

InfoTech Column
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An Open Letter to My Boomer Peers by Stephen Abram

Dear Colleague:

I'm writing this letter to you to engage you in a major effort to sustain our profession. Special librarianship is facing the challenge of a major generational change and it is all happening in the context of technological, socio-economic and global upheaval. It's exciting. It's frightening. And it's tiring. It is ongoing and the changes are ambiguous and sometimes they're not as clear as we might like.

You have talent. You have depth in many areas. Over your career's arc you have learned a lot – through education, through experience, and through involvement with, among others, our association, SLA. There are a bunch of things that you know that can only be learned well primarily through experience – that wonderful, messy and deeply personal life experience that we've lived. Even though we can learn about the soft skills of librarianship through formal courses and reading, we know that our personal professional and work experiences are what sets us apart as individual professionals. Just think about some of the things you might have initially learned the foundations in your professional education that you are so much better at practicing today. Remember we call it 'practice' just because it's never perfect. I'm thinking of things like:

- Presenting to senior management
- Writing a position description
- Chairing a meeting
- Reference interviewing, research negotiation
- Information and research skills training
- Designing products and services
- Promotion, sales and marketing
- Writing agendas and taking meeting notes
- Giving feedback to employees
- Attending a conference or corporate retreat
- Developing a business plan
- Participating in a vision exercise or developing a mission statement
- Writing a report, e-mail or memo for wide distribution
- Developing a budget
- Asking for executive support or investment

I challenge any of us to think about the first time we ever had one of the experiences listed above and to remember how much we've progressed since then. Do you remember how you felt? Was it comfortable? Was your confidence high? Did you get the full value out of that first experience or did you play it safe and hang back? Did you wish you knew something then that you know now?! You are more comfortable in practicing those soft skills now. Aren't you? And, I ask you to think about who coached you in this process. I am willing to wager that it included someone who is past or near retirement now - someone who took the time and effort to care about you and your role in information practice - someone with experience.

Now, in this still new century, we have a major influx of new professionals entering our field combined with many, maybe even the majority, of our peers retiring in greater numbers than ever before. Bluntly, the great services we've built and want to see sustained are at risk. As our peer David Penniman (at AT&T Bell at the time) said, "In order for things to stay what they are, they must change, if they don't change they won't remain what they are." True. Is our legacy at risk? Yes – but only if we don't step up to the plate and engage with our wonderful successors. The essence of what we do is not changing but the practice certainly is. As we selectively adopt technologies to enhance our services we are encountering a new learning curve. Let's be honest with ourselves. Are we as comfortable today with our hard technology skills as we are with our soft managerial skills? I'm not. Honestly.

Look at these new professionals entering the profession with fresh education and fresh eyes. It's very exciting. For many decades I have been teaching and visiting library schools across Canada, the U.S. and occasionally beyond. I meet newer librarians and information professionals often. Trust me; they're an amazing group of people. And, while they have good native interpersonal skills, foundations training for management and wonderful intelligence and energy, they don't have that patina that comes from experience. They also have some of the deepest skills I have ever encountered with respect to technology. It appears to be as deeply coded into their professional DNA as political, managerial and advocacy has been burned into ours.

So, this is the point of my letter to you. Don't forget the power of one; the power of *one* individual to make a difference. It's the essence of the idea economy rather than the goods economy. In a goods economy, when I give you something tangible I no longer have it. That's one kind of gift (or sale). In the idea economy we share ideas. When I give you the gift of an idea, an insight, I still have the idea too. We're both better for the gift. Indeed the gift is more valuable when more people own it. The goods economy largely depends on payment based method in stores while the idea economy depends on sharing through conversations. And this is what I am asking you to do, as an individual, in quite little acts of ***reciprocal conversations***. We need these conversations to be truly reciprocal. You need to listen and learn as much as you share. The only

pre-requisite is mutual respect. And that's not hard. Below I've outlined a few simple ideas that you can choose to implement or add your ideas to.

Some Ideas to Consider:

- When I wasn't traveling as much, I made it a point to take local special librarians or LIS students to lunch, drinks or coffee. Sometimes this was as individuals and sometimes in pairs or groups. I have great fond memories of what I learned from these folks. I tried my best to address their concerns and dreams. I plan to visit a lot of LIS schools in my years as SLA president.
- Partner with your fellow members in chapters and divisions. Some chapters have local members who sponsor students to every chapter meeting. Some divisions offer travel stipends and shadowing opportunities for our annual conference. SLA Toronto has a student sponsorship fund that anyone can contribute to.
- Make an effort to identify and sit with new professionals (indeed anyone you don't know) at every opportunity. Have a great conversation by breaking through our own comfort zone and connecting with new contacts, talents and colleagues. If you're like me, some of the best and most valuable parts of my network are retiring. I need to add some fresh crayons to my box!
- Play with new technologies by partnering with these folks. It's amazing how quickly we can learn Facebook, instant messaging, wikis, and the new culture of content rules through just playing inter-generationally. Maybe your Facebook profile is just for this purpose. Link to your chapter Facebook Group as a source of ideas and advice and ask questions too. It's reciprocal. It's a modern way of friending!
- Design a project to capture everyone's knowledge in your field so that we can share on a higher level. Can we build delicious tag groups at the division or chapter level? Can we build wikis to share knowledge within the domains we practice in? Can we build social networks that lift us all up across the full range of SLA members?

Lastly, I want us to commit to making the entry into SLA and specialized information practice a uniformly positive experience for all involved:

- When someone says the new LIS grads are not as good as they were, ask them when was the last time they met and engaged with a bunch of them. I do. Challenge them - their prejudice needs to be challenged. It's often just an uninformed generalization unsupported by fact or experience. It might make one feel better in the short term but it hurts every one us in our image, marketability and success.
- When someone says these younger librarians don't have the managerial skills you need. Remind them that they didn't have it when they started out either. Ask them what they're doing to support and mentor.

- When someone says that they really must have too many years experience for a job they're hiring for, let's ask them "why?" Are they unprepared to experience the great gift of coaching new professionals and learning from them in return. It is social responsibility in its highest form.

Let expunge those behaviours from our experiences. Let's look to the next generation of information professionals to see our future. Let's learn from each other and share knowledge, insights, ideas and experiences.

What do we have to lose? Too much. We have more to gain.

Thanks,

Sincerely,

Stephen

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