles of one-person librarians, book reviews, quick tips, editorial columns and a column entitled "What would you do" in which a hypothetical situation is presented and readers are encouraged to submit various solutions to the dilemma. While this may appear to be an ideal resource for a solo librarian, the publication fails its readers in several ways. *One-Person Library* is written in a self-congratulatory style, and questions posed in the "What would you do?" column are quite defensive. Articles appearing in this publication are often quite opinionated. For example, a recent two part article entitled "Virtual Reality Check: Information Resources on the Internet" Marisa Urgo writes "The reality is the Internet, as we know it, is simply not a practical tool for the librarian's daily exploitation of information resources". While librarians may disagree on the value of the Internet for reference work, persons reading this article may be dissuaded from trying the Internet for themselves and making an independent assessment of its value. Finally, some suggestions they make fail to address the need to develop professional competency. For example, the July 1994 issue (Volume 11, Number 3) contains an unsigned item

entitled "If You Are Not Overly Confident... Fake it" in which they say "If you can project self-confidence, isn't it rather immaterial whether it's real or not?". They fail to suggest ways for solo librarians to acquire the knowledge they need to confidently accomplish their job.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR THE SOLO-LIBRARIAN

We all recognize the importance of maintaining professional contacts and participating in professional organizations. We rely on professional organizations to keep us abreast of library related issues in our local geographic region and turn to professional organizations for subject related information. We look to national or international groups to provide us with information on developments and trends within our profession as a whole. We learn from our colleagues and receive validation when our peers recognize us as consummate professionals.

Local and state based professional organizations help us maintain our knowledge and awareness of library related issues concerning our geographic vicinity. Within these localized groups it is quite possible for solo-librarians to receive professional recognition for their services to the community. Subject based organizations such as IAMSLIC may also provide solo-librarians a forum where their professional accomplishments can be recognized. However, when it comes to national organizations such as American Library Association, I question if one-person librarians can gain recognition as easily as librarians who have had the opportunity to specialize as professionals (e.g. cataloger, interlibrary loan librarian, or administrator). The one-person librarian may continue to remain at a disadvantage, professionally, because he has not been in a position to develop expertise in an area of specialization and therefore may not receive acknowledgment of his professional standing.

There is one national professional organization devoted to one-person librarians. The Solo-Librarians Division of Special Libraries Association came into existence ten years ago as a Caucus of SLA. In 1990 the caucus became a full fledged SLA division whose ranks now number approximately 800 members. The Division produces a newsletter called the *Solo-ist*; being a new member to this group I can only report its existence and cannot comment on its value to solo-librarians.

## EVALUATING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE SOLO-LIBRARIAN

### Formal Evaluation Process:

Any performance evaluation will be influenced by organizational considerations of the parent institution. Annual or tenure review processes often require letters of support and we should consider the possibility of having fellow IAMSLIC members as part of a peer review process because in many cases, our IAMSLIC colleagues may be more aware of our day-to-day work and professional activities than some of our co-workers or main campus colleagues. In any case, it is vital that we make our administrators, users and main campus colleagues aware of what our jobs entail.

### Self Evaluation:

Unlike librarians in larger institutions, solo-librarians have no immediate colleagues with whom to compare themselves. Therefore, when establishing our individual professional goals it is imperative that we maintain contact with fellow one-person librarians of similar background. Doing so provides us a basis from which to work and helps us to determine what we can expect of ourselves as professionals.

### DISCUSSION

Solo-librarians must guard against professional isolation, so our conference theme, "Building Global Connections", is quite timely. Much of the literature for one-person librarians does not encourage them to look beyond that subset of the literature, or beyond other "one-person" colleagues for assistance. Perhaps we should begin "Building Global Connections" by cultivating relationships with individuals who specialize in one aspect of librarianship with the goal of enhancing knowledge transfer and improving our own performance in those areas.

Another step towards "Building Global Connections" is to insure that our co-workers, administrators and main campus colleagues understand what our jobs involve. We may want to consider inviting representatives from groups such as the U.S. based National Association of Marine Laboratories (NAML) to attend IAMSLIC meetings and likewise, invite representatives from regional NAML groups to participate in IAMSLIC regional group meetings.

For solo-librarians in the aquatic and marine science field, IAMSLIC is one of the best "Global Connections" available because its electronic bulletin board and newsletter provide us a current awareness and resource sharing mechanism. IAMSLIC outshines other national and international groups because it provides us contact with other one-person librarians sharing similar subject interests and also brings us into contact with individuals from larger institutions who are active both inside and outside of the IAMSLIC group.

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