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The Librarian Entrepreneur? Demystifying an Oxymoron

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My father was an auto mechanic. For both hobby and profit he would acquire cars with minor damage, fix them like new, drive them briefly, and then sell them. I recall one vehicle in particular, a 1958 kelly green Cadillac. Growing up we had many different cars, but this one was memorable. Thanks to seatbelts and car seats today's children are secured in place. The massive backseat of a 1958 Cadillac was anything but secure. The four rambunctious children under age eight jumped about as if at the playground. Only when my mother grew fearsome that one of us would accidentally hit the car's too-easy-to-open door handle and fly out onto the road did my father's inner entrepreneur kick into gear.

You may think this story culminates with a great invention or innovation that revolutionized auto door safety or launched the child restraint. While Dad had all the hallmarks of an entrepreneur he lacked only the instinct for market desirability. Dad's solution was innovatively unique; it was risky in its conception and implementation and recognized an opportunity ripe for the taking. His solution was to remove the handles and replace them with what I can only describe as a sharp object that certainly kept us children far from the doors. The innovation worked but it probably would fail to pass muster of any consumer safety agency. Was Dad an entrepreneur?

Do You Know An Entrepreneur?

The point of the story is that knowing who is an entrepreneur and what makes that person entrepreneurial is a nebulous thing. A person may have some of the characteristics, but what if he or she never succeeds? Was taking a risk enough? And what if their idea is great and works, but provides little value? So I began to explore the concept of the librarian entrepreneur to see if such an animal exists. I first asked librarians, at conferences mostly, if they could name a librarian entrepreneur. The vast majority came up blank.

Here are a few interesting observations though about the names I did get. They fell into three distinct categories: (1) co-workers; (2) non-librarians who create library products; (3) actual librarians. Colleagues may perceive a co-worker with a reputation for trying new things as the entrepreneurial type, but these folks rarely fit the model of a true entrepreneur. Folks like **Tim Spaulding** of **LibraryThing** and **Eugene Garfield** of **ISI** are classic entrepreneurs who serve the library market or offer library-oriented services; neither is a librarian. While I did get the names of a few actual librarians, none emerged as a consistently recognized library entrepreneur.

Perhaps the most interesting comment I received came from the librarian who said "I can think of some who are innovative but not really entrepreneurial." The difference between the two is murky, and it's not surprising

that a librarian could be perceived as innovative but not necessarily entrepreneurial. Our commonly held perception of entrepreneurs is that they take big risks on big deals and make — or lose — big money. **Bill Gates** or **Donald Trump** are two names I heard frequently when I asked those same librarians to name any entrepreneur; they fit that classic perception. Start-up business people also fit the classic entrepreneur model. They focus on a single big idea and put everything they have into it, their money, their time, their energy, and if they fail they lose it all. That may be what separates the entrepreneurs from the innovators. The former take the risk-it-all on one big thing approach, while the innovator needs only to create something new that is of value to some-

one. So while librarians may be innovative, they rarely would fit the traditional image of a classic entrepreneur. But we can identify librarians with entrepreneurial spirit doing entrepreneurial things at their entrepreneurial libraries. Good examples abounded at the **Entrepreneurial Conference**.

Five Characteristics of Entrepreneurs

But would the experts in entrepreneurship agree? To better understand the qualities and characteristics I visited the **Center for Entrepreneurship** at my institution. There I gathered information and attended workshops on developing entrepreneurial skills. I condense here all I discovered into five characteristics of entrepreneurs; you may argue there are others, such as passion or customer focus. A librarian entrepreneur need not demonstrate all five, but should be able to identify how these qualities contribute to their ability to achieve innovation and get things done. The characteristics are:

- **Opportunistic:** Israel is the global leader in wastewater re-use. This arid country must excel at recycling water to survive, and has invented technologies that allow it to re-use 70% of its wastewater. Until just recently no other countries cared. With a few sustained droughts and the global green movement Israel now has an opportunity to entrepreneurially export its technology abroad. With the world knocking at its door Israel is set to capitalize on the moment.
- **Creative Genius:** In the movie *Flash of Genius* physics professor **Robert Kearns** is portrayed as having a "creative genius" moment while driving in a rainstorm. The idea for the intermittent windshield wiper pops into his head and he goes on to invent and market the wiper. Although such moments may oc-

cur, it is more likely that creative ideas come from teams of eclectic colleagues. Creative companies like **Pixar Films**, which creates animated films based on "ideas no one has ever thought of before," uses entrepreneurial teams to generate their amazing film projects. To them, the idea of the lone creative genius is more myth than reality.

- **Persistence:** In 1991, a few years prior to the Web explosion, **Tim Berners-Lee**, the entrepreneur who realized the power of the hyperlink, actually had a paper on hyperlinking rejected from a conference on Internet technology. Entrepreneurs refuse to quit when their ideas are rejected or when their first attempts fail. Rather, they persist because they passionately believe in their ideas. Ultimately some will fail and move on to new projects, but others such as **Tim Berners-Lee** become forever associated with revolutionary products and services.

- **Connect the Dots:** We all read, hear and view much of the same information. Yet entrepreneurs are able to derive the insights and ideas everyone else overlooks. By connecting the dots between disparate events and trends they see possibilities where none currently exist. The founders of **Expedia.com** saw that the convergence of secure Web commerce, sophisticated reservation systems, user preferences for self-service and widespread Internet access laid the foundation for an online travel service. They created a new industry by connecting the dots.

- **Risk-Taking:** This is the one characteristic everyone associates with entrepreneurs. Some entrepreneurs, like extreme athletes, risk their health and well being for their passion. Librarian entrepreneurs take risks by stretching beyond their regular responsibilities to implement new innovations in their libraries or for the profession. There are many ways to take risks and some will risk it all, but the smartest entrepreneurs take risks in ways that limit their exposure to complete loss.

Seven Tips for Aspiring Librarian Entrepreneurs

Taking into account all I heard, observed and learned about entrepreneurs I developed a list of seven suggestions for librarians seeking to channel their inner entrepreneur or for library organizations that want to establish an entrepreneurial culture. There may be other ideas beyond these seven, such as keeping up with the latest information, making daily time for thought and reflection or as **Clayton**

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Christensen suggests, never being in a state of doing nothing. If you think of good ones please share them.

- **Listen/Observe:** Sounds simple but so often we fail to pay attention to the simplest things. What are patrons complaining about? What mistakes do you see them make on your Website? What student trends are emerging on your campus? Entrepreneurs discover problems and create solutions. It begins by having the antennae positioned to pick up the right signals.
- **Accept Hard Work:** Multiple presenters demonstrated that nothing comes easy for entrepreneurs. Coming up with ideas means implementing them and that requires dealing with budgets, deadlines, more staff and all manner of hurdles. Librarians often fear success more than failure, as success means having to do the real work to make an idea come to fruition.
- **Break a Few Rules:** The entrepreneur's motto is "It is better to ask for forgiveness than permission." If not rules, then at least avoid allowing policies to hamper staff creativity and innovation. Too often our new-to-the-profession colleagues are excited by their LIS education and are eager to try new ideas, only to have senior colleagues construct barriers out of rules and policies. Let's not let policies and procedures get in the way of our budding entrepreneurs.
- **Balance Risk and Evolution:** Risk-taking is almost synonymous with entrepreneurship. But not all entrepreneurial endeavors need be risky if it's evolutionary. For example, starting a text reference service may involve a degree of risk, but as an evolution of past digital reference services there is risk mitigation. The library has experience with this type of technology, and if text reference fails there are existing fallback options. So for your next entrepreneurial venture think evolution.
- **Develop Sticky Ideas:** The practicing entrepreneur, **Jon Obermeyer**, who delivered the luncheon keynote at the **Entrepreneurial Librarians Conference** discussed the "elevator pitch." All entrepreneurs have to effectively communicate their idea in a compelling, convincing way in just 30 seconds; that may be all the time a potential financier will give. Read the book *Made to Stick* to learn how to construct sticky messages that are simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, stories — in other words: **SUCCESSful**. If you can do this you'll gain the support of your colleagues for your next entrepreneurial idea.
- **Use the Zoom Out Lens:** In times of crisis, according to **Jim Collins**, author of

against the grain people profile

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BORN & LIVED: Philadelphia.

EARLY LIFE: I'm a lifelong Philadelphia resident.

FAMILY: Married with two grown sons (ages 27 and 25).

EDUCATION: BA at **Temple University**, MLS at **Drexel University**, EdD at **University of Pennsylvania**.

FIRST JOB: **Institute for Scientific Information** (real first job – cleaning fish tanks as a pet store).

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Focus on academic librarianship; blended librarianship; design and user experience; active in **ACRL**.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE: Writing, cycling, fitness training and gardening.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Mostly business/design books such as *The Designful Company*, *Making Meaning and Subject to Change*, but I do wish for one more **Travis McGee** novel.

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: Bloggers who write about their own blog posts at **LISNews**; over-the-top shameless self promoters.

PHILOSOPHY: Better to have too much to do than not enough.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Helping a colleague get an article or presentation accepted – especially their first time.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Develop a robust and fully realized library user experience that makes a difference for community members.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: The options for information search and retrieval will expand both in terms of the number of possibilities and devices for capturing content. Librarians will be challenged to compete on a technological level. Over the next five years we need to create library organizations that leverage relationships and the meaning that people derive from them – something we've always been good at but must build on and prioritize to remain relevant to our communities. 🐻

Good to Great and other leadership books, most workers tend to zoom in on the crisis of the moment. We need to deal with immediate concerns, but real entrepreneurs use their "zoom out" lens to stay focused on two or three years out and contemplate where the organization should head and what it will take to move in that direction. By zooming out we engage our inner entrepreneur as we spot new ideas and technologies on the horizon.

- **Be a Problem Finder:** Designers think of themselves as "problem finders" not problem solvers. That means you need to first immerse yourself in the users' experience and figure out what's broken in your library. All entrepreneurial triumphs begin with problem identification. This is a lousy mousetrap, can't someone make a better one! If library improvement begins with hunting down solutions to attach to unspecified problems then there's a real problem — a dysfunctional process. Our practicing entrepreneur spoke of a six-step process he and all other entrepreneurs

use. Guess what the first step was. Yep. Identify the problem.

Change the World One Idea at a Time

I began my research by asking colleagues to name a librarian entrepreneur. If someone asked me that same question I could answer in a flash. Librarian entrepreneur may not be the phrase I would have used to describe these colleagues, but now I realize it fits the opportunistic, creative, innovative and potentially risky projects that continue to define their careers. In fact, I captured video interviews of each one giving their advice on how to build and promote an entrepreneurial culture in the library organization. You can seek out that video on the conference Website, but let it suffice to say that each spoke to the importance of all those characteristics and tips given above. Perhaps one summed it up best by encouraging the conference attendees to go back to their libraries with their new ideas for products, services or resources and to set out to change the world one step at a time. Sounds like good advice for us all. 🐻