Who is a one-person, or solo, librarian? And how do they manage to do what they do?

To start, it is obvious that a solo librarian (which term I will use going forward, as opposed to “one-person librarian”) generally works by himself/herself (except for some assistants, whether they are students or library paraprofessionals). Solo librarians are responsible for managing all of the library functions that are usually handled by different departments in larger libraries, such as collection development, cataloging, and circulation. Library paraprofessionals without an advanced degree in library and information science, in many libraries around the world, perform the management tasks professional librarians do in other libraries. Solo librarians work in a variety of libraries – public, school, college, and corporate – where non-solo librarians also work. They serve a diverse group of people, whether they are public library patrons, students, instructors, business people, lawyers, or doctors, to name just a few. They work varied hours and may not always be available to help their patrons (and may have to rely on student workers or volunteers to fill in the gaps of time when they are not there). They may report to a manager or may just manage their own work schedule (probably the better and the ideal of the two!). But whatever their backgrounds, education, or type of libraries they manage, solo librarians differ from their counterparts in their responsibility for running the entire library and serving their patrons, clients, or students effectively and efficiently. Solo librarians must be everything and everyone to serve their clients well, whether they are physically present in their libraries or not. But how can they manage and function to serve their patrons well? Time management, organizational management, and change management skills can help solo librarians prioritize their tasks and allow them to run their libraries effectively on their own.

Time management

The eighteenth-century French chemist Antoine Lavoisier demonstrated that matter is always conserved, never destroyed – he never knew about time, evidently! Time is a resource that always seems to slip through our fingers; how can we as librarians manage our time more efficiently and effectively to serve our patrons better? Figure 1.1

Since the first studies of industrial workers’ time a century ago, time management has been an important component of how efficient and effective workers can become by compartmentalizing and dividing their tasks. Now most solo librarians, as mentioned, must do a bit of everything to accomplish their work, so time management must help them to realize all of their tasks, not just some of these. Time management allows solo librarians to organize their work properly.
Managing the One-Person Library

Some librarians may find time management to be confining and restrictive; they believe that they do not need to create a schedule covering every possible minute of their work day in order to feel fully organized and busy at all times. But time management does not have to be so all-encompassing; solo librarians should think of it as a skeleton to embellish later with bones, muscles, blood, and organs. It should be seen as a first step in organizing their daily schedules.

What did I do to start effective time management? My plan, after I realized what my daily job requirements and duties consisted of, was to write down my specific tasks. Then I would organize those daily tasks on certain days and at certain times. For instance, shelf readings could be conducted on a given day, and cataloging on a certain day or at a certain time of day when students were in class and I could give my undivided attentions to the joys of cataloging!

But what if some event or meeting or something out of the blue arrived and threw off my entire plan? The thing to remember is that a time management schedule needs to be flexible – as most librarians realize, when there is an emergency or crisis, they are the ones everyone turns to for help (my personal motto as a librarian is “in case of emergency, break glass!”). A good time management plan takes into account meetings, time out of the library, and any daily crisis (or crises) that may occur. Plans should not be etched in stone; for instance, if I received a book shipment (sometimes up to 15 boxes at a time) from my bookseller, I would revise my schedule to allow for processing and cataloging over a period of time – say several days. I would block off certain times during the day when I could devote most of my time to this task. I would divide a project like this one into doable tasks (I like to call this “chunking” a task). With chunking, I could make what seemed an insurmountable task surmountable.

Finally, an ideal time management plan should change daily; of what use is a fixed schedule when work schedules change so often? Most solo librarians (or any librarian, for that matter) arrive at work each day, create a to-do list, and prioritize the tasks that
lie ahead of them. And since each day is different, it makes sense to have a general
time management plan that allows for daily flexibility and change if the need arises.

Time management can be summed up as follows.

• Time management allows solo librarians to accomplish their daily tasks effectively and
efficiently.
• Time management plans should be flexible to allow for any changes in a solo librarian’s
schedule.
• Time management plans should allow librarians to deal with their customers first.
• Time management plans should vary daily to allow for changes in a librarian’s tasks.
• Each and every day, create a to-do list and prioritize that list with the most important task
that needs to be completed on that day. Then prioritize other daily tasks in the order you
think those tasks need to be handled. Always remember to check off a task when you have
finished it – this may sound trivial, but I have found that checking off a finished task gives
an enormous sense of accomplishment and spurs me on to complete the next task.
• Break your larger tasks into smaller, more doable tasks that can be completed on a daily
basis – this “chunking” makes an insurmountable task or project much easier to deal with
(and keeps the hair on your head intact!). Small changes, such as chunking or checking off
completed tasks, can give a solo librarian the confidence to organize and complete daily
tasks and larger projects.

Now that we have established how important a time management plan is for solo
librarians, how do we organize such a plan? The next section deals with organization
management strategies to create successful time management plans.

Organizational management strategies

As noted, organizing and running a one-person library require good time management
skills, perhaps more so than for librarians who work in conventional libraries. And
successful time management skills require good organizational skills. How should
solo librarians organize their time successfully? What are good organizational tools
to use?

First, find an organizational method that you are comfortable with. I have noticed
that there are two methods to organize schedules and projects – written or electronic.
Some librarians not used to technology (or maybe just technophobes!) tend to favor
the paper and the pen: they create to-do lists, they write reminders for themselves,
they write dates and meeting times in a diary. In the other camp, technophile librar-
ians will opt for Blackberries and smart phones to create their daily to-do lists and
reminders about meetings. Other electronic methods, such as Excel spreadsheets or
organizational tools such as Microsoft Outlook, are also effective organizational tools
to create order out of chaos.

Which of the two is preferable? Neither – as I mentioned above, choose the or-
ganizational method you find more comfortable, and use it often. One advantage,
however, of electronic methods of organization is their portability and their ability
to store your work in them, allowing for editing, changing, or creating documents
practically anywhere a solo librarian goes. Electronic devices such as smart phones
also allow easy and frequent oral and written communication with others. There are numerous free applications for smart phones, such as EasilyDo, Evernote, and ifttt (short for “if this, then that”), which can help solo librarians manage their time. Most solo librarians can use these devices to organize information about their library budgets, acquisitions, shelf reads, and just about any other data needed to run a solo library (of course, circulation and cataloging information is usually found on a desktop or laptop library computer, but this information can easily be synched or downloaded on to a smart phone or other PDA if it is needed at a meeting or a conference, for instance). Solo librarians, I have noticed, are the ones who are interested in learning new technologies or changing their work and organizational habits, as they need to adapt and change in order to run their libraries more effectively. So if you are one of those solo librarians on the technophobic side, you may want to explore learning how to use technology to your advantage. I would suggest starting with one technology, like Microsoft Outlook, and then working your way up to other technologies. Websites like www.microsoft.com have numerous tutorials, both in PowerPoint and in audio formats, that allow you to learn a technology easily. Microsoft Outlook is a great organizational tool, with calendar and note features that allow a solo librarian not only to stay in touch with others but to organize files and messages easily. Even Google, the website that librarians love to hate, contains applications such as Google Now and Google Calendar to organize a solo librarian’s time effectively and efficiently.

Nevertheless, a hybrid model of paper and computer can work for most solo librarians, as it allows for flexibility of use in different locations (in the library itself and while traveling or commuting). The important aspect of using good organizational tools is that they allow solo librarians more time to assist and help their patrons, as well as managing the library itself. The old adage of the poor workman blaming his tools is relevant here, as solo librarians need to find what type and what level of organization tools will help them manage their libraries effectively and efficiently.

**Change management strategies**

Many management books talk about the fact that change, whether it is in the company’s hierarchy or in its policies or procedures, is a fact of life in most organizations, and many books detail how employees can embrace change to ensure a healthy and prosperous work environment for themselves and their co-workers. Librarians now use change management skills to implement new policies and procedures more effectively than in the past (Adeoyin et al., 2012; Kelly, 2010; Warnken, 2004). How can solo librarians maintain their management skills and professionalism amid changes in their organizations?

Solo librarians, as mentioned before, work in diverse settings – there are school librarians (both secondary and post-secondary), public librarians, law-firm librarians, medical librarians, and corporate librarians, to name a few. Change will occur in any organization, yet despite their differences, solo librarians embrace change in the same
way, even though the types of change may vary. How is this so? Solo librarians are usually the sole managers of their workplace, so change affects them quickly; there are no buffers of other librarians or departments to allow change to affect them in a slower fashion. And perhaps no one feels the brunt of change more than the information facilitators and disseminators, the librarians!

From experience, I can say with comfort that change happens and moves faster in smaller organizations than in larger ones. And change, whether for good or for ill, can produce stress, anger, and other forms of negative behavior. What can a solo librarian do to manage organizational change in an effective manner?

There are two parts to understanding change management: power and reason. Power consists of change management strategies for leaders, and reason consists of implementing change when you, the librarian, are not in charge of a situation.

Now, power and reason here may sound like a contradiction in terms – how can you be in charge and not be in charge? But one-person librarians, I would like to propose, are in this paradoxical position: we lead and are led. So these change management parameters can truly help us, as solo librarians, to maintain our sanity and professionalism.

So a paradox has been stated – what can solo librarians do to embrace and grow in their professional development by change management? Here are some ideas.

- First, and perhaps foremost, maintain communication with your manager as well as your co-workers. Some organizations are very good at maintaining open communication between co-workers; others, I have noted, are very poor at this. Why is this so, when communication, as most good librarians know, is the life-blood governing how well organizations function? Perhaps to keep information from workers (to have more control over their work), perhaps from laziness… Whatever the reason, maintaining open lines of communication allows solo librarians to gain a semblance of control in their work and stay ahead of the curve when it comes to change and adapting to change.

- Second, learn to adapt to change. No one, in all honesty, likes change; most people like to continue to work in the same way they have always worked, completing their tasks in the same way they have always completed them. When change does arrive, most people throw their hands in the air and decide not to change at all, contemplating a stealth campaign against their employer to do it their way or no way at all. This is not a solution; a solution is to adapt to change gradually. Like chunking tasks, adapting to change gradually gives the appearance of change not being the daunting or impossible task that it seems to be. However, change may arrive rapidly, unannounced, and all at once – what is the solution here? Accept the change willingly and, again, try to chunk it so that you are not overwhelmed by it.

- Finally, solo librarians should take a leadership role in the organization when change occurs. Librarians are the gatekeepers and the disseminators of information, and a major part of change is good communication of those policies and procedures that are going to change. Disseminating information frequently and cogently, serving on committees dealing with the policy changes, and setting an example of positive change in the library are all good strategies of change management.

Change, like death and taxes, will always exist in the workplace and in our world; the key is to understand it, embrace it, and work with it in order to serve our patrons in the best way we can as solo librarians.
Stress management

Here I give some thoughts dealing with managing stress. Many librarians do find their work to be rewarding, yet very stressful. Solo librarians can find their work even more stressful, as they are the ones who run their libraries from the ground up; they are responsible for circulation, cataloging, collection development, budgeting, and inventory, to name some responsibilities. It is important to remember here that stress never disappears totally, but can, with the proper strategies, diminish somewhat and be managed somewhat to enable solo librarians to enjoy their work and their profession. Implementing the organizational and change management strategies mentioned earlier can help to alleviate stress. Beyond this, what else can solo librarians do to alleviate stress on the job, apart from the usual deep breaths and massages? Here are some additional tips.

• Take breaks during your day. This sounds like a time-worn and obvious tip, but a change of scenery from your library can work wonders in changing your mood and your attitude towards work. If you can find a replacement for a few minutes, such as a staff member, an instructor, or even a work-study student, leaving your post for a brief time can help you put a new perspective on your work and lessen any tension you may have when a crisis or a problem arises. These breaks are especially effective after a problem lands on your desk; leaving is a great way to cool down and see your work through a new set of eyes, a set that is not focused on the task at hand. There are some librarians who believe that their libraries will fall apart and collapse if they leave their posts even for a few minutes; do not believe them for a moment! Librarians are human beings, not robots, and everyone needs a break or two during the day to maintain their sanity.

• If possible, try to work with your supervisor or manager about changing schedules or work hours; this allows for a change of pace in your work (on some levels, it’s like arriving at a new job!). Working different hours is not for everyone (some people like to adhere to the same schedule, and others, for reasons of the library they work for, cannot do this), but it’s worth a try to change your schedule for a new perspective on how to run and manage a library.

• Attend as many professional development conferences or meetings as you can, depending, of course, on your schedule. This may be difficult, especially for school librarians who usually don’t have back-up or substitutes to cover for them, but if you can do it, meeting other librarians in a professional setting, as well as learning a skill or two, is invaluable not only for professional development but for stress reduction – attending a meeting is an event to look forward to and therefore a stress reducer in its own right. Technology now affords us the professional webinar, so it is much easier for busy solo librarians to set aside a bit of time in their libraries to watch a webinar for an hour and not have to spend the time traveling away to attend professional conferences. Some may say that webinars aren’t as satisfying as live conferences or meetings, as there is no face-to-face contact, but they are a great resource if you don’t have a lot of time (or back-up) to leave your library. Podcasts serve a similar function as webinars; these technologies should definitely be embraced by those solo librarians who want to learn and to meet other librarians, but cannot leave their libraries due to either scheduling or other constraints (such as budgetary ones). I discuss professional development for solo librarians in more detail in Chapter 3.
People management

All librarians have to deal with stressful events and with people, whether they are patrons, customers, or students, to note some examples. Solo librarians, however, need to deal with certain people, such as managers, more directly than those who work in larger libraries. Solo librarians are usually the “go-to” people in many organizations, as they are the source of all information, not just from books and electronic databases. These can be tricky relationships at times, since the solo librarian not only has to answer to his/her users, but to a manager more directly and more frequently than non-solo librarians. A good relationship with a manager can make a big difference between a stressful workplace and a less stressful workplace. What can solo librarians do to maintain a good working relationship with their managers?

Be available

I am reminded of an old story attributed to the long-time Los Angeles Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda. When he first played baseball in the minor leagues, he remembered seeing a billboard for condensed milk that read “contented cows give contented milk”. He never forgot this advice as he led his teams to many National League pennants and World Series wins. And the same advice can be used by anyone who works for a manager – if you can help your manager or supervisor make her or his job a bit easier, you will be remembered by them for that. It is important not only to act professionally, of course, but to be there when they need help, and solo librarians will always need to be there and be ready to help, given they are the only librarian or information professional around in an organization.

Be ready to help and offer solutions

I recall the advice a library school professor had for us in his library management class – always offer a solution to a situation that arises. For instance, if you need to be away from your workplace during your library’s scheduled opening hours, make sure you have coverage from a student or volunteer worker in your place. A manager will appreciate your doing so instead of just saying that you have to change your scheduled opening times and not having alternative cover. Having alternative plans goes a long way to establishing good relationships with managers; they will remember your doing so and can be more amenable to budgetary and other financial allowances, for instance. Of course, they may not have the funds available to help you or grant your requests, but being available, ready to help and to offer solutions to problems will go a long way to cementing a solid, long-term relationship with management.

Take the initiative

Everyone wishes to be acknowledged for the work they do in an organization. And what better way to receive such recognition than by taking the initiative as a solo
librarian in volunteering for a project or assisting in other ways in your organization, in order not only to help with improving your organization or company, but also to enhance your profile and standing as a solo librarian? Doing so may reap benefits, such as more funding for your library maintenance and programs; there is no guarantee that such action will do so, of course, but a little goodwill on your part to help can go a long way in providing support from management for your library.

Case studies

**Amanda Tarbet, reference librarian, MGH Institute of Health Professions, Boston, MA**


Part I: Setting Goals

*The library’s and individual librarian’s goals for the upcoming year should be set at the conclusion of the previous fiscal year, ideally using the outcomes from the previous year as the basis for a new set of annual goals. Goals are subject to change depending on the overall organizational environment, and space will be made for adjustments as barriers or new ideas emerge. The goals that are set should be specific, realistic, and measurable.*

The goals for the 2014 FY are as follows:

1. Continue to provide effective reference services to students and faculty.
   a. Answer reference questions in a timely and professional manner.
   b. Update and maintain course reserves.
   c. Provide research consults or one-on-one instruction as needed.
   d. Develop and assess new and current classroom instruction sessions and workshops.
2. Create, update, and maintain various web services.
   a. LibGuides: Create new research guides as needed. Update current guides, checking for broken links, out-of-date resources.
   b. Video tutorials: Improve accessibility of current tutorials. Create new tutorials as needed.
   c. Website: Make updates as needed. Improve accessibility and usability.
3. Develop, maintain, and evaluate the physical collection.
   a. Acquire, process, and promote new materials.
   b. Evaluate, weed, and dispose of current materials as needed.
   c. Track and manage circulation of materials using ILS.
4. Market and promote library services to community members, as well as external organizations and associations.
   a. Reach out to community through newsletters, book groups, liaising with faculty, hosting events, and promo materials like custom bookmarks.
   b. Seek out and apply for appropriate grants.
   c. Participate in the greater LIS community through conference attendance, poster proposals, continuing education.
Part II: Achieving Goals

Time and task management are integral to reaching organization and individual goals. For each goal and its tasks:

1. Plan out the tasks and projects that will be necessary to reach a goal. Identify what actions need to be taken, whose assistance you may need, and evaluative measures.

Carol Munroe, Milwaukee, WI Public Schools: The one-person library overall management plan

As I am working with a library with no systems in place, there are two possible perspectives: I have no change management to worry about (and cannot improve our systems for it) or I have the highest possible level of change (one that is open to infinite improvement).

Because I am starting from scratch, I have greater latitude in choosing what systems and set-ups we will use. At this point, I am operating in the belief that our best option is preparation for future changes, particularly in technology.

At present, I know that I will have both Microsoft Outlook and OneNote available to me. I already have used these two tools together very effectively in the past to track projects from inception to completion. The Outlook Task feature handles small or routine tasks. OneNote handles the bigger picture and keeps all necessary info aggregated.

So, with these things in mind, my change management plan looks roughly as follows.

- Keep abreast of industry trends, changes, and developments through formal publications, blogs, and listservs.
- Begin collecting information – positive and negative – to decide if a program or change of interest is worth pursuing.
- If yes, pull together a proposal for the director of instruction, principal, and superintendent; make sure it’s well sourced.
- Go through any necessary rounds of research/present/revise (likely to include “how much will this cost?”).
- Publicize and present proposal to those who would be affected; get their feedback. Adjust plans as necessary.
- If everyone’s given input, the principal and director of instruction back the plan, and it’s still looking like a good idea, go for it!

As a practical example, I hope to switch from Dewey to a genre-based system in three or four years. While we could theoretically open with such a system, I firmly believe that the students’ input will be critical to making it work long term. So I will want to get the administration’s approval, poll students about how they use the library and what would make it more useful to them, and then, once all those data are collected, decide what looks like it will work and (hopefully) spend a very busy summer moving everything around.

The perk of working solo is that I’m not likely to have to argue about “what works best for everyone” when it comes to certain behind-the-scenes aspects of library management. If I want to run projects out of OneNote, I can – no disputes. The downside is that I have to research, pitch, plan, execute, and explain any changes largely on my own.
To summarize

- Successful time management strategies allow for solo librarians to budget their time wisely to serve their patrons more fully.
- Successful organizational strategies are the proper tools to use to create successful time management strategies.
- Change management strategies allow for solo librarians to thrive and to grow their libraries to serve their patrons well.
- Stress management strategies allow for solo librarians to stay focused in their work environments.
- Solo librarians need good people management skills to maintain good working relationships with their manager or supervisor.

I have demonstrated, in this chapter, some management strategies that can help solo librarians accomplish their work more effectively and efficiently; the next chapters deal with the actual management tasks that solo librarians face.

References


Further reading


Maktelow, James (2007). Manage Your Time, Work/Life Series. New York: DK Publishing. (This book is available on Amazon.com, but it appears to be out of print at this time. This is unfortunate, as it is an excellent pocket guide to time management, organization, and delegation; numerous helpful diagrams, charts, and photographs make for easy reading and, most importantly, retention!)