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Presentation notes

The current economic situation affects archives and archivists both professionally and personally. Rosemary Flynn and Caryn Radick discuss practical implications of coping with diminished resources without losing spirit. How can we say “no” to overburdening demands, stick to our priorities, and survive in today’s environment?

I have always had what I think of as a healthy cynicism toward the self-help genre. The idea of paying for a book that is somehow going to fix your life has always struck me as improbable. However, back in the early 2000s, I was deeply unhappy with my career in publishing...I decided that checking one or two career advice books out of the library would be okay...no one would have to know. I found a lot of the advice impractical (by which I mean I wasn't going to follow it), but there was one piece of advice that made me pause...[I think this book was called "I Can Do Anything, If Only I Knew What That Was"]. The advice was to think about whether there was a job that you may have expressed an interest in, but dismissed the possibility of doing it almost immediately. My reaction was "no. wait...yes there is..." I remembered that I had had several conversations someone who was getting a masters and then his PhD, where I would ask him about how his research was going. Sometimes he would tell me about going to the Thomas Edison archives, or the Bronx Zoo archives...and I would think, "I wonder how you get a job like that...anyway, back to the editorial salt mines." The next piece of advice was to examine why you'd dismissed it and to learn more about the steps to take to get that job. Listing all my steps may not be necessary, but I credit my self-help book experience (as much as it may pain me to admit) to helping me see a career as an archivist as an actual possibility. So, it's worth asking, is there something that might help that you haven't done because it isn't your habit to do so?

Trying to think about what to say that would add to the discussion about managing and working in archives in hard times took me back into self-help/how-to territory. A lot of the advice given isn't new, but hearing it enough times or put in a certain way can help reframe the situation in such a way as to bring you to a new realization.

A good deal of advice about navigating difficulty has to do with accepting what you have control over and accepting (and not worrying about...good luck with that) what you can't. There are some unavoidable truths of life that one faces in dealing with...well life. The first is that you only have so much control (if that) over your archives, your job, and issues that confront them both. The second is that unfortunately, there is no magic formula that means hard work and effort will be rewarded with security (and dare I say promotion...). It is important to acknowledge that sometimes, good workers lose their jobs.... In the end, what I've discovered to be most important

is to try to look at yourself and the reality of your job and your organization, try to maximize your value (likewise your department or organization's), and have some back up plans (I think having several can make you feel less helpless).

At a New York Archivists' Round Table panel discussion on Archives in Difficult Times that I attended in July, a number of panelists pointed out that archivists are probably more accustomed to weathering uncertainty than members of a most other professions. Those entering the archival profession tend to be aware of the finite nature of many archives jobs and are used to having to consider what happens next. So, we've faced this before, and I've faced this before...and this is helpful because it makes me realize I have a plan or plans in place. Maybe I haven't followed up on all of them in the same way that I used to just dismiss the idea of being an archivist, but I can see some possibilities and think out some of the steps I'd need to take to get there. Seeing what the worst can mean also tells me that I'll probably get through it, but I am also aware of the potential for struggle and the need to make sacrifices.

This brings me to the idea of empowerment. It is important to do what you can for yourself to see what is in your power, and for managers, I think it is vital to encourage your employees to view themselves in those terms as well. Recognizing individual contributions and how they help the archives function (and excel) is important.

Another part of your assessment should be considering the avenues and opportunities open and available to you should your job come to an end...or considering how you might have to do your job effectively with "less" whether that refers to people, time, or money.

Both issues of what is under your control and where your power lies (I don't view these as being the same thing) require some self assessment. On the job, you want to work to those strengths that also demonstrate your value to your organization (or your organization or department) to your larger structure. Some strategic self promotion can be useful (sending e-mails or blog posts about recent achievements for example). If nothing else, they'll serve as a good record for you to revisit as you work on your resume

I can say that at my workplace, the new reality of the economy has been factored in the most regarding our planning, particularly in regard to the amount of help we might have in the form of hourly workers. In one sense, we've benefitted from the poor economy in that a number of library school students interested in archives have either arranged their work-study jobs with us or are even volunteering, trying to gain experience that they will take with them as they search for jobs. I think they set a good example for dealing with the reality of their situations. They want experience, and although getting paid would be better, it's difficult to find work, particularly work that is related to the field, so they're in it for the experience. As I've mentioned, we benefit in being able to move several projects along that might have otherwise stalled for lack of people to work on them.

I have heard a line of advice to not worry about the things out of your control. I understand the logic of this thinking (nothing you can do about x...why spend time worrying about it), but I've never found the advice to not worry very helpful (in fact it makes me feel worse for being unable to stop worrying). In some ways, worrying helps you see what you view as your worst case scenario. From there, you can start taking yourself. It might be good to consider, what if something doesn't happen, because then you can start thinking through your possibilities.

Another recommendation made at the NYART meeting was to make sure you take and encourage others to take the days off that are available to them. Although it may be truly hard to disconnect, time away can help ensure that you have energy to deal with whatever comes up in the workplace.

Some Resources:

Looking at this issue has led me to some interesting resources, not all library focused. Some of the advice given is common sense, like the ALA's Advocating in a Tough Economy Toolkit. (<http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/advocacy/advocacyuniversity/toolkit/index.cfm>).

Whether in an advocacy situation, for internal use to determine your department or archives' goals, or just to help focus in on individual desired outcomes, the "message worksheet" they provide it is helpful in trying to prioritize.

Along with the "survival" component, it is also important to consider the mental and emotional energy given to one's job. I also found it helpful to refer to Melanie Hawks's *Life-Work Balance* (an ACRL Active Guide) while considering how important it is to take a step back from the job and enjoy other parts of your life. Two particular points she made about balance that apply to the current situation is that balance is finding the right mix, which entails trade-offs and sacrifices...the hard choices aren't between good and bad, but between good and good or good and better. Obviously, this can be difficult.

Hawks's booklet has several exercises designed to help the reader see their way towards better balance. One exercise she invites the reader to do is to consider how they currently spend their time, versus how they would spend their time ideally and compare the two. From there you can see what parts of your life you would like to keep, and which you'd like to be different. I think this can be a valuable exercise not just in terms of work-life balance, but in seeing which aspects of your work and personal life hold the most meaning and value for you.

Another resource I tripped over and found myself enjoying was a book called *The Amazing Adventures of Working Girl* in which the author Karen Burns documents the 59 jobs she held and what she learned from each one. Burns also incorporates a few exercises designed to help the reader envision the bigger picture of their career's progress.

Works Referred to:

- 1a) American Libraries Association: Advocating in a Tough Economy Toolkit
<http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/advocacy/advocacyuniversity/toolkit/index.cfm>
- 1b) ALA Web site: Advocating in a Tough Economy—Making the Case: Message Worksheet
[http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/advocacy/advocacyuniversity/toolkit/makingthecase/mes
sageworksheet.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/advocacy/advocacyuniversity/toolkit/makingthecase/mes
sageworksheet.cfm)
- 2) Karen Burns, *The Amazing Adventures of Working Girl: Real-Live Career Advice You Can Use*, (Running Press: Philadelphia, Penn.), 2009.
- 3) Melanie Hawks, *Life-Work Balance*, ACRL Active Guide (ACRL: Chicago, Ill., 2008)
- 4) Barbara Sher and Barbara Smith, *I Could Do Anything If Only I Knew What It Was: How to Discover What You Really Want and How to Get It*. (Dell Trade: New York, 1995).