Overcoming the Systems Librarian Imposter Syndrome
by Rachel Singer Gordon [1]

Abstract: Due to the newer nature of this subfield of librarianship and the lack of formal technical training experienced by a number of systems librarians, many feel needlessly inadequate in their positions. An understanding of the importance of a library background and skills in the success of any systems librarian can help these individuals overcome their "imposter syndrome" and settle more comfortably into their positions.

"Mother," Meg pursued, "Charles says I'm not one thing or the other, not flesh nor fowl nor good red herring." -- Madeline L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*

Like Meg in Madeline L'Engle's classic YA novel, many systems librarians -- especially those who originally entered librarianship intending to concentrate on another specialty -- worry about failing to fit into the tidy categories that have traditionally marked our perception of the profession's subfields. While categorization is a natural librarian impulse, systems librarians (and their employers) need to realize the futility of trying to package systems job descriptions into neat little boxes. Systems librarianship by its very nature fosters both overlap and ambiguity; systems librarians need both an understanding of the needs of each department and the ability to work with librarians in other specializations.

During any given week, a systems person in a public library may be helping technical services to write and implement policies in the automation system, adding links to the web site for the children's department, and disassembling the PC at the reference desk to replace a broken CD-ROM drive. In an academic library, she might be negotiating electronic license agreements, adding new resources to the Intranet, and teaching students effective database and Internet searching. In smaller libraries, systems librarians can fill dual (or triple, or quadruple…) roles in departments like reference and systems or cataloging and systems, rather than having the luxury of concentrating solely on the technological portion of their job. In any library, their actions impact and intersect all departments, since technology is so intertwined with both the institution's day-to-day activities and its larger mission.

The skills and philosophy underpinning the field, however, draw upon the foundations of librarianship itself; a library background is essential to the effectiveness of any systems librarian. Systems librarians who realize their inherent strengths and learn to use their existing library skills in dealing with changing technology both feel more secure in their positions and are better able to serve their institutions.

Faking It Through

Unfortunately, it often takes library systems personnel years to settle comfortably into the ambiguity inherent in their jobs. Many originally entered librarianship with the intention of specializing in some other subfield of the profession, or completed their degree before an emphasis on technology was common. They lack formal training in technology management, troubleshooting, network administration, and many other duties as assigned. This lack, combined with the need to deal with constant change, leads many otherwise successful systems librarians to feel as if they are "faking" their way through their jobs. When those with an official IT background proclaim that there is but one true standard of expertise and education that defines systems librarianship, this only exacerbates the feeling that they fail to measure up. They go through their duties convinced that they will eventually be exposed, unable to resolve a critical issue or unable to answer a crucial question.

Joan Harvey talks about a syndrome called "the imposter phenomenon," in which otherwise successful individuals believe that others overestimate their talents, that their success is not due

to their own ability, and that they will eventually be exposed as frauds in their position (Harvey and Katz, 1985). While this syndrome occurs in people across all professions, those in positions that constantly require doing new tasks or taking on new roles are particularly susceptible to these feelings. Their cure lies in realizing that their success stems from their own abilities and actions rather than in some random or external force. The cure for systems librarians lies in realizing that, as long as they know (or can find out!) enough to keep the systems in their own institutions humming along, they are successes -- and integral to the smooth functioning of their library.

New Roles, Familiar Skills

Whether or not they do so consciously, systems librarians in all sizes and types of libraries draw on their existing skills and background in order to serve effectively in their positions. It is precisely because they have these skills to draw upon that they are able to be successful in a systems role, with or without formal technical training. Essential traditional library skills for systems personnel include many of those we are either taught in library school or learn on-the-job. Following, find several ways in which systems librarians use these skills -- and suggestions on how they can extend their knowledge and abilities to serve even more effectively in their positions.

Research

One academic librarian notes: "It has never ceased to amaze me how much better I am at finding solutions to problems in knowledge bases (like Microsoft's) than my technical staff, most of whom, frankly, can barely spell."1 A background in librarianship is an invaluable tool in navigating both online knowledge bases and offline manuals, researching problems, and locating answers. It serves us well as we build a personal collection of resources that will be useful in our own technological environment. A librarianship background gives us insight into whom to trust, where to start, what to look for, and how to evaluate potential solutions to our support dilemmas -- and helps us to avoid implementing untrustworthy techniques that can create more damage than the original problem.

While each systems librarian's support toolbox and strategies will be unique to her situation, there are resources that will be useful in many environments, some of which can be found on the Accidental Systems Librarian web site. Many systems librarians also pick up tips from colleagues or from online discussion lists and make a habit of bookmarking sites and ordering reference materials they come across in their reading.

The skills that systems librarians have picked up through reference coursework or while working on a public service desk are also valuable additions to their support toolbox. A typical technical support interview with a staff member or library patron eerily parallels a typical reference interview. In each, the trick is to work from the original inquiry to the actual problem by asking questions designed to narrow down the issue. Only then can we resolve the issue or answer the question. In each instance, we also need to know the point at which we need to call on an expert -- in this case, vendor technical support or support personnel in our larger institution or system.

Networking

Karen Ventura, Head of Systems & Technology at Novi Public Library, advises that systems librarians "collaborate with other library technology folks…Together, we do much more than we could do on our own. And if there's something that I am not familiar with, chances are someone else at another library is. This way, the library technology world is much more manageable!"

Librarians are master networkers from way back; the sheer proliferation of professional e-mail discussion lists, workshops, conferences, and interest groups attests to our reliance on each other's knowledge and experiences. The image of a solitary researcher toiling away in a back room is passé; our strength lies in our collaboration.

Systems librarians are no exception to this need to network. From mailing lists such as [SYSLIB-L](), [Web4Lib](), [oss4lib-discuss](), and [LIBNT-L](), to conferences that include [Computers In Libraries]() and [ASIS&T](), specialized forums on technological issues serve every interest and level of expertise.2 The inclusion of tech topics in more general conferences and among the workshops offered by local library systems offers a further opportunity for systems librarians to enhance their technological skills while they keep a foot in the traditional library world. Successful systems librarians take these opportunities to learn from one another, share their own experiences, and, above all, to realize that they are not alone. Teaching and learning from others, beginning to feel part of a larger community, is a large step toward overcoming the sense of being an imposter.

Organization of Knowledge

Any systems librarian who has needed to lay his hands quickly on a CD key, a grant number, a technical support phone number, or a video card model number knows the value of organization. As the computing environment expands, both physically and in complexity, well-organized records allow systems librarians to keep track of everything from installed systems and software to vendor information and institutional IP addresses.

Organization also helps us track and make use of the statistics of which library administrations are so fond. Electronic statistics include web site usage statistics, information on electronic database usage, and reports generated through an institution's ILS (Integrated Library System). Knowledge -- and the ability to find information -- is power! The well-organized and informed systems librarian can justify his position and carry out his duties in relative calm.

Lifelong Learning

In their quest to keep informed, empowered systems librarians are inveterate lifelong learners. Learning can be achieved in many ways -- informed systems librarians make a habit of keeping up with developments in fields relevant to their library's environment and potential. Savvy systems librarians take advantage of a mix of on- and offline opportunities, which can include relevant reading, online tutorials, web logs and announcement lists, formal coursework, and on-the-job education. Every professional activity is an opportunity for learning. The more knowledge a systems librarian acquires, and the stronger her background in both technology and librarianship, the more comfortable she will be in her position. Systems librarians who remain open to learning from every situation, and who make a conscious effort to improve their skills, are empowered by their own efforts.

Instruction Techniques

University of Washington systems librarian Emalee Craft explains: "As a librarian, a lot of my skills involve how to communicate effectively with users in a way that will help fill their information needs. I think these same skills have been invaluable in relating technological terms and ideas to other staff members and users of the library."

Whether or not systems librarians are formally involved in technology instruction in their institutions, every tech support call and every computer-related interaction provides an opportunity to teach. Any technological knowledge they can communicate to their colleagues helps empower other library staff, making everyone's job easier. Any technological knowledge they can communicate to their patrons enables library customers to make effective use of institutional resources, making their colleagues' jobs easier and improving the image and effectiveness of the library. One of systems librarians' most important roles, therefore, is that of communicator -- both imparting knowledge and translating technical terms and ideas.

A Bridge Between Two Worlds

Using traditional skills to fill new roles, systems librarians bridge the two worlds of technology and librarianship. They also benefit from the best of both worlds, using both sets of skills to confront changing technology as librarians, and in terms of the larger goals of their institution. Once they are able to relax into their positions, they are able to feel the excitement and possibility that comes from bridging these fields. As University of San Francisco Director of Library Systems Karen Johnson exclaims: "You will never get bored. If you like change, living on the edge (at least the edge of the library), then this is the job for you."

At the end of *A Wrinkle in Time*, Meg finds to her relief and delight that she is so much more than she imagined. It is precisely her unique combination of personal strengths and skills that make her able to face her fears and save the day -- and her brother Charles. Successful systems librarians draw on their own unique combination of strengths and skills in situations ranging from the dramatic (the Internet connection is down and classes are scheduled all day for database training) to the everyday (a printer failure, a press release needing to be posted on the web site, a patron with a technical question). Neither flesh, nor fowl, nor good red herring -- simply a necessary bridge between technology and librarianship.

Notes

1. Quotes are taken from answers to a survey on systems librarianship which was posted online from late 2001-early 2002. The text of the survey can be found as appendix A to Rachel Singer Gordon, **The Accidental Systems Librarian** (Medford, NJ: Information Today, 2003).

2. Find links to a number of library technology discussion lists at http://www.lisjobs.com/tasl/toc.htm#lists.

Reference List

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