

Making “Information Magic” Happen

In former SLA (Special Library Association) President Deb Hunt’s latest webinar titled [“Where the information Magic Happens – Hint it’s Outside Your Comfort zone”](#), she talks about going outside your comfort zone when it comes to career development, encouraging people in our industry to examine their roles and titles in order to make their titles future ready. That way you can be seen as invaluable as old librarian roles and archivist stereotypes are shredded or abandoned. She also stressed the need to knuckle down and do the work required to earn increased respect and value.

Deb has an MLS, but never introduces herself as a librarian because she gets stereotyped into the typical public librarian role when she does. She prefers to introduce herself as a Knowledge Strategist or Knowledge Curator because job titles do a lot to demonstrate the strategic value someone has to an employer. Here is a slide from that webinar with suggested titles for MLSs in the corporate world:

What do You Want to be Called?	Librarian	Information Professional
	Knowledge Manager	Strategic Knowledge Professional
	Knowledge Curator	CKO

Inspired by her webinar, we sat down to have a conversation with John Connolly, MLIS, PMP. John spent 16 years working in the library field before pivoting his career. A talented writer and communicator, he reaches thousands of readers worldwide through his contributions to blogs, podcasts, and on social media. He gained his Project Management Professional Certification in 2022 and holds a Master of Library & Information Studies degree from the University of Alabama

In her webinar, Deb asks: What is your plan?

Throughout my career, I have either planned far too much or not enough. I’ve had to work hard at what I call the concept of “planning balance:” the ability to set goals that

are solid enough to make progress toward, yet flexible enough to adjust as circumstances warrant.

I never dreamed of being a librarian. Instead, I stumbled into the field at a young age by accident. At my undergraduate college, I was part of the student work program, and was assigned to work in the kitchen. When the head chef found out that I had all morning classes, he unceremoniously kicked me out as the only openings for workers were serving breakfast. A couple weeks later I was reassigned to work in the library. Because I was “late,” all the spots for pages were full. I was sent to the second floor to work in the cataloging room.

During the three years I spent in the cataloging room, I learned how books were prepared for addition to the collection, what metadata was, what MARC records were, and eventually was able to supervise most library operations from acquisition to shelving. I was put on a road that I’m still walking today.

Over the years, my plans have shifted along with my experiences. I went to graduate school for library science, began consulting with a library software vendor and managed a special library in an art museum. I also worked in multiple roles for a public library and eventually pivoted into project management, drawing on my extensive expertise in planning and delivering results.

In her webinar, Deb asks: How will you get there?

I believe that a struggle for many people in our field has been too many options rather than too few. The talented and flexible information professionals that make up the backbone of many information environments could succeed at many things. Finding an area of expertise and sticking to it can sometimes be difficult. Nevertheless, I’ve found far greater success with clearer goals and a solid personal brand.

I was recently at a project management networking event where I met a high school student who was asking established professionals for advice. He had his life mapped out: he wanted to work in sports business with companies that held events in places like Dubai and India. He was learning new languages and preparing for a rigorous course of business education. When he asked my advice, I told him what I learned firsthand: keep a hold of your plan, but don’t grasp too firmly. Keep a loose grip in case new opportunities come your way. You can’t see beyond the first bend in the road, and you never know if something even better is coming your way. Keep an eye out for opportunities that will take you closer to your goals.

In balance to this flexibility is the need to drive forward even as goals are in flux. I found that working toward new certifications and learning in my fields was extremely helpful for bringing new opportunities my way. Volunteering and upskilling built my resume and

allowed me the flexibility to begin choosing my areas of emphasis. Yes, I can do more than my focus. But the focus has allowed me to make a unique pitch for my value.

Throughout the webinar, Deb asks: What do you want to be called?

A clear vision is key, and flexibility is a necessary ingredient in traveling our path effectively. Part of that journey is letting go of our own preconceptions about ourselves. The term “librarian” is loaded with lots of cultural, political, and even practical baggage. The stereotypes of library work create deep complications for us as we try to prove our value. In the end, I’m a pragmatist on this point. Although I have invested a lot of time and money in “librarianship,” the ability to maximize my own return on investment in this field is predicated on using terms that show my value more easily.

I’ve met professionals who insist that “librarian” should be our title, and that it’s our duty to fight against prevailing stereotypes, educating key stakeholders on the importance and value of librarians. I have found that it’s faster, easier, and more accessible to begin looking at new terminology that describes our value. Titles like Knowledge Manager, Information Architect, or Information and Data Specialist are newer titles that can describe portions of the value we bring and open new conversations about our highly specialized skillset.

Deb says she has wanted to change the world through her work in the library industry. Do you want to change the world?

I believe that most information workers want to change the world and I’m no exception. The observation that this kind of change comes outside of our comfort zone is wise. Another observation I would contribute is that we are part of the world, too. And we owe it to allow ourselves to grow and evolve as the world changes. our self-identification with our work and any sense of prestige.

I am guilty of self-identification with my work. It has taken self-awareness and discipline to begin correcting this. I am many things to many people, and my unique contribution to the world will come in many areas. If I see my work as my primary impact on the world, I risk losing contact with opportunities for deeper influence: my local community, my family, my friends. Relationships, in my view, are far stronger tools for world change than any amount of technical training or proficiency.

Last, any sense of prestige of our field, title, or credentials should be tempered by our drive to deliver and receive value. Credentials are important, without doubt. They codify our knowledge and experience and get us to the table. But what we do once we’re at the table is far more important than how we got there. The talented, empathetic, intelligent, and conscientious people who work in our field have so much to offer. We can’t fall into

the trap of feeling we have “arrived” once we accomplish a particular goal. It takes humility to climb new mountains and serve our teams and organizations.

John Connolly, PMP is a project manager and librarian with more than 15 years of experience in management in software and special libraries. He has a strong background in cataloguing, metadata generation, information management, and knowledge management.