

## ***Travelling by yourself but not alone***

### **The OPALS many hats**

*Toni Silson & Marion Steele*

#### **Introduction**

I am going to start off the session today on one person libraries with a short discussion about the many hats we wear in our work as one person librarians. This paper was prepared with Marion Steele, the librarian at AWCH library, who unfortunately could not be here today. I will then be followed by Maria Athanasatos from the Australian Consumers Association who will be talking about conflict resolution and negotiation in the workplace. Our next speaker will be Marilyn Tandukar from Ryde Hospital Library who is doing a paper entitled *Super hero or mere mortal : stress and time management in the one person library*. Then we will hear from Tony McCumstie from Corpus Christi College Library who will be telling us how we can best cope with change in the workplace. After Tony, we have Catherine Halsall from the Prebyterian Theological Centre Library who will be looking at how the purposes of the parent body mould the mission of the library and its librarian, and how we can empower ourselves within the organisation, with specific application in a theological library. After the speakers have finished we would like to encourage a general discussion about managing a one person library, and all the panel members will be happy to answer any questions you may have, as well as welcoming your thoughts on the subject.

So what do I mean when I talk about the many hats we wear? I mean that each of us is many things to many people in our organisations. For example, some people in my workplace see me as the computer person, or the printer fixer. To others I'm the information provider they come to when they want statistics, or 'books on [something]', to help them with their studies or research or care of the patients. To still others I'm the archivist that finds old files and photos for them. To some of the patients, I'm the person that comes around periodically asking them to answer questions about what they thought of their stay in the hospital. But I am not unique. I'm sure many of you here today could tell similar stories of multi-skilling in the face of adversity and necessity.

#### **Attitude**

I have just outlined some examples of the many different roles that a one-person librarian may take. Now I want to emphasise how important your attitude to those roles is. One can look either positively or negatively towards these different roles. The positive approach is to treat the multitude of different roles as promoting interest and variety, which in turn will lead to motivation: boredom is rarely a factor for a multi-functional librarian. Alternatively the negative approach creates frustration in not having time to finish any one job well, or becoming bogged down with half finished requirements, as well as

having to function in roles for which one has received little or no training. Obviously the positive approach promotes challenge and career satisfaction whilst the negative simply foster dissatisfaction and disillusionment. I'm sure you can all guess the attitude Marion and I prefer to take!

### **What hats?**

It is important to be aware of new opportunities as they arise, as these may help you to use your versatility to expand the role, either of you personally or of the library, in your organisation. Try to make yourself and your library so necessary that they can't imagine what they would do if you weren't there! It may not always work and your management may still decide to close the library down, but in the process you'll be expanding your skills and experience and helping yourself progress to another job where these will be appreciated.

For example, in late 1996 the person who had been coordinating the computer network at the hospital where I work decided to leave, and they offered me the job. I think they thought I was the next most computer literate person in the hospital, as I had had a lot to do with the computers as a result of my determination to put things like the catalogue and Medline CD-ROMs on the network. I decided to take it on, with the proviso that I get some assistance with my clerical work, and that they send me on some courses to get me up to scratch. This was agreed to, and I have been doing it ever since.

Similarly, when they needed someone to look after the archives, they asked me, and I agreed, again with extra training being given and an increase in my hours (I had been part time). I could have seen these as extra work, too much to do, but instead I saw them as opportunities for personal and professional development and more than that, as a way of making myself necessary to the organisation. This was very important at the time as the hospital, which had previously been a Dept of Veterans' Affairs hospital, was being sold to the private sector, where I knew libraries were a very low priority. I thought that I would have a better chance to keep my job there if I had more than one "string to my bow", which eventually was the case. Then again earlier this year there was major cost cutting, and staff retrenchments. I was again given one of the best deals in the hospital. I know it wasn't the library that the executive wanted, but the computer support. But my agenda is to keep that library open and functioning, and if I have to fix a few printers to do it, I will. We both got what we wanted.

Marion's case is also an example of taking on "another role". AWCH library is the Information and Resource Centre of the Association for the Welfare of Child Health, operating as an "independent unit within the University of Western Sydney, Nepean library system. The University restructured in 1997 and required that all sections "fit" under the direct mission statement of the University as a teaching institution.

Essentially AWCH library is a community library focusing on consumer child health issues. Its clientele is drawn from all over Australia with contact by phone, fax, email as well as in person. Subsequently AWCH Library added to its functions the task of directly supporting a course within the university teaching structure. To this end the Senior

AWCH Librarian (Marion) became instrumental in promoting the development of the professional training of Hospital Play Specialists, initially as part of the Bachelor of Health Studies (Play Speciality and then progressing on to a postgraduate diploma, masters and doctorate. The AWCH Senior Librarian is part of the Steering Committee playing a major role in the coordination between the university and the profession of play specialists.

Just like me, Marion's main agenda was to keep the library open and functioning, and she gave her management what they wanted in order to get what she wanted - a win-win situation. In doing that she has also extended herself professionally and personally and increased her skills immeasurably.

Our examples may be a little on the extreme end of the spectrum of extra things we are often asked to do, but I'm sure many of you in the audience could tell other stories with the same theme - we all need to wear many hats in order to be successful in our work.

### **Necessary skills**

Finally, in order to create a balance in keeping all the roles functioning at the same time, one needs to develop the following skills:

- the ability to be flexible
- the willingness to view possible change not as a problem, but as a challenge or opportunity, either for yourself or for your library
- the development of patience to help combat frustration
- the practice of using all the creative parts of oneself
- good communication skills
- the ability to work independently and use initiative
- the ability to adapt and to implement change, and above all
- a highly developed sense of humour.

Sometimes you may feel like the "Cat in the Hat" juggling so many things in the air but you notice he still has a smile on his face - and I hope you can too.

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