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Next-Generation Librarianship: The Revolution Begins

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Introduction

It's nearly impossible to ignore the statistics, hype, and headlines that have appeared in the library literature over the past decade. The library profession seems to be graying at its highest levels, resulting in a leadership vacuum. Articles and blog postings urge library leaders to reach out to newer generations of librarians to ensure that librarianship continues to be a vital and dynamic profession. When viewed in the context of the dramatic changes currently taking place in higher education, technology, and global economics, these warnings about planning for generational shifts in the library profession take on new importance and urgency.

Rapidly changing workplaces and job duties have particularly impacted academic librarians, as technological advances have challenged traditional approaches to providing reference, instruction, and collection development services. Academic librarians have had to adapt their workflow practices to respond to an increase in the number and type of digital resources, as well as a growing demand for faster, simpler access to those resources. Acquiring and providing access to e-journals, e-books, and electronic databases has become as time-consuming as traditional book- and journal-centered collection development, if not more so. Academic librarians have also been increasingly challenged to meet the needs of a more diverse student population (both culturally and chronologically) that is spread across wide distances. The rapid pace of these changes shows no signs of slowing down, and the need for flexible and creative responses will heavily impact the next generation of librarians poised to move into leadership roles within the next decade.

This article will examine the distinctive traits, workplace habits, professional needs, and career goals of these newer librarians from Generation X and the Millennial generation.

For purposes of this discussion, those born between 1965 and 1979 will be considered part of Generation X, while those born between 1980 and 1994 will be considered part of the Millennial generation. In addition to discussing the opportunities and challenges presented by the entry of these "next-generation" librarians into the workplace, the authors will also offer practical advice for current library managers who wish to maximize the leadership potential of next-generation librarians.

Statistics: Staffing Trends, Age of Librarians, Retirements, Retention, and New Librarians

The good news is that library staffing has steadily increased over the last 21 years. From 1982-2003 overall staffing in libraries, including both MLS and non-MLS staff, has increased by 63.6% (Davis, 2005, pg. 189). It appears that libraries are increasing their budgets to meet the literacy needs of communities across the country. MLS-degreed librarians in academic libraries have also increased by 8,199 during the same time period (Davis, 2005, 189). Recruitment efforts do seem to be working in some respects for new librarians. This data takes into account the oldest Millennials and all of Generation X.

However, the majority of librarians are still older than Generation X. Data published in 1999 by the American Library Association puts 26% of the professional librarians at age 39 or younger, 35% between the ages of 40-49, and 39% over the age of 50 (Lynch, 1999). Given this data it could be assumed that, at minimum, 39% of the MLS workforce have already retired or will be looking to retire within the next six years. Thus it was surprising that in 2001, a third of the respondents to an email survey sent by the American Library Association stated that they expected less than 5% of MLS degree holders to retire in the next five years (Lynch, 2001). Whether this means that librarians have unrealistic expectations or

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the distinctive traits, workplace habits, professional needs, and career goals of librarians from Generation X (born 1965-1979) and the Millennial generation (born 1980-1994). The authors discuss the opportunities and challenges presented by the entry of "next-generation" librarians into the workplace; they also offer practical advice for current library managers who wish to maximize the leadership potential of next-generation librarians.

It is vital for current library leaders and managers to develop plans for training the next generation of librarians to take the reins of leadership.

that many librarians simply want to work past typical retirement age, the reality is that there is the potential for a large wave of retiring librarians in the next few years.

In addition to a potential retirement wave, there is also a potential for retention issues. The 1999 American Library Association study about retirement also found that of the respondents, "20% were expecting to lose more than 20% [of the librarian workforce]" (Lynch, 2001, pg.2). Generation X/Y will be needed to help fill this gap.

Succession Planning

Succession planning, which refers to the deliberate grooming of the next generation of leaders, is a way of responding to these impending demographic changes. The impending retirement of current library leaders has the potential to create a leadership vacuum that destroys many libraries' institutional memories. Thus, it is vital for current library leaders and managers to develop plans for training the next generation of librarians to take the reins of leadership.

Planning is also necessary to ensure that new librarians stick with the profession. Blanchard writes, "Without fostering participation and involvement with both new and experienced librarians, there is the risk of losing these new librarians to other industries that do embrace 'new blood'" (2003, p. 17).

Planning can also soothe generational friction points by making all groups feel valued. Martin notes that, "Longer life spans, changing societal views of retirement, and a shortage of workers due to declining birthrates means that older workers are either rejoining the workforce or delaying retirement altogether. This creates a situation where four generations are now working side by side" (2006, p. 4). Encouraging experienced librarians to pass on their wisdom to newer colleagues can make older employees feel respected and younger employees feel included. McCaffrey and Garnar explain that, "Succession planning that also provides for re-education will appeal to Generation Xers who value learning opportunities, while Boomers

will appreciate how succession planning explicitly values their career accomplishments and contributions" (2006, p. 145).

Regardless of when and whether Baby Boomers and Traditionalists plan to retire, Gen Xers and Millennials will soon begin moving into leadership positions. Succession planning is critical to ensuring that this transition is seamless, but successful transitions must take into account these generations' unique characteristics. Although popular culture perpetuates several negative stereotypes about the traits of Gen Xers and Millennials, an examination of scholarly research paints a more positive picture of these generations.

Stereotypes

Popular culture often perpetuates the stereotype that members of Generation X are lazy, skeptical, and disloyal. One writer notes that Gen Xers "came of age in a time of 24 hour news channels and tabloid journalism which exposed the flaws of so many authority figures and institutions. … The economic boom and subsequent crash of the late 1980s … and the boom and crash of the 1990s … only reinforced the cynicism and skepticism of this generation" (Martin, 2006, p. 7).

Stereotypical members of the Millennial generation are portrayed as being impatient, inattentive, narcissistic, indiscreet with personal information, and sheltered by and excessively connected to their overprotective parents. As Abram explains, "Some worry that they are in a state of continuous partial attention and lack the focus and concentration skills necessary for life" (Abram, 2006, p. 100).

Certainly, there are young people who exhibit some of these qualities. But serious research about Generation Xers and Millennials reveals that many of these stereotypes are just as invalid and irrelevant as the negative media stereotypes that have plagued librarianship as a profession.

We all know the old stereotypes of librarians: Quiet, Mean or Stern, Single/Unmarried, Stuffy, Wear Glasses. The media has done a lot

to reaffirm these stereotypes of librarians. *Desk Set* is the quintessential library movie, starring Katherine Hepburn as the single, efficient "librarian." This movie title has recently been embraced by a group of librarians in their 20s and 30s in New York, recently profiled in the *New York Times*. The article paints a picture of "cool" librarians (or in some cases "Guybrarians"), and it describes a party where the drink names are given Dewey Decimal Classifications before being placed on the menu (Jesella, 2007).

The "cool librarian" trend appears to have started with the 1995 movie *Party Girl*. Starring Parker Posey as a library clerk who eventually decides to go back to school to earn her MLS, *Party Girl* featured young librarians, without a bun in sight. Next came the made-for-TV movie *The Librarian: Quest for the Spear* and its sequels *Return to King Solomon's Mines* and *The Curse of the Judas Chalice*, which featured a socially-challenged genius with 22 college degrees who learned the Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress Classification systems "along the way." This globe-trotting adventurer with the title of "librarian" does little to exemplify what a librarian does, but it does makes the profession seem cool.

In addition to librarians' image changing, the image of nerdiness has transformed into something to aspire to. As evidenced by commercials featuring Justin Long as the Apple computer guy, Freecreditreport.com commercials featuring Eric Violette, or the television show *Chuck*, a nerd is definitely the new cool thing to be right now in the media. Librarians are considered to be squarely in the nerd camp and for now that is a "cool" place to be.

Research Findings About Generation X

Research on the goals and work preferences of Gen Xers consistently reveals that they like frequent feedback, which helps them to determine whether they're on track and meeting expectations. Lancaster recounts the feelings of one Gen X librarian, who says, "I can handle anything as long as my boss lets me know what's going on and where I stand" (2003, p. 38).

Additionally, Xers appreciate having the freedom to define their own tasks, and to solve problems in their own way. Mosley explains that Gen Xers "work best when they are given an objective and a deadline but are also allowed the freedom to execute the task as they wish" (2005, p. 187). Xers like being able to accomplish tasks on their own schedules, which allows them to maintain a positive work-life balance. Gen Xers like the challenge of identifying ways to improve work processes. Lancaster notes that they "want to make things run better" (2003, p. 38). They also want to keep learning and growing professionally. Although this professional development can take many forms, Mosley notes that "Xers tend to place a higher value on structured development opportunities that can be documented and used to build a vita" (2005, p. 189).

Gen Xers as Library Leaders

Given their unique characteristics, Generation X library leaders have the potential to create more balanced, humane workplaces. Mosley notes, "As they become managers, Generation Xers still put significant value on the balance between their work and personal lives, both for themselves and their employees…They are concerned and caring toward those whom they supervise and highly tolerant of issues such as family demands and flexible schedules" (2005, p. 188).

As leaders, Generation X librarians also have the potential to make libraries innovative, responsive, and flexible. They will accomplish this by trying new approaches to streamline work processes, and by rotating workers through different positions to prevent burnout and to take advantage of new ideas. Mosley presents a vision of what such leadership would look like. She explains that a library run by Gen Xers

> would probably be a constant work-in-progress, characterized by a willingness to try new services or organizational approaches with little preimplementation planning. Individual initiative and self-reliance would be encouraged, with cross-organizational communication an imperative. Formal meetings would be minimal, with more

time spent in small and impromptu working groups. All aspects of the organization would be permeated with technology. Rather than being hierarchical, the organization would have more of a flat structure with different individuals responsible for various projects or functions. There would be more flexibility in individual schedules and an increase in working from home. Similarly, the administrative and management corps would consist of a larger number of individuals, who rotate roles on a periodic basis, so managers and administrators have a better work and life balance, avoid boredom and fatigue, introduce fresh viewpoints, and enable development of the next generation of managers. (2005, p. 191)

In order to take full advantage of Xers' leadership potential, managers will need to focus on retaining and motivating them. Lancaster observes that "One of the critical challenges facing libraries will be making sure that the few Xers they've attracted are going to stay. Xers will put pressure on libraries to provide more well-thought-out and varied career paths, more opportunities for mentoring and education, and more options to champion change" (2003, p. 37).

Managing Generation X Librarians

It is clear that Generation X librarians appreciate new challenges. Lancaster claims that "Xers are like sharks; if they don't keep moving forward, they die" (Lancaster, 2003, p. 38). Managers of Gen X workers can address this need by encouraging the Xers to take on projects in new areas, rather than "pigeonholing" them in narrowly focused positions.

In addition to challenge, Xers appreciate mobility and a humane work-life balance. Wiethoff notes that "Monetary rewards are not as influential as they were/are for Boomers. Gen Xers want to – and like to – work, but not at the expense of their families" (2004, p. 53). Managers can address Xers' needs for mobility and balance by considering alternative work schedules and by allowing Xers more freedom to telecommute.

Research emphasizes Xers strong desire for lifelong learning and professional development opportunities. Managers can accommodate this need by providing release time and funding for Xers to attend workshops and conferences, or by offering flexible scheduling that allows them to pursue additional education. By considering these needs, library managers can begin to address the challenge of retaining and motivating Generation X workers.

Research Findings About the Millennial Generation

Research about the goals and work preferences of this generation reveals that Millennials exhibit "format agnosticism," meaning that they are comfortable with multiple learning styles, information formats, and technologies. Abram explains this paradigm when he writes, "The Web and its simple, agnostic way of searching everything changed the expectations of a generation. Why do I care about the format of what I want until I need to make my choice?" (2006, p. 98).

Members of the Millennial generation are also characterized by more conservative, family-oriented worldviews than some of their preceding generations. They appreciate traditions, family, and personal relationships, and many have demonstrated a preference for more traditional, liturgical worship practices. Abram notes that there is a "trend for this generation to be more religious and spiritual as well as highly concerned about their values, principles, and ethics. … they actively seek a healthy lifestyle and exercise more than previous generations. They also have a strong family-orientation combined with some renewed traditional values " (2006, p. 100-101). This desire for tradition may be attributable to several factors: the unsatisfying moral relativism and high divorce rate of the Millennials' parents' generation, the numerous corporate and political scandals we've of the past 20-30 years, the real threat of terrorism, and the formation of a multicultural global society.

Like Gen Xers, Millennials are also achievement-minded multi-taskers who enjoy taking on new challenges. In his 2006 book *The Kids are Alright: How the Gamer Generation*

is Changing the Workplace, Beck explains that the "gamer generation" places a "high value on competence" (p. 81). As children, Millennials were encouraged to participate in many extracurricular activities, and many Millennial librarians will bring this enthusiasm and desire for new challenges into the workplace.

Finally, research shows that Millennial workers are highly team-oriented and enjoy being constantly connected to others. Years of group work in the classroom mean that Millennials are used to working closely and cooperatively with others, and the explosion of social networking sites, blogs, and web-enabled cell phones is a testament to their desire to keep in touch with the world and each other.

Millennials as Library Leaders

Given their high levels of confidence and appreciation of competence, Millennials have the potential to become strong leaders. This potential is enhanced by the Millennials' strong team work skills and cooperative work styles. Beck notes that "Members of the game generation – especially frequent gamers – are much more comfortable with involving others in making decisions [than a more authoritarian style]" (2006, p. 126).

Beck also explains that the Millennial generation's long experience with video games means that its members generally possess strong process management and problem solving skills. Millennials are not afraid of taking risks, and do not seem to be devastated by failures, at least to a certain extent.

Managing Millennial Librarians

Millennials have the potential to become strong and collegial leaders. However, this potential must be developed through experience, feedback, and mentoring. In her article on generational issues in the library workplace, Lancaster observes that the Millennial generation

is globally concerned, diverse, cyberliterate, media savvy, and environmentally conscious. Their work style is highly collaborative, in contrast to the more independent Xers. This

generation will put even greater pressure on libraries to use technology to its fullest. Millennials are multitaskers who are likely to experience multiple careers in their lifetimes, possibly with the same employer. Managers of Millennials will be kept busy attending to their needs for lifelong learning. (2003, p. 37)

Millennial librarians' desire for constant challenge may cause them to become frustrated with the sometimes slow pace of innovation in academic libraries. In order to retain these librarians and motivate them for maximum leadership potential, managers should try to address their professional needs, which in many cases are similar to those of Generation X.

Like Gen Xers, Millennials are energized by new challenges and "changes of scenery." Managers of Millennials can address this need by encouraging them to take on projects in new areas. In addition to encouraging retention and motivation, these changes of scenery will provide Millennial librarians with much-needed opportunities to develop managerial and leadership skills. Practical experience in a variety of library service environments will help Millennials acquire the practical experience they need to make their leadership potential into a reality.

Finally, one unique characteristic of the Millennial generation is that its members desire work with meaning. Millennials – especially those with a predisposition toward service professions such as librarianship – are motivated by the belief that their work helps to make the world a better place. Managers can accommodate this need by giving them leadership roles in innovative and socially-conscious projects. Essinger explains that "Projects involving new technologies, library promotions, and multiculturalism can benefit from Millennials' enthusiasm for those subjects" (2006, p. 105). Projects related to usability, accessibility, and environmental responsibility may also meet Millennials' needs for meaningful work. By considering these needs, library managers can begin to address the challenge of retaining and motivating Millennials.

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Encouraging Next-Generation Librarians' Leadership Potential

One common theme emerges from a study of Generation X and the Millennial Generation. Next-generation librarians are often reluctant to take on leadership roles in their libraries, in spite of their strong leadership potential. Although the reasons for this reluctance are complex, Hernon, Powell, and Young offer some insight. They write, "Currently, there is less inclination for many frontline librarians to assume managerial responsibilities. They probably perceive the directorship as being too demanding of one's time and energies, and they do not see the extra salary as sufficient motivation to change their mind and lifestyle" (2003, p. 4). This is especially true of Gen Xers and Millennials, who place high value on their families, hobbies, and personal lives. Mosley expands on this explanation, writing that

> Because of their lack of tolerance for bureaucracy and hierarchies, being a library director is not a presumed goal [for younger librarians]. While they do want to have an effect on their environments and futures, many Generation Xers, including managers, do not have the desire for control, recognition, and responsibility that goes with top-level jobs. They are more likely to see assuming administrative roles as a sacrifice that brings a burden of responsibility and negatively impinges on the personal relaxation and family time. (2005, p. 191).

One of the first things library leaders can do is provide authentic mentoring to younger workers. Most librarians likely receive some kind of new-employee orientation before starting a new job, and this process often includes being matched with a "mentor." But authentic mentorship is actually quite rare in the workplace, because it is time consuming and because many librarians have specialized jobs. To remedy this, library leaders should make a concerted effort to spend time developing healthy relationships with newer librarians, talking with them about possible career paths and offering useful career advice as appropriate.

Library leaders can also help prepare next-generation librarians for leadership by giving them progressive levels of responsibility. Promoting new librarians through the ranks gives them practical experience and increases their confidence in their ability to handle the increased responsibility of upper-level management.

In the process of mentoring and progressive responsibility, library leaders should be intentional about passing on practical leadership and management skills. As Millet explains, "This group of librarians needs administrators to help them develop budgeting and management skills. Less than half of the participants [surveyed] thought they would be able to gain the necessary skills at their current jobs. Junior academic librarians also thought they were deficient in project planning, fundraising, publishing, and cultivating donations/development" (2005, p. 54). Inviting newer librarians to observe these skills being put in action will help de-mystify the process of upper-level management. Millet advises managers to "include them [next-generation librarians] in administrative meetings, encourage them to apply to leadership seminars, and work to ensure that they have the confidence to take on being the boss someday" (2005, p. 54).

Although they may find their younger colleagues' needs for frequent feedback and personalized career paths frustrating, library leaders should try to take them into account in the succession planning process. Penn warns that, "The next generation of workers will be better educated and more technologically comfortable, yet they will be more difficult to satisfy unless they are treated in new ways to match their expectations of unlimited choice. Employees will essentially have to be microtargeted from day one – and given matching mentors, motivating messages, and customized loyalty programs" (2007, p. 367). Wiethoff notes that "Both of these generations value direct feedback, and providing them with this input can ease their discomfort in the work environment" (2004, p. 54). Attempting to relate to Gen X and Millennial librarians on their terms can help foster goodwill and encourage younger workers to be more

Millennials have the potential to become strong and collegial leaders.

loyal to their employers. Taking Gen Xers' and Millennials' need for work-life balance into account is also a good strategy. Mosley writes, "In order to entice them into upper administrative roles, current administrators are going to have to provide solid incentives for doing so, such as restructuring organizations for a more team-oriented environment that provides a realistic work and life balance" (2005, p. 191).

Encouraging next-generation librarians to take advantage of opportunities for continuing education can also help them decide to pursue leadership positions. These opportunities demonstrate the organization's commitment to its workers, and give new librarians safe opportunities to develop the skills they need to be leaders.

Moving newer librarians into different roles and positions is also an important action current managers can take to groom them for leadership. Lateral and vertical position changes can provide new librarians critical practical experience, and can help them avoid burnout, be more engaged and innovative, and develop the broad knowledge and perspective needed to be an effective leader.

Current library leaders can encourage next-generation librarians to consider pursuing upper-level positions by actively modeling the benefits of being an administrator. Bell writes, "If the work-life practices and behavior of the current generation of directors establishes a model upon which the next generation forms its attitudes towards library administration then today's library directors, as part of their effort to recruit and shape the next generation of leaders, needs to live and promote an image that will attract the best and brightest to academic library leadership" (2008). Administrators can appeal to Gen Xers' desire to improve processes and create change by demonstrating how administrative power can be used for those purposes. Likewise, administrators can appeal to Millennials' desire for meaningful work by demonstrating how administrative roles can be used to improve services and the wider campus environment.

Finally, library leaders should work to eliminate the veil of mystery that often surrounds administrative tasks. Including next-generation librarians in administrative processes like budget preparation and campus governance can soothe some of their fears about assuming leadership roles, and can give them practical experience in those roles.

Conclusion

Implementing the strategies recommended above may lead to the creation of a more productive, loyal, and motivated next-generation library workforce. Recognizing and making reasonable accommodations for the distinctive professional characteristics, habits, needs, and goals of Generation X and Millennial librarians may also have the positive effects of improving retention rates and cultivating a strong group of library leaders. ✠

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