

“Superhero” or “Mere mortal” Stress and time management in the one-person library

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Abstract:

The recent controversy over the image of librarians as "Superheroes" may reflect the dilemma of many one-person librarians balancing the demands of users or clients, while attempting to satisfy the expectations and standards required by the organisation in which they work. Add to this all the daily tasks, clerical, administrative, professional or unprofessional that the librarian needs to perform to keep the library running may result in stress and in some cases, burnout. Symptoms can be prevented or avoided by using stress management and time management strategies. This paper will provide you with examples tailored to the person working in a one-person library to help you survive in an ever changing technological and cultural environment.

The current controversy caused by the latest poster put out by ALIA for Australian Library Week 1998 with its "Super Hero" image reflects the dilemma of the one-person librarian. The expectations of our clients or users are in part built up by the media, some from public opinion and partly from past experiences, positive and negative, they may have had with those in our profession.

Managers in many organisations, be they corporate, government, educational or theological, also may have unrealistic expectations of librarians, and may therefore place pressures on them to perform on various levels without a full understanding of what their everyday work entails.

Unfortunately, many librarians often appear to be, by nature, perfectionists, and try to be "all things to all people". This means that the more that is expected of them the more they try to perform, often with the result that they become stressed or become subject to burnout. We are after all mere mortals, with partners; children, and some of us, elderly parents to care for; bills and mortgages to pay, in other words a life to live. We also all have our strengths and weaknesses and with the pressures of life in today's world are often subject to stressors and influences within our personal and working environments. Most of us cannot afford a "life coach" to help with career and financial advice, goal setting, personal grooming etc. - most of us have to sort it out ourselves!

We have, over the past five to ten years, experienced an incredible change in the workplace where "restructuring" and "downsizing" have become part of everyday language, budgets for most libraries in all spheres diminishing, being told to "do more with less" on a regular basis. This atmosphere demands of us as "one-person librarians" (OPALS) to be more creative in the way we manage our libraries and information centres and promote them to our organisations in order to survive. One way we can do this is to manage our time better.

Time can be regarded as a commodity or a resource. Whichever way we look at it there never seems to be enough of it. Richard Neville, in a recent article in the *Good Weekend*, asks:

Where has it gone? The faster everything happens, the quicker time disappears. Food, news, knowledge and puberty comes at us quicker, leaving us breathless. The fax from afar doesn't 'save' us the week formerly lost to airmail - it devours it. The triumph of tea bag over teapot allows neither minutes nor mind state to savour the brew. (Neville,1998)

The huge increase of fact-based knowledge, especially on the Internet had led to a new sense of time - "net time". Neville claims:

Cyberspace can resonate with inner space. A mouse-click captures Christian liturgies, the classics of philosophy, obscure Buddhist mantras. Seven minutes on the Net can equal seven years in Tibet. (Neville, 1998)

We still all have 24 hours, or if you prefer it, 1440 minutes in each day. We need to be effective in the way we manage the time we have available to us, especially as OPALs because we are the one person the library service depends on, and this can be a huge responsibility or a challenge. Taking on the challenge and managing our time well can make our lives easier and our jobs even more enjoyable.

Helen Gothberg, in her article "Time Management and the Woman Library Manager", lists time wasters:

External

Telephone Calls
Meetings
Lack of objectives
Handling emergencies
Distractions - visitors, email, etc

Internal

Indecision
Estimating time realistically
Inability to say "no"
Lack of self-discipline
Unclear communication

Telephone call tips

Outgoing calls

- Take the initiative in making calls - don't hesitate if it's difficult or unpleasant
- Don't make calls too early in the day - give people time to settle in - and don't ring too late - we all have a home to go to!
- Keep the call short and to the point .

Incoming calls

- Don't let the phone ring more than three times - a quick response spells efficiency.
- When answering identify the library or organisation and your name to let the caller know who they are speaking to.
- Check your Voice mail or answering machine regularly and always reply to messages.
- If you cannot answer your caller's question immediately, take their details and call back, if possible the same day.

Meetings

- If you do have to chair meetings, keep them short and don't let people stray from the agenda.
- When the meeting is finished - make two lists - one of everything you did right and one of things you could have done better - review these before the next meeting.

Self-discipline

We can all find time to do the tasks we enjoy - for me personally it's doing literature searches and the more varied and challenging the better! But while I'm searching there are always journals to be accessioned, books to be catalogued, staff members to liaise with and the list goes on. With all OPLs there is the constant balancing act between managerial and professional duties and those tedious clerical tasks which make up the day. Of course it is the one thing which makes our jobs so interesting! With time management a well planned day can achieve most of the assigned tasks by using prioritisation.

Nine steps to efficient time management

1. List your goals
2. Rank your goals as: Most Important; Second in importance; Least important
3. Set priorities to achieve most important goals
4. Make a daily "to do" list
5. Prioritise your list
6. Continually ask "What's the best use of my time right now?"
7. Handle each piece of paper only once
8. Delegate some tasks if you have voluntary help
9. Do it now!

Ideally we can plan our weeks or even our days to a certain extent and it's always advisable to use a diary, a desk calendar or a computer schedule as found on many of the word processing packages, as a prompt. We all know that in every day there are the inevitable interruptions, the requests for urgent interlibrary loans, the telephone request for that little bit of trivia, which can disrupt our routine, but these require flexibility and an ability constantly to adjust our schedule or daily plan so that Task A becomes Task B and Task C may become tomorrow's problem!

Stress and stressors

Stress may be defined in many ways. Occupational stress can be described as: *'the reaction in people to excessive demands, pressures and expectations'*. (Worksafe, 1997). Berry (in Ollendorf) describes burnout as: *'a specific way of coping with stress caused by a lack of sufficient internal or external resources'* (Ollendorf, 1989).

We are all too familiar with the symptoms of stress and burnout: anxiety; irritability; sadness or lowered self-esteem; fatigue; and related psychosomatic problems such as : insomnia; headaches; backache; high blood pressure - the list goes on!

Stressors are cited by many studies (Elliott, Hodges, Ollendorf), some of which are listed below. We can no doubt recognise those particular to our own organisations and library situations:

Stressors

- Paperwork
- Work overload
- Physical environment
- Decision making
- Technological change
- Workplace conflicts
- Organisational climate and structure
- Communication – with clients & management
- Performance evaluation
- Accreditation
- Low pay rates
- Isolation from peers
- Decreasing budgets
- Unrealistic expectations – clients, management

There are many stress management courses and programmes available – and many practical self-help books in bookshops and libraries. While it is not possible to summarise all of the information available I have compiled a few tips which may be helpful in the workplace and also in your daily life. Remember they are only suggestions and what works for someone else may not work for you.

Stress breakers

Workplace

1. Reorganise your workplace - make it as comfortable as possible for you and your users, ergonomic furniture, safe handling procedures but also posters, flowers, lighting, etc can do wonders for your morale and feeling of well-being.
2. Set goals (performance plans, mission statements) and stick to them!
3. Network, network, network - local, state, national, global (ANZTLA, List-Servs, Newsletters, ALIA OPL Group)
4. Professional Development - attend courses on computer software or Internet skills; get involved in: conferences, seminars, workshops, journal clubs.
5. Learn to say NO - when overcommitted.
6. Be assertive in your relationships - state your limitations.
7. Make a weekly list of achievements - books catalogued, searches done, etc.

Self

1. Cultivate a sense of humour - find friends to laugh with!
2. Include some physical exercise in your daily routine - walking, swimming, etc
3. Take up a hobby - gardening, belly dancing, pottery, craft, accapella - whatever you enjoy.
4. Try meditation/yoga/tai chi for their relaxing effects.
5. Give yourself a break at least once a week - have coffee/tea with a friend, see a film, concert, buy something special for yourself!
6. Find a good listener - a colleague or a friend to discuss issues and problems.

Conclusion

Remember one thing : as one -person librarians we are not "alone". As members of ANTZLA and ALIA and many other groups we are part of one huge group of professionals doing our absolute best for our institutions and organisations.

In order to survive we need to:

Promote our libraries to our organisations - tell them what we do; and how well we do it!

- Set realistic goals for ourselves and our libraries.
- Define our objectives with performance measures and indicators.
- Develop competencies for our particular group (OPL's) to give us more esteem and clout in the workplace.

Guy St Clair, in the rationale for the OPL Manifesto, published in February 1998, describes the OPL of the future:

One Person Librarians are leading the way into a productive and successful information future for society. OPLs have the information skills, professional expertise, management ability, organisational proficiency and the complete and recognised mastery of customer service and interpersonal relations that guarantee success for information providers in today's information delivery marketplace. (St. Clair, 1998)

Whether we see ourselves as "Superheroes" or "Mere Mortals" is really a turn of phrase - what really matters is what we achieve on a day to day basis, meeting the needs of our clients in the most effective and efficient manner. If we can do this while still maintaining our common sense and humour, and with an eye to our own personal well-being and health , we will be well on our way towards "surviving" as one person librarians in the Year 1998!

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