

Library and Information Sciences
Library and Information Science Working
Papers

Tennessee State University

Year 2007

Examples of Handling Change While
Working in Libraries

CHRISTIAN LANGER
TSU, clanger@tnstate.edu

Here are some examples of handling change which I have experienced while working in libraries.

A few years ago I moved from West Virginia to Nashville TN for a new library job. Salem WV had 2500 people. There are no splitting interstate highways; if you go a few miles from the 4-lane you lose cell phone reception; about a mile out of town cable TV disappears. In Nashville the interstates split often, you never lose cell phone reception, and everybody who wants it has cable. Well talk about disorienting! How did I handle it? Basically a regular schedule was the biggest help. Same series of activities every day. Life, if rigid, became rhythmic in a soothing way. I did this until the disorientation went away.

Another type of change involves daily tasks on the job. Such tasks will change from time to time, and perhaps will change often. It is natural for humans to resist change. It is difficult to change at times even if you are moving from a job that you don't like to one that you do. If I am reading shelves (not my favorite activity) and I am told to do some typing on the computer (a good activity) I will nevertheless be somewhat irritated to have to force myself out of my familiar task and move to another one. This kind of change can be managed relatively easily by telling yourself that you go to a better place. An amusing variation on this problem came when I was assigned by the supervisor to perform a daily task which I did not like. I performed my task faithfully, until one day the boss said that Miss X would now take over. Was I overjoyed that I had been removed from the onerous task? Yes, but I was also angry at Miss Jones for taking my job away! This is how paradoxical the dislike of change can get; but again I was able to tell myself I was going to a better place.

Another type of change involves getting the assignment to perform a job you have never done before. Fear of the unknown is natural for humans. Add to this, anxieties, for example, over whether I will be able to do the new task, or will I like it? And, there may be a prejudice against the job from previous experience. One may have heard something negative about the work in the past. All three played a part in the following example. After I acquired a library job at Salem-Teikyo University in Salem, WV, I got the assignment to read computer manuals and run the computers, and to interpret the manuals for the rest of the staff. I was not only intimidated, but my impression was that this would be a dull job: what I had experienced of computers convinced me I would never enjoy working with them. However, I had the assignment, and forced myself to read the manuals. To my surprise I found myself enjoying reading them and trying their instructions on the computers. Soon I was taking manuals home with me to read. (Some feel that taking pleasure in reading manuals is a bit odd.) Eventually I went to computer school for a year, which helped me in my job search. So, although fears of dullness and lack of ability may be realized, it is also true that often they may not. So here forcing myself to try did the trick.

It is unfortunate that we may see merit in a task yet at the same time find it onerous and/or dull. Changing to such a dull task is not welcome. However it is well known that one may dislike a task but later, find it interesting. The job may become interesting in

itself over time, or one may begin to see hitherto unknown ways of making the task more interesting. One obvious example of the former is seen in young kids who hate vegetables. Twenty years later you may see them at the dinner table happily eating vegetables, having found merit and pleasure in the activity. The latter has happened to me with two apparently dull tasks, shelving books, and emptying boxes of books to be shelved. I needed to find some pleasure in these tasks which I already knew had merit. Simply forcing myself was not working. Finally I found relief by trying to inject some exercise. Taking books out of boxes is obviously physical. I just changed my thinking to say, "I am getting a workout as I might get at the Y or in walking." I also reminded myself that I was clearing my head by getting out of my seat. However, shelving books, not being inherently so physical, had to be handled differently. What I did was this: I would take my books and make sure they were unordered on the cart. This would insure less efficiency, and more walking for me. Then, I would place the cart at one spot near the stacks, and carry one book at a time to the shelves. Never more than one, in order to maximize the walking. I would never move the cart; I would move only myself. If I were to set the cart by the Hs (LC system), I would have to walk progressively farther to shelve books in the A-Fs, and the J-Zs. In fact the predominant purpose became getting some walking in. In this way I made the task more interesting; and once again I was clearing my head. Meantime, the books got accurately shelved. Of course using this method assumes there are no big time pressures on you.

A variation on this scheme comes when I have to count the users in the library, once an hour. I don't just sit in my seat and count the people I can see; I walk to all the places where people might be hiding and look; this takes me on the grand tour of the library, gets me out of my chair, and also gives a more accurate count of users.

Such thinking can also be used while shifting books. Shift one book at a time, no matter how far you have to walk, and no matter how dumb it may make you feel. Your health will increase while your sense of embarrassment will eventually drop off. You may also avoid damage to your hands caused by carrying too much weight at one time.

The above solutions have worked for me, but of course would not for everybody. I am sure everyone has stories to tell about handling change.