

April 2012

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Recommended Citation

Harris, Laura (2012) "Joining the Dark Side," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 24: Iss. 2, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6128>

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Joining the Dark Side

by **Laura Harris** (Community Specialist & Trainer, Springshare, LLC, Miami, FL) <laura@springshare.com>

About a year-and-a-half ago, **Slaven Zivkovic**, the CEO of **Springshare**, offered me a chance to switch to the “dark side” — in other words, to leave my position as a Web services librarian in an academic library in order to work for a vendor.

I’d never worked for a vendor before, and I’d never pictured myself working for a vendor, either. Nevertheless, I happily took **Slaven** up on his offer, for two reasons.

On a personal level, I felt working with **Springshare** would be in line with my professional interests. I was very interested in gaining more technical knowledge, and I knew that working with a software development company would be educational in this respect.

I also took the position because I’d already developed a strong relationship with the company. The academic library I worked at was an early adopter of **LibGuides**, and as the **LibGuides** administrator, I often corresponded with **Springshare**. As a customer, I found **Slaven** to be a very engaged leader, and the rest of the **Springshare** staff was equally attentive and accommodating in terms of both support and feature development.

As a professional, one of my priorities is to work with an organization that is engaged with the communities it serves. **Springshare** was (and is!) passionate about serving libraries and librarians, and I was excited by this unique opportunity to engage with the library community in a different way.

How Academia Prepared Me For This Position: What’s Similar

My position at **Springshare** involves providing technical and training support, and I knew from the beginning that my experience as an academic librarian would serve me well. On one level, my former job responsibilities prepared me for my current job responsibilities. Providing technical support over the phone and through email is not dramatically different from answering reference queries in the same manner. I find myself thinking back to **Dewdney and Ross’s *Flying A Light Aircraft*** — “without speaking, she began to type” — and as a result, always try to keep our clients informed of what I’m doing (especially when chatting on the phone). My experience providing instruction to former colleagues and students has also helped me excel at training our clients on **Springshare** products.

Perhaps more importantly, my experience as a librarian has made it easier for me to relate to our customers. All of my colleagues on the Community & Training team at **Springshare** are also former librarians. We understand library jargon. We understand the needs and challenges libraries face — having faced many

of these challenges in our own professional lives.

The Community & Training team also provides a vital voice in terms of development. We help the coders determine what features are important or critical to add to feature releases of our products. We rely heavily on customer feedback in determining these features, but we also call upon our own experience as librarians to inform our recommendations.

What Academia Didn’t Prepare Me For: What’s Different

Joining **Springshare** brought its fair share of changes. One of the most notable changes was the work environment. In my last position, I worked in a cubicle and shared the room with nine coworkers. Now, I work from home. As you can imagine, that was a dramatic shift!

Working from home comes with a number of freedoms and benefits: no commute, a flexible schedule, and of course, the oft-touted ability to work in one’s pajamas. However, it also has its drawbacks — home holds its own distractions and disturbances. These distractions can be tempting, like a good television show, or frustrating, like one’s landlord mowing the lawn during a teleconference.

I was also unprepared for differences due to the company’s size. I think many people assume that library vendors are large corporations; however, **Springshare** has fewer employees than my last place of work. The smaller size of the team is a boon: knowledge is freely shared among teammates, interoffice politics are nigh non-existent, and there’s a culture of appreciation. We frequently share positive feedback from clients with one another — whether the feedback was directed at the sender or someone else in the company. I also feel that there is slightly more levity and humor in our interactions than I have had in my previous workplaces.

While the tone of our internal communication is different, we use familiar tools to communicate with one another: email, phone, instant messaging, and so on. These tools, however, take on a different level of importance within our company. In my current position, between internal discussions and client emails, I receive approximately 200 email messages per day. The goal of “inbox zero” — something off-touted by productivity experts such as **David Allen** — is highly impractical in our work environment.

The most unexpected — and delightful — difference I’ve encountered at **Springshare** is how quickly things get done. I believe there are a number of reasons for this:

- As mentioned above, the company is not large — the formation of committees is

generally unnecessary. Most projects I’ve worked on involve my whole team (the Community & Training team).

- Simply put, **Springshare** is a software company. In order to stay competitive and meet the needs of libraries, our products must change. It follows that everything associated with our products must change as well: sales pitches, help documentation, training sessions, etc.

By necessity, we the employees must have less fear of failure and less fear of change.

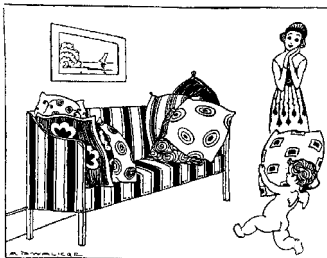
I feel that our training program is an excellent example of this. In the course of the past year, the program has changed dramatically. For example, we stopped offering training sessions to individual clients, because it had become unsustainable. We began by offering separate training sessions for our **LibGuides** and **CampusGuides** training sessions, but eventually merged the sessions. We’ve also needed to thoroughly revise the content of our training sessions, based on an important code update we completed a few months ago. In early 2012, we will be revising our offerings once again — our basic training sessions are currently two two-hour sessions, and we are shortening these sessions based on client feedback. Even though I am part of the team, I am impressed that the training program has evolved so markedly in the period of a year — I don’t believe this would have been possible if not for a willingness to experiment and change.

- As I mentioned above, when our products change, everything else must change as well. In order for the team to operate efficiently, projects and tasks often change hands as needed in order to get completed. It is not uncommon for documentation created by one person to be updated by another person — whether that documentation is a help guide, FAQ, etc. I do not need to ask my coworkers for permission to update their past work; I simply let them know it’s done. My colleagues feel free to do the same with documentation that I’ve authored.

Overall, I believe we have a culture where we do not feel deeply and *personally* invested in projects — while we take pride in what we do and are *professionally* invested 100%, we are not “personally attached.” I believe this is a positive thing. In addition to allowing us to work quickly and efficiently, I believe it has helped us develop trust in each other’s expertise and competency.

Most of the points I’ve described above describe my day-to-day work environment; while I do not attend library conferences frequently, I’ve definitely found attending them as a vendor is a different experience than attending

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as an academic. Since joining **Springshare**, I've attended two large conferences — **ACRL** and **ALA Annual**. When attending these conferences as an academic, my focus tended to be on attending (and sometimes giving) presentations. As a vendor, the majority of my time was spent in the exhibit halls. I find this experience to be invigorating, if a bit hard on the feet. It was incredibly satisfying to speak to so many people! In my opinion, networking with colleagues is one of the primary reasons for attending a conference — and I feel I succeed at this goal much better as a vendor than I could as an academic librarian.

What I Miss About Academia

Although I've discovered and embraced the many advantages to being a vendor, I must admit that I sometimes miss academia. Specifically, I miss interacting with students and faculty. I am perpetually curious about students, their information needs, how they go about fulfilling those needs, and how their information-seeking strategies differ from my own. I loved working with faculty, especially learning how they use technology to enhance their teaching and how library resources can contribute to their work. Thankfully, working for a vendor has not prevented me from learning about students' information needs and faculty's use of educational technology — but it has, by necessity, put me slightly farther away from the conversation.

Conclusion & Reflections

In the introduction to this piece, I stated that I had never imagined working for a vendor. I think this is not an unusual mindset; many librarians deviate from and often outright shun this career path. I'd like to encourage people to reconsider this attitude. I think all vendors that serve libraries need to hear the voices of librarians — and sometimes, we have greater voice and power from working within.

Don't mistake me, though — vendors are not the only ones who can benefit from partnering with librarians. This position has been invaluable in helping me hone and expand upon my technical skills. Working for a vendor may be an excellent way for you to advance your own professional goals.

I've appreciated the opportunity to share my experience with you; I hope you will feel free to contact me with any questions you might have about working for a vendor. 🌱

also promised to run a **Provost's Panel**. We also have **Anurag Acharya**, Founder and lead engineer of **Google Scholar**, **Peter Brantley**, Director, **Bookserver Project**, **The Internet Archive**, **Kirsten Eschenfelder**, Professor,

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Lessons Learned

by **Amira Aaron** (Associate Dean, Scholarly Resources, Northeastern University Libraries)

As a “seasoned” librarian who has transitioned more than once between the academic library and vendor world, I have been thinking lately about several themes which unite all of my work experiences to date. In the past, we've often concentrated on the differences, but I think now that the similarities are really more important.

First, just a little about my background. I've had the good fortune of being on the staff of several excellent academic libraries, including **UCLA**, **MIT**, **Harvard**, **Brandeis**, and, currently, **Northeastern University**. But my career was also greatly enriched by the opportunity to work for serial vendors including **Faxon** (twice), **Readmore** and **Blackwell**, and to consult for some others.

So here are the major themes I'd like to discuss in this context:

1. Leadership
2. Innovation and Entrepreneurship
3. Customer Service
4. Collaboration
5. The Bottom Line
6. Trust, Transparency, and Respect
7. Need for Market Research and Prioritization
8. Technology
9. Organizational Culture and Staffing

Leadership

I am fortunate to have worked with a few incredible leaders in the industry — both at vendors and libraries. These leaders had clear vision and were willing to take serious risks. I think about **Dan Tonkery** and **Russell Shank** at **UCLA** who foresaw the potential early on of automating the library and made it happen. **Dan** then went on to expand his vision and leadership at more than one serials vendor. I can also point to **Will Wakeling** at **Northeastern**, who has a vision of transforming the library's value proposition on-campus and is guiding us carefully through that transformation. I never had the opportunity to work for **Ex Libris**, but have observed the vision of staff such as **Oren Beit-Arie**, bringing to the industry developments such as **SFX** (openURL linking), integrated search, recommender systems, and now a cutting-edge ILS in the cloud. These leaders are not content to accept the status quo and are always working towards an improved future and better service for their clients.

But one caveat here. It's not enough to be visionary. Leaders need also to know their market, know how to effectively undertake successful projects, and know how to hire and motivate staff who will make it all work. Unfortunately, many of us have seen

and lived through examples of vision (think **Faxon**) which was not based on reality and destroyed entire enterprises, both companies and libraries.

Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Coupled with the clear vision of a successful leader, I have found that the most exciting and successful organizations are those which foster a level of innovation and entrepreneurship among the staff. I was so fortunate to participate in the in-house development of one of the first integrated library systems, **Orion**, at **UCLA**, and the formation of the innovative back issue services, **Backserv** and **Backmed**, at **Readmore** (still ongoing at **Swets**). With the help of my colleague, **Marilyn Geller**, we also mounted the first vendor catalog on the Web, **ReadiCat**.

Another driver for innovation is that of competition. I remember that **Marilyn** and I had great fun and a good deal of motivation going head-to-head with **Fritz Schwartz**, then at our competitor, **Faxon**. Our library clients were the beneficiaries of our hard work, entrepreneurial thinking, and efforts to best each other. Similarly, at **UCLA**, **Dan Tonkery** and **Russell Shank** were driven partly in competition with other campuses and especially the statewide Division of Library Automation. Unfortunately, efforts to commercialize **Orion** were not approved by the campus administration. Today, libraries face steep competition with **Google**, **Amazon**, and other information services. We need to step up to the challenge and, as a profession, work on innovative projects for our patrons — witness the development of the Digital Public Library of America and some of the work being done at the Innovation Labs at **Harvard**. We also need to work more closely and aggressively with our competitors to insert our own expertise and innovative services into our users' preferred information environment.

Customer Service

The ethic and practice of excellent public service must permeate the culture of all types of organizations. At **Faxon** the customer service account representatives were the face of the company, and it was they who were directly responsible for the retention or loss of clients. The wonderful, personal service they provided led to close relationships with the library staff they served and made the demise of the company all that more painful on both sides. Similarly, in libraries, it is the staff who work closely with the faculty and students who represent the library to the parent organization and are largely responsible for its success and relevance.

But there is more to customer service than the day-to-day, face-to-face contact with those

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