

InfoTech Column  
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**An Open Letter to My New Peers**  
by Stephen Abram

Dear Colleague:

Last month, in this column, I wrote an open letter to my Boomer peers exhorting them to re-engage with special librarianship and step up to the plate to ensure the sustainability of our profession. A huge part of that that sustainability plan is 'you'. Not the Time Magazine you, but you as an individual professional who will have an impact on your own success and contribute to the overall success of our profession and world.

OMG – It's a total cliché but you *are* the future of our profession. Whether you're a spanking new graduate or just in the first five years of your career, and whether you're a just entering your first career or are a mid-life career changer bringing different skills and experiences to our profession.

Without a doubt, through retirement, illness, or death, generational change happens inexorably. (I am personally depending on this week's lottery investment to make my move!) Sometimes the changes are nice and seamless and sometimes change is painful. By all accounts, we are entering an amazing and exciting period of change in our global profession. On so many levels, socially, economically, technologically, demographically, and more, we are challenged to ensure that our profession will evolve to address this knowledge and information revolution. While these changes are exciting, frightening, and challenging, the path to the future is also clearly ambiguous and unclear. But I always paraphrase Alan Kay that the best way to discover the future is to invent it ourselves. What an opportunity! It is my belief that this is the best way to frame the challenges facing our profession.

You bring a lot to the party. And that party can last for your entire career, indeed your life. You bring, broadly, perspectives and training that includes:

- Fresh energy
- A fresh education in the latest 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies
- A deeper understanding of 2.0 and beyond
- A life that has generally never know a world without the Internet, Web, mobile phones and an adult life influenced by Wikipedia, Facebook, MySpace, and instant messaging.

- Deep personal experience in the latest technology as both a user and a developer.
- A very wide understanding of a variety of metadata tools.
- An immersion and understanding of the multi-generational challenges we face. Some of you are Millennials and bring an understanding of that key demographic in libraries; some are Gen X and Y and bring that understanding and communication abilities to bridge between Gen M and Boomers. Some are mid-career changes and can again transcend the tyranny of a single generational perspective.
- A perspective that assumes a personal impact and involvement that extends through many decades.
- And much more too numerous to list here.

In many respects it's difficult to articulate what our strengths are when we're immersed in it. It's the old saw that some fish would have difficulty describing water. You have talent. You have depth in many areas. Do not underestimate the power and value of fresh and new education. You'll meet many people over your career. Some will have more than 30 years experience. Learn from them. But also let them learn from you.

You'll meet many people, at work, through continuing education and in our association, SLA. Keep an open mind. One of my coaches and mentors told me early in my career that there are two kinds of experienced people – those who have thirty years of diverse and incremental growth experiences, and those who have 30 sets of identical one year experiences. He said that wise people learn to tell the difference.

I can assure you that a career is messy. There are no clear five year plans, just goals and visions and the wisdom to recognize opportunity knocking. Here are a few hints that you might want to pursue:

Some Ideas to Consider:

- There's no absolute need to develop just *formal* mentoring experiences. Lunch and coffee work just fine. Sometimes we have to break through our comfort zones and socialize with people who aren't just like us. Invite a colleague (even from SLA or at work!) to coffee or lunch. A lot of advice and learning happens in those social conversations. I made personal and professional friends this way, you can too.
- By all means attend every SLA or association event you can. If your employer doesn't pay, go anyway. It's often the cost of a meal and if my experience is any indication, I found positions that increased my pay manifold over the cost of the investment in learning and networking that comes from involvement in SLA.
- Don't sit at these meetings in a small group of people you already know. That's networking but it is puny networking! Set a goal to meet at least

two or more people at every event you attend. If you need some tips search Google for networking for introverts (you already know how to do that). I've pointed to a number of these resources from my blog, *Stephen's Lighthouse*, and, although I am in no way introverted, I found useful tips too.

- Don't say no too often. When you're offered the opportunity to stretch yourself at work or in association activity, jump at it. You'll be part of a team and you'll learn from peers and more experienced folks. Everyone is in the same boat and you're all focused on success. Partner with your fellow members in chapters and divisions. Some chapters have calls for volunteers or volunteer in a general way through the main SLA website on our volunteer form.
- Make an effort to identify and meet people who can help your career. Do you have a goal to work in a certain industry? Do you have a goal about what your next position will include? Do you have a goal to learn something specific? SLA is full of folks to meet. Use your research skills and contact them before a local meeting or international SLA conference (Seattle is coming soon!). Don't be mercenary; just have a great conversation by breaking through your own comfort zone and connecting with new contacts, talents and colleagues. If your experience matches mine, some of the best and most valuable learning and contacts will be the result.
- You have great skills and fresh skills and modern skills. Don't pay heed to that little voice attacking your self confidence from within. Offer to train local chapter members in some technology that you can introduce. You'll find willing learners who have something to exchange with you too. You'll build respect and equity and build your network of people with other deep experiences to share. I certainly learned how to ask for a raise from someone who'd 'been there, done that' and I hadn't.
- Open yourself up inter-generationally. We need to break down some of the invisible demographic walls in our profession. It's amazing how quickly old folks like me can learn Facebook social networking, instant messaging, wikis, and the new culture of content rules through just playing with folks and learning by doing. Help build your chapter Facebook Group as a source of ideas and advice and ask questions too. It's reciprocal. It's a modern way of professional networking.
- Partner beyond your organization and work across generations to design a project to capture everyone's knowledge so that we can share on a higher level. Can we collaboratively 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? You have the skills and our knowledge is bigger together.

You are an amazing group of 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; you are an amazing group of people. My peers are an amazing group too. We need to talk more. We need to collaborate. SLA is a wonderful framework for this to take place. All of us have an investment, personal, professional and psychological in the information profession and specifically specialized librarianship. We want to succeed and we will only succeed together.

So, this is the point of my letter to you. Just like I told my Boomer peers last month, 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 idea economy depends on sharing through conversations and sharing is a fundamental value and principle of librarianship. And this is what I am asking you to do, as an individual, in 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.

- When older colleagues say it's not done that way, ask "why?" Challenge them. This will either break down the barriers to unconstructive advice or you'll learn the subtleties of advocacy and influence.
- Join, volunteer, participate, coach, and get involved. Invest in lifelong learning through SLA, CLICK University and beyond.
- When someone says these older librarians don't have the technology skills you need, offer to teach them. Remind them that you didn't have it and had to learn through play with friends and by doing. Ask them what they can teach you in exchange.
- When someone suggests that a job opening really requires far too many years experience, ask them "why?" Are they unprepared to experience the great gift of coaching new professionals and learning from them in return. If we want to sustain our libraries and profession we need to diversify the base of participants.

Lastly, I want us to commit to making the SLA and specialized information practice a uniformly positive experience for all involved. I dream that we can all have personally great careers and that the world will be better for having had our profession working together for the best results. You are the emerging future leaders and the next generation of information professionals to invent our future.

Let's learn from each other and share knowledge, insights, ideas and experiences. Share your awesomeness!

What do you have to lose? Too much. We all have a lot more to gain.

Thanks,

Sincerely,

Stephen

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