

The Five-Year Itch

Are Libraries Losing Their Most Valuable Resources?

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This paper is based on the authors' poster session "Changing Roles and Redefining Goals: The Five-Year Itch," originally presented at the ACRL 12th National Conference in Minneapolis, April 2005.

To quote Winston Churchill: "To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often."¹ "Change" means different things to different people, however, and the word itself has many definitions and a long etymology. One meaning, "To make (a thing) other than it was; to render different, alter, modify, transmute," sufficiently describes the type of change impacting librarianship.² Change is not new to librarianship. Library environments are continuously being transformed with new designs, new technologies, and new functions. Librarians today expect to embrace change around every corner and to live with it on a daily basis. To keep up with new technologies, new learning styles, new users, and new environments, librarians will need to adapt their own roles within the library; and library administrators will need to create new roles that are interesting, challenging, flexible, and suited to meet the needs of the changing library landscape.

Whether in their early twenties or their fifties, starting their first or fourth career, new librarians are motivated professionals who want to learn, network, acquire new skills, be involved in professional development, and be encouraged and allowed to effect change. Abbott, in his article "Professionalism and the Future of Librarianship," writes, "For most professions, for most professionals, for most of modern history, wandering, relearning, and changing are the typical, not the atypical, experiences."³ In this respect, librarians are not any different than other professionals; in fact, they are accustomed to relearning their jobs approximately every decade.⁴ In that fashion, librarianship has a number of people who wander into and out of the profession, and this is normal. However, when a

profession's newest members are increasingly leaving soon after starting their first jobs, something is amiss. If new librarians are in fact switching jobs at an increasing rate, library administrators could be facing a greater problem than the need to merely relearn a job; the problem is retention. What impact does consistent turnover have on an institution and more broadly, the profession?

In their article "Fixing the First Job," Newhouse and Spisak conducted a survey of new librarians who had been on the job for a year or less.⁵ Although a majority indicated they were happy with their jobs, many respondents talked about specific issues that drained their enthusiasm and idealism, including the difficulty in discovering their roles within the library, feelings of inadequacy, and excessive bureaucratic red tape. The authors conclude, "We believe these issues are far more pervasive than our small sample could reveal. They could mean a major staff problem for libraries when the economy improves, and the predicted shortage of professionals materializes."⁶

Recent discussions about job satisfaction and retention in libraries have often revolved around generational issues. So-called Generation X'ers, in particular, are cast as highly motivated people who crave change and constant learning, but are often impatient and not as loyal to a job as previous generations. Lancaster provides a thought-provoking overview of Generation X'ers working in today's libraries:

Not deluded by the idea that employers would keep them around for a lifetime, [X'ers] took charge of their careers early on and have been willing to leave a job if their needs weren't being met. One of the critical challenges facing libraries will be making sure that the few [X'ers] they've attracted are going to stay. [X'ers] will put pressure on libraries to provide more well-thought-out and varied career paths, more opportunities for mentoring and education and more options to champion change.⁷

Similarly, in "Mentoring Gen X Managers: Tomorrow's Library Leadership Is Already Here," Mosley echoes this same point from an administrator's perspective, stating that retention will always be an issue with Generation X'ers because they expect to work in different institutions and do not consider job stability as an objective: "Generation X'ers are not afraid to walk away from a job that is not living

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up to their expectations. However, this is something the librarianship profession cannot afford.”⁸

Certainly many seasoned librarians would empathize with their younger colleagues about the need for change; they, too, felt the need for change throughout their careers. Braunagel wrote in 1979 about job mobility among male and female librarians and the impact it had on their careers, citing many reasons behind their decisions to switch jobs as being similar to those currently attributed to Generation X librarians.⁹ Moran found that relocating was typical for males seeking directorships, while women, though they may have wanted to switch jobs, found greater success attaining a directorship by staying with one institution.¹⁰ The topic of gender is not addressed in this article but presents an interesting subject for further study.

Generation X'ers are widely considered to be the next generation of library leaders, so no substantive understanding of how to retain new librarians is complete without profiling that generation. Broad characterizations about an entire generation can exaggerate differences. Still, the generational characteristics of new librarians and how they influence career decisions are too complex to be dismissed. Generation X'ers make up a large percentage of new librarians. This exploratory study seeks to understand and bring attention to a trend among new and early-career librarians that has both immediate and long-term implications for librarianship. The authors call this trend the “five-year itch.”

Changing Jobs and Roles

The five-year itch can be defined as when a librarian purposefully switches jobs or roles at least once within his or her first five years as a professional. The authors designed a survey using WebSurveyor software to test the pervasiveness of the five-year itch and to begin to explore its implications on the career trajectories of new librarians and on the profession as a whole.¹¹ The survey comprised multiple choices, scaled, and yes/no questions, and a follow-up questionnaire was designed to allow respondents to describe their early-career experiences in their own words.¹²

Solicitations to complete the survey were posted on several e-mail discussion lists: NEWLIB-L, NEXGEN-L, and NMRT-L.¹³ Although membership in these lists is open, their primary audience is new librarians in all types of libraries. The survey targeted librarians who had received their degrees in 1996 or later in order to get the perspective of newer librarians with five years (or less) experience as professional librarians in a digital and rapidly changing library environment. The goal behind targeting these specific discussion lists was to reach as broad an audience of new librarians as possible; however, given the nature of the lists and their subscribers, this was not a random sample and thus may not be representative of all new librarians. The survey was available from February 16 through March 2, 2005, and was accessible from a link included in the

e-mail message. The twenty-five questions addressed basic demographics and a variety of educational and career issues, including specialties pursued in library school, reasons the respondent had changed jobs or job title, participation in and institutional support for continuing education and professional development, and professional requirements such as holding an additional advanced degree or meeting requirements for tenure. In all, 464 surveys were completed.

Respondents were additionally encouraged to submit an e-mail address if they wished to respond to a supplemental questionnaire. The questionnaire sought qualitative comments on the first professional job, reasons for seeking another position, involvement and satisfaction with professional development and continuing education opportunities, and the respondent's personal feelings about the effect of the five-year itch upon their careers and librarianship in general. Of the 192 who submitted e-mail addresses, 117 (61 percent) responded to the questionnaire.

Respondents were surveyed on how long they have worked as professionals, what type of library they worked in, and the generation with which they identified. Thirty-four percent (160) had worked as professional librarians for one to three years; 24 percent (113) for three to five years; 19 percent (87) for five to seven years; 14 percent (63) for less than one year; and 9 percent (40) for more than seven years. Fifty-two percent currently worked in academic libraries, 28 percent in public libraries, 17 percent in special libraries, and 3 percent in school libraries. Respondents were asked to identify with one generational category. Eighty-eight percent considered themselves to be Generation X, 11 percent Baby Boomers, 1 percent Millennials, and only one person identified as a Traditionalist.

For the purposes of this research, three types of job changes are described: a promotion, which typically comes with higher pay and more responsibility, a lateral move to the same type of position and responsibilities and similar compensation, or a role change, which usually involves very different responsibilities and a different title. Each of these changes might occur within the same or a different library. Overall, 69 percent of the 464 survey respondents have changed jobs at least once since becoming a professional librarian. As the number of years worked increases, so does the number of job or role changes. Many of the respondents have not worked a full five years as professionals, so in order to identify the differences and similarities between the brand-new librarians and those who have worked for a few years, some results have been grouped by number of years worked. Whenever possible, percentages are used to present the data; however, for specific representations of data it is necessary to use the actual number. Nearly one third (31 percent) of the respondents who have worked for three to five years as professional librarians have changed jobs two or more times, while nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of the respondents who have been librarians for at least five years changed jobs two or more times. Further,

of the librarians who have worked less than one year, 28 percent have changed jobs at least once, a seemingly high percentage for new, just-out-of-school librarians. That number increases for librarians who have worked for one to three years, with 59 percent having changed jobs at least once; and for those who have worked for three to five years, 81 percent having changed jobs at least once. Ninety-one percent of librarians who have worked from five to seven years have changed jobs at least once (see figure 1). The comments of one librarian who had changed jobs several times within her first five years as a professional are typical: "I think I made all those changes both because I was restless and because I didn't want to commit myself to any path before I'd at least glimpsed several other paths."

Clearly, changing jobs or roles as a new librarian is a typical occurrence. It is by no means unique to librarianship, and in some professions such changes are often encouraged and even necessary for advancement. But what is it that compels new librarians to change jobs so often so early in their careers?

Survey respondents were asked to choose from a list of factors that most influenced their decisions to change jobs. They could choose as many factors as they wanted. Of the factors listed, the top-rated was "limited or no opportunities" (154 votes), followed by "financial reasons" (128 votes), and "position or role not challenging enough" (121 votes). Other factors that many respondents wrote in themselves included: "moved/relocated" (39 votes), "bad work environment" (22 votes), and "job ended" (28 votes). Although inadequate salaries are often noted to be the leading cause for a high turnover rate for librarians and a leading cause for job dissatisfaction, the authors found that new librarians are just as concerned and frustrated with the limited opportunities provided to them in their jobs and in their institutions.

Comments from the questionnaire provided deeper insight. When asked, "How did your experience in your first job as a professional librarian compare to what you wanted and expected?" one respondent said, "In no way in this position did I feel like a professional . . . I left after less than one year." Another replied, "I expected to be in a position to make a difference for the people I worked for (the

Percentage of Job Changes by Number of Years Worked

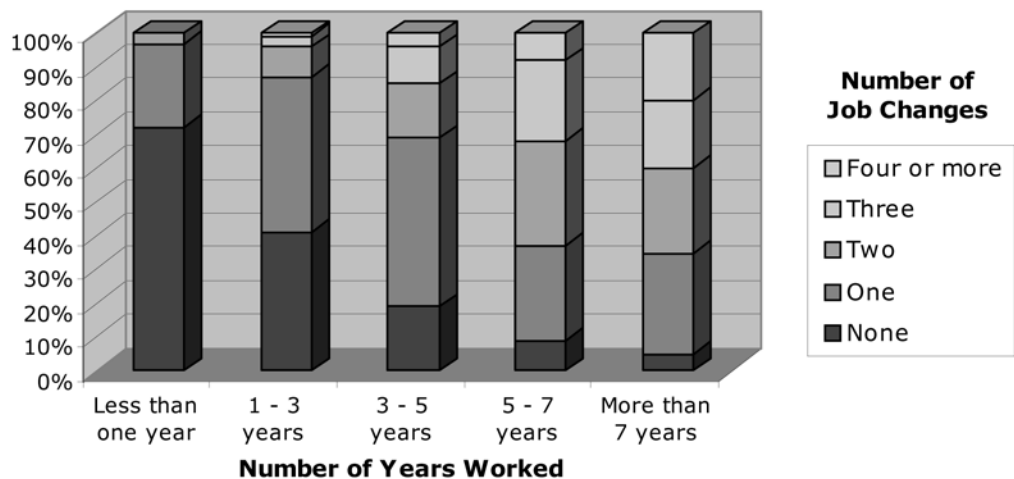


Figure 1. Percentage of Job Changes

public). I did not expect the quick burnout and I expected to be able to grow professionally and [for] my ideas [to be] heard and considered. I found a lot of 'red tape' . . . I was disappointed because I was ready to take on the world . . . But roadblocks were put up." The desire to exercise more professional responsibility was often cited as a key factor in changing situations.

Results from the survey and questionnaire indicate that many new librarians are frustrated with the lack of growth opportunities in their jobs. The real or perceived inability to move up in the ranks or change roles was another leading cause of dissatisfaction among the respondents. Eighty-four percent of respondents replied that in order for them to advance in their careers they needed to change jobs. Thus, a majority of new librarians considered their current position to be temporary, a stepping stone to something better. Unfortunately, unless an immediate supervisor leaves, retires, or is promoted, there is often little room for advancement for many new librarians.

How often is it necessary to change jobs? This is impossible to answer and will vary from person to person; nonetheless, it is true that most new librarians feel that they definitely will have to change jobs in order to get ahead. Ironically, new librarians sometimes feel that they need to be wary of too much job-hopping. As one respondent remarked, "I think it makes veteran librarians, particularly those who have stuck with one or two institutions throughout their careers, see newer librarians as disloyal." Common advice given to new librarians is the importance of staying at least one year (preferably two) in a position, especially early in their careers. Realistically, however, this is not always possible. In contrast to many other professions where job-hopping is accepted, librarianship is a profession where loyalty and longevity have tradi-

tionally been rewarded. Loyalty is a defining characteristic of the Traditionalist generation, some of whom are still in charge of many of our libraries.¹⁴ It seems, however, that new librarians, and librarians in younger generations, are less concerned with their staying power as they enter into the profession.

How loyal are new librarians to the profession? Perhaps the most shocking data came when respondents were asked if they had thought of, or were currently thinking of, leaving the profession. Fifty percent said “yes”; exactly half of the 464 librarians who answered the survey—librarians who are recent graduates and currently employed—have already entertained thoughts of leaving the profession. Data suggest that the majority of new librarians surveyed at best do not consider their current positions as being long term and at worst are actively dissatisfied with them. While they may be thinking of a job change soon, many are also considering leaving the profession altogether.

Several respondents worried how they would be perceived by potential colleagues if they changed jobs within their first years in the profession, but many considered this a natural occurrence. They cited other technology-related fields where changing jobs is expected. They considered their skill sets a commodity and had no problem looking elsewhere for better pay and more job satisfaction. One respondent stated, “I’m a little surprised that the five-year itch is an issue at all. In software development, everyone switches jobs every three to five years—it’s the only way to keep your salary up to par. Everyone expects it.” Several respondents even considered the five-year itch healthy for both librarians and libraries. They thought mobility among librarians would encourage libraries to compete for good professionals. One librarian stated that “more competition among libraries to keep energetic professionals” would promote better pay and better work environments for staff.

Others felt that librarianship was broad enough to allow for evaluation. One respondent suggested, “Personally, I do not think the itch is a bad thing. The field is so broad with many facets and positions to fit into. An unhappy librarian is a burnout [*sic*] and ineffective librarian.” Another respondent said, “If librarians move from job to job frequently, it might help libraries realize that they need

to make changes in order to keep their librarians and encourage loyalty . . . changing jobs can give librarians a wider range of experiences and make them marketable.”

Many respondents commented on how they felt job-hopping was perceived by administration. Black and Leysen’s 2002 article, “Fostering Success: The Socialization of Entry-Level Librarians in ARL Libraries,” discusses challenges to new academic librarians in adjusting to their new places of employment. The article emphasizes the role of the supervisor of the new librarian to assist the new hire’s socialization process by “connecting new librarians to important resources and individuals.”¹⁵

Types of Changes

Each of the job or role changes investigated might occur within the same or a different library. Survey respondents were asked to describe their most recent job changes and to specify if they stayed at the same institution or moved to a different one. Overall, the majority of respondents identified their job changes as role changes, involving different job responsibilities and a new title (see figure 2).

Overwhelmingly, new librarians move to new jobs or roles with different institutions. Aside from the costs of hiring and training a new librarian every few years, institutions that lose their new librarians also lose a bit of themselves. The comments of many questionnaire respondents indicated that this situation creates a double dilemma. If new librarians do not envision themselves staying at an institution longer than a few years, there will be no one to carry on the institutional knowledge and memory as the senior librarians retire. When the new librarians leave, their knowledge and expertise departs with them.

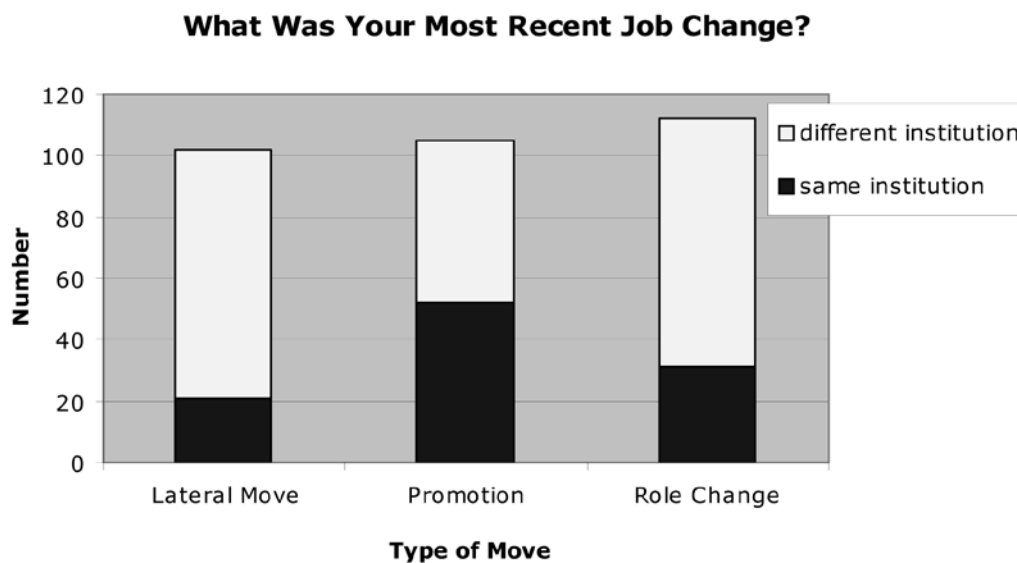


Figure 2. Types of Job Changes

For librarians who have worked for three years or more, the majority (46 percent) of changes were lateral moves. And for those librarians in the very early stages of their careers, the majority of job changes were role changes (46 percent). One respondent stated, “When you’re in library school you don’t really know what type of librarianship you should specialize in. By taking different jobs in different types of libraries you gain a breadth of experience which informs your overall work.” Changing roles can be

a positive experience in the scope of a newer librarian’s career, providing a greater breadth of knowledge and more diverse skill set. But some librarians may be pressured or expected to move into more technology-heavy roles because they might be the only librarian or library staff member with the necessary skills. Similarly, newer librarians may be eager to take on many different roles, which could potentially lead to burnout. In 1990, White wrote that, “We suffer burnout when we have allowed ourselves to be saddled with undoable jobs.”¹⁶ Today’s librarians can easily find themselves burdened with a multitude of jobs and expectations, rendering some or all of those jobs undoable for one person.

One way of potentially curbing the five-year itch is by offering opportunities for growth. Continuing education and professional development (CE&PD) were of great importance to many survey respondents. Eighty-five percent of all respondents said that having institutional support for CE&PD was critical or very important to them. In contrast, only 22 percent rated their institutions as excellent in providing support for CE&PD, and 22 percent rated their institutions as unsatisfactory or poor in providing support. When broken down by how important CE&PD is to them, the excellent rating declined and the poor rating increased in correlation with the support rating (see figure 3). Fifty-two percent of respondents stated that involvement in professional development activities is written into their job descriptions. Of these, 28 percent gave their institutions an excellent rating, and 16 percent gave their institutions a rating of unsatisfactory or poor. The importance of institutional support for CE&PD for new librarians is stated nicely by one respondent, “The support of the organization makes me feel

How Important is Professional Development to You? (Critical, Very Important, Somewhat Important, Not Important) And How Would You Rate Your Institution's Support of It?

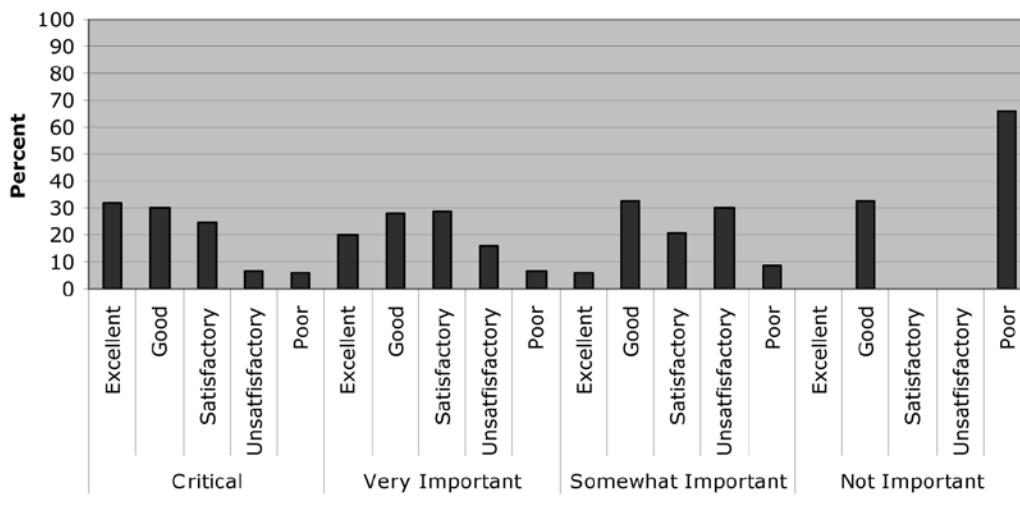


Figure 3. Importance of Professional Development

like I have endless opportunities to expand and enrich my skills, making me a better librarian and returning that positive attitude and new skills to the library.”

New librarians place a high value on access to CE&PD opportunities, but such opportunities are wasted, and can even lead to bitterness and frustration, if there is no administrative support for implementing new projects in the workplace. Disconnect between what employers expect and what they will support (with leave time or financial support) was distressing to several questionnaire respondents. Some respondents were invigorated by new ideas learned through professional development opportunities but ultimately disappointed by the lack of time, energy, resources, or open-minded managers to permit implementation of these new ideas. Many respondents expressed concern that while employers expect new librarians to develop documented skills and to participate professionally, they do not actively support the professional activities that would make this possible. This suggests that a constantly evolving approach to the profession, including ongoing learning, training, and role changing, is more than a passing trend among new librarians.

Discussion

The results of this research were both expected and revealing. It was known that new librarians change jobs or roles early in their careers; the list of factors contributing toward job change resonated with the authors’ experiences during their first jobs and in the job market. Still, the degree and rate that this is occurring is perhaps higher and faster than in the past. “New blood,” new, or next generation librarians

represent the demise of traditional librarian roles, outdated systems, and old-fashioned models of service. With their fresh ideas, undaunted enthusiasm, and contagious motivation, new librarians are transforming the library landscape, and they seem to have the profession, and the future of libraries, laid out at their feet. However, many of the profession's newest and brightest are leaving their jobs, and in some cases, librarianship, before they can provoke any change.

New librarians certainly feel that a generational gap exists between them and their senior colleagues. Many are worried that their more seasoned peers view them as disloyal professionals who are only using their current positions as stepping stones and will resent them for their mobility. In fact, many attribute the dissatisfaction with their positions and the profession to the inability of older generations to understand and accept them as peers. In Black and Leysen's 2002 article, new academic librarians reported feeling isolated and encountering a culture of disrespect in their new workplaces.¹⁷ Whether the generational differences are real or merely perceived exceeds the scope of this research; nonetheless, it is important that supervisors and administrators recognize that new librarians are likely to have different professional needs than senior librarians. Also, although issues related to librarian recruitment and retention have been addressed in the literature, there is virtually no mention of new librarians

leaving the profession, nor does the literature address librarian's perceptions of regularly changing jobs within their first few years. This is an area for further research, which could help administrators in grooming new librarians for leadership roles and help guide new librarians in navigating the job market.

What can be done to persuade new librarians to continue to develop and grow as professionals, both in the profession and in a particular position or role? How can library managers and administrators diminish the impact of the five-year itch and enhance their retention success at the same time? Data from the survey and comments from the questionnaire suggest that new librarians experience a high level of job satisfaction and motivation from the following factors: moral and financial support for professional development and continuing education; freedom to pursue new or alternative roles, including the freedom to pioneer job roles that are new to the institution; mentoring and training; professional respect; opportunities for advancement; salary increases; and a working environment that fosters teamwork and embraces change.

Mentoring can also help new and mid-level career librarians to meet both institutional and professional goals. Musser writes, "Mentors help the new employee understand the unwritten rules of the workplace and the cultural/organizational norms."¹⁸ She cites issues such



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as the preferred organizational communication style, assertiveness, and creating the balance between work and home as some of the important factors that a mentor can help a new librarian navigate. In the article, "A Focus on Mentorship in Career Development," the authors state that mentoring can assist with "assessing potential career directions, channeling energies effectively, setting long-term goals, and enhancing leadership skills" at all career levels.¹⁹ Although creating and maintaining a successful mentoring program can be challenging, the literature is full of advice and recommendations, both for administrators who wish to develop a formal mentoring program and new librarians who wish to find a mentor.

New librarians also need to take charge of their own careers. They must be selective and interview potential employers and coworkers as thoroughly as they themselves are interviewed. For instance, learning if new roles or position descriptions have been created recently is a good indicator of management's willingness to encourage staff to develop new skills and strengths. Opening a dialogue with a supervisor about the need to be challenged on the job and to grow as a professional, to negotiate for more responsibility and exposure within a current position, and to vocalize the desire to gain new skills and find opportunities for advancement can be a proactive way to minimize misunderstanding.

The five-year itch is a growing phenomenon amongst new librarians, as there is increasing dissatisfaction and restlessness amongst the profession's newest members. More research in this area is needed to assess the long-term consequences, but it is immediately evident that institutions and the profession as a whole must improve, or reassess, their retention efforts or watch passively as their newest members continue to leave for opportunities elsewhere. Most institutions are not equipped to handle the financial burden of routinely recruiting, interviewing, and training new librarians, and the revolving-door trend can damage employee morale and discourage institutional loyalty. How library managers and administrators choose to address this potential trend—if at all—will have a significant impact on the health and the future of librarianship.

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