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## The Value of Experience

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and that our professional expertise and excellent service are necessary to our success.

### Organizational Culture and Staffing

Each organization I've worked for has its unique organizational culture, and these vary widely. What is most important is for the leadership to understand the culture they are working with. This understanding must be the basis of any change that needs to be undertaken. The disconnect, for example, between **Divine, Inc.** and its acquisition, **Faxon/Rowecom**, is legendary. **Divine** didn't understand about the personal relationships and excellent service so important to both the staff and clientele, not to mention the rest of the business. In general, corporate salespeople working with libraries need to understand the culture of librarians and the importance of relationship-building.

At one academic institution, **Brandeis**, the merger of the library and IT was far from a success; little attention was paid to the widely different organizational cultures of the two groups or to the morale of the library staff who felt that they were overtaken by the

IT organization and the CIO. Organizational culture varies widely between geographic areas as well; **Blackwell's** marketing culture in the U.K. was quite different from that of **Readmore** in the U.S., but as a subsidiary, we were forced to use marketing materials and language entirely foreign to our clients (one small example: "routing" became "circulation!") and could not seem to make **Blackwell** understand our very different market needs. And even in the U.S., at one point I remember being chastised by **Dawson** management in Illinois for using the word "client" instead of "customer" in **Faxon's** marketing materials.

Staff morale is such an important factor to the effectiveness of both libraries and companies, and yet it is so often overlooked. How we treat our staff, hopefully with respect and compassion, has such an important impact on their motivation and work. They must be seen as people with their own lives as well as work colleagues. Unfortunately, I have seen the ill effects of low staff morale at various library settings as well as companies suffering from the results of mergers and acquisitions. Leaders can do so much more to foster and improve staff morale, and we all have a lot more work to do in this area! One of the more difficult

challenges I find myself dealing with is how to make long-term staff still feel valued in this time of transformational change and shifting priorities.

One final note. I believe that all of these professional experiences together, both academic and commercial, have contributed to a much better understanding of the industry in general and have definitely enhanced the work that I do. I cannot understand the reluctance to hire good candidates because they come from "the other side." On the contrary, who could be a better collections librarian to negotiate with vendors than one who has been a vendor? And who better to deal with sales and customer services to the library community than one who has been a librarian?

We all have a lot of tough challenges, crises, and competition from outside the industry to deal with in the years ahead. Certainly working together, and I include libraries, publishers, and vendors here, we will be better able to find solutions to facilitate the chain of scholarly communication and keep us all viable, relevant, productive, and successful. 🐼

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## The Value of Experience

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Earlier this year my longtime friend and former colleague **Forrest Link** invited me to contribute an article to an issue of *Against the Grain* focusing on an exploration of the boundaries between librarians, vendors, and publishers by those of us who have crossed said boundaries. I happily agreed to do so.

**Forrest** represents a small but notable group of professionals whose career trajectories evolved more or less along these lines: these folks earned their MLS, may or may not have gone on to work in libraries for some time, but eventually found themselves working for vendors or publishers. In this context "vendor" can mean book vendors, serials agents, or systems vendors. Many vendors have long sought to recruit librarians, either because their experience helps inform business practice, lends credibility to their enterprise, or both. In a few instances, such as **Forrest's**, members of this group have crossed back to the library side.

My experience mirrors that of a much smaller cadre: those of us who began our careers as vendors and only later returned to earn our library degrees. Another friend, **Steve Bozich**, now of **Midwest**, is one of only a few others I can think of whose story is similar to mine.

I spent nearly thirty years working for **Blackwell's**, initially assisting in the administration of the approval plan, and later serving as a regional sales rep and manager in various parts of the world. In my first years with the firm I was fortunate to work for **Don Stave**,

who along with **Oliver Sitea** created the approval program as we have come to know it for the **Richard Abel Company**. **Don** is a kind and generous soul who taught me much and was, as I think back, remarkably tolerant and patient. **Don** was working as a librarian in **Washington State** when **Dick** recruited him. Another former boss and alas departed dear friend, **Jamie Galbraith**, worked as a librarian before going on to a remarkable career in bookselling.

Many of these people belong to a generation whose professional careers were shaped by an unprecedented expansion of higher education and a corresponding, dramatic growth in the businesses that serve the academy. Companies like **F. W. Faxon** dominated their markets in the 1970s and seemed both permanent and indestructible. There were dozens of book dealers, serials agents, and systems vendors, large and small; their numbers assured employment for many. Who today remembers **MacGregor, Boley, Ballen, Taylor-Carlisle, Franklin, Stevens & Brown, CLSI, NOTIS, or Data Phase**, let alone **Faxon** or **Abel**?

The firms that survive were able to do so, in part, because of their ability to anticipate trends, to innovate, and to re-invent in the face of increasingly rapid changes in technology, an accelerating migration from print to digital, and a library market shaped by new forces and new players. Examples of such companies are **EBSCO** and **Innovative Interfaces**.

In light of these myriad changes, I decided to build upon my first career's experience and

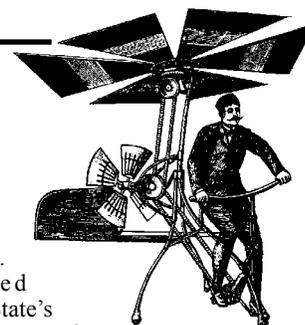
return to library school.

I graduated from Kent State's School of Library and Information Science in May of this year, and I add my voice to this discussion as someone who represents vendors and librarians.

With that said, I'd like to offer the following observations:

1. There is a great deal of talent out here. **Kent's** program is perhaps unusual in that there are fewer of what are politely referred to as "returning students" (i.e., old coots like me) and a lot of young and very bright people coming out of library school. **Stephen Abram** often talks about this generation and their skills, abilities, and predispositions. Their biggest disadvantages are the awful state of the job market, their sheer numbers, and their lack of experience. Listservs are abuzz with postings from frustrated job seekers struggling even to get initial interviews.
2. Libraries are overwhelmed with applicants. This is pretty obvious and not all that surprising. Combine lots of recent grads and scarce job opportunities, and you get a flood of applications for pretty much any job out there. Unfortunately, this leads to an inevitable process of elimination which by

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definition must be swift, imprecise, and in many cases ultimately unproductive for the prospective employer. Pedantic HR staff rush through checklists and discard those resumes and cover letters absent the most obvious qualifications. Politically correct criteria are invoked in an often naïve attempt to atone for the wrongs of the past and summarily disqualify candidates — based on revised but no less discriminatory standards.

3. Some in the library world fail to understand the value of vendor experience. This strikes me as odd because so much of acquisitions work is learned on the job and in interacting with publishers and vendors, and yet I've encountered this view more than once. Everyone benefits from a better understanding of the practices and culture of the other's world.

It is also curious to me that some in the library world (and indeed a few of my instructors in my LIS experience) view the vendor community with some suspicion, as though to be affiliated with a commercial enterprise is to somehow be tainted. This view is both simplistic and wrongheaded. With the exception of only one, now rather dated, example of a company whose business practices caused

libraries grief, this industry is remarkably absent graft and corruption.

My admittedly limited experience suggests libraries and vendors are, in fact, more alike than different. Any assembly of people engaged in some collective activity inevitably develops an organizational culture. I've been in more than one library where the workplace climate is both immediately evident and highly toxic. Conversely, not all vendors represent engines of brutal efficiency and highly-calculated, precise economic performance. Prior to the abolition of the Net Book Agreement in the UK (which, in effect, forbid discounting books and thereby guaranteed a solid profit margin for booksellers), **Blackwell's** was an example of an overstaffed, bumbling, and somewhat paternalistic organization, but not one that could be characterized in any way as predatory. (A former colleague was fond of referring to the company as the "Bertie Wooster of the British book trade.")

Instead, in my view people bring what they can and will to their jobs, be it enthusiasm, innovation, weariness, self-absorption, energy, or laziness. The climate and culture they encounter may inspire growth and change. If the work environment is too weak or unfocused it may exert no influence at all. If it's really bad it can exacerbate the worst in people.

Whether it's a casualty of my transit of middle age (i.e., can't remember much of anything anymore) or a genuinely accurate perception of our world, I can't say — but my

sense of libraries and vendors is that, on the whole, we're collections of people trying to do good work. To hearken back to my fellow **Kent State** students, these people bring an enormous amount of creativity, knowledge, and sheer eagerness to the table. I will be deeply saddened if this is wasted, whether it's because of a poor economy, badly defined institutional priorities, or inept hiring practices. They and we all deserve far more.

Will it all work out? I can't say. I just returned from a couple of weeks in Germany, and up until this trip I thought all the drama surrounding the debt crisis and the threat to the euro was hyperbole. After **Cameron's** veto and the subsequent response throughout Europe I am compelled to revise my thinking, and consider what might happen if the Eurozone collapses. The consequences for the economies of many countries will be devastating, and the support for and opportunities offered by libraries will be severely jeopardized.

I'm more fortunate than many: I have a job, and I've had several offers from the vendor world as well as libraries. I have the relative luxury of being able to wait for the right position, instead of accepting the first (only?) opportunity. Others aren't so lucky. My advice to prospective employers is this: take a little more time. Be a bit more creative in your thinking. Look beyond the two-dimensional description provided in response to your position announcement, and approach your pool with a more open mind. You'll likely get a better hire. 🐾

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## Oregon Trails — The Ego and I

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For those who read my last column, you must be reminded of the trailers at the end of each episode of "Arrested Development" where **Ron Howard** tells viewers what to expect in the next show except that those events never transpire. I promised more stories of book sellers I have known but it is that time of year again when *Foreword Magazine* ships boxes of books to volunteer readers, so I have been busy reading in two categories, Autobiography/Memoir and Essays.

As I read, I ask myself, what makes a good memoir? How does a good essay differ from a poor essay and what are some of the elements of each? I have enjoyed several of the books even though I didn't think that they deserved one of the top three ratings or even an honorable mention. Others offended me. There is no other word to describe my negative reaction to them. Some of the writing was technically competent, some was hackneyed and awkward. I used to hate it when a professor scribbled that "Awkward" next to something that I had written. Awkward? How? What

should or could I have written? But now I understand that sometimes a phrase is awkward and there is nothing more to be said. It is up to the writer to mull it over and come up with something better. That is what a good editor does. A good editor questions and challenges a writer to reconsider and rewrite or excise a word, a passage, a paragraph, or an entire section. It has happened. Just ask **Thomas Wolfe**, **James Jones**, or many another writer who had something to say and knew how to say it but sometimes had trouble knowing what to cut. When does less mean more?

When writing book reviews, you have an obligation to explain in as much detail and clarity as you can what you like or don't like and why. It is not enough, despite the current atmosphere of blogging and television journalism, to simply discard a piece of writing. Everyone is an expert in today's atmosphere of non-stop communication, but no one

seems to have any cognitive authority, an authority based on education, knowledge, and background. Opinions are woven with opinion, hearsay, envy, rancor, deep-seated emotional feelings, and ideologies. If I don't agree with you, you must be at fault, but nuanced discussion of differences and resources seem nonexistent. We don't have time to listen respectfully to informed discourse that is backed up by facts. Presidential hopefuls are paraded as debaters but who appear as naked emperors in a forum meant to win points on spin, draw laughs with vapid jokes, and destroy opponents through *ad hominem* attacks. We deserve better, and authors, no matter how awful I might regard their books, deserve a reasoned decision before they are relegated to the bottom of the pile.

When reading essays, especially personal essays, and autobiographies and memoirs, it is important to separate one's personal feelings about topics and judge the writing on style and substance. Both must be present to deserve a top three ranking, and substance is to be preferred over style. Having nothing to say but saying it well reminds me of the graduate student explaining in great detail courses, theories, and favorite professors. In fact, one

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