

# What's New? What's Next? Or . . . What's Not?

Julie Todaro

It started about three months ago . . . the barrage of “what’s next” questions linked with “end of the decade” discussions. And although these lists were similar to the “end of the century” predictions we encountered beginning in 1997, this time around—ten plus years later—we had a fair number of comparable predictions from 1999 to 2009, with a fair amount of “Did they come true? If yes, why, and if not, why not?”

So I started doing what I typically do—I collected all of the content on “predicting the future,” “what’s new,” “change” and “trending” I could find with plans for my usual approach of applying ideas for new services and resources, how to better serve target audiences, innovations in hardware and software and changes to the world of information, to libraries. The reality was, however, that I didn’t really come up with anything too dramatically different from what I had seen and commented on before, *and* I didn’t find many surprises. The usual potential column topics included privacy issues abound (and questions about patron privacy and confidentiality are increasing), social networking (how is it being used and where is it going), new work “tribes” (new groups forming at work such as Gen X’ers and millennials), and the human side of today’s technological generation—spending much time online while alone “in person,” but seeking and forming online communities and networks. So in trying to decide what was different in the workplace and with today’s employees, I decided instead to focus on what hadn’t changed—whether we like it or not—and what shouldn’t change, no matter what.

## What Hasn’t Changed—Whether We Like It or Not . . .

### Territorialism

No matter what goes on in countries, regions, states, or neighborhoods—and we all know how territorial we *all* are—the workplace is rife with an attitude of “this is mine, don’t

touch it.” Whether it’s because some employees feel solely responsible for support or maintenance, or because they are afraid of people doing a better job than they are doing, or perhaps because they really *are* the best person for the job needed, “it’s mine!” is not an unusual sentiment or attitude or behavior in the workplace. Historically, we referred to it as “I am the only person who knows the files,” and the implication was that if you created something and made it yours, you didn’t or shouldn’t give the information about that system or process away to anyone else. You knew where everything was, you knew how things were arranged or “filed,” and you didn’t tell anyone else. That made you indispensable.

The reality is, however, *none* of this is ours, and it shouldn’t be treated as such. Our passwords for our access to technology are not our own personal secret, and if they are comprised of our own set of answers to questions, or if they represent personal aspects to our lives, our managers and administrators must be aware of all access words and codes. Company “files” are not our own; processes we develop are not our own; nor should we keep functions, fixes, or operations to ourselves.

Managers should insist on audits and then assess their audited environmental data to make sure that access structures, while confidential for general security, are organized. Managers should strive to open up processes and job functions to ensure that no particular employee or set of employees possesses all or even most of the information on job function. While most organizations have standardized processes for assigning access codes, keys, passwords, and other security processes, many do *not* have a clear hold on how security arrangements are chosen, assigned, updated. And—the real test—many managers do not know if all processes “owned” by individuals involve backup measures, such as individuals or groups of individuals who are



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adequately and appropriately trained and responsible for stepping in if minor or major emergencies occur.

Now, you are probably commenting to yourself, “The library is transparent,” or “The library has organized access and security processes, but our IT department does not,” or “We’re not the problem, they are.” And you would be right. We often find our own departments organized but our partner departments not only disorganized, but also uninterested in assessing processes to determine who knows what as well as who should know what. There’s no magic bullet to get people talking; however, one avenue to auditing access is the emergency management route that requires the establishment of standardized processes to enable organizations to prevent and respond quickly, at the very least to disorganization and everyday problems, and, at the most, to emergency situations. Territorialism is not only unhealthy in business environments, it’s unsafe. Organizations maintain or enter into risky business situations if even a few job functions are determined to be owned by an individual or individuals and not visible in the bigger picture of the organization. Managers should begin the dialogue.

## Lack of Communication

Organizations still haven’t mastered the art or the science of communication. In fact, it’s become even more difficult to communicate effectively as the speed, mode and methods of communication have allowed us to connect more quickly; however, often not more clearly. And while there is research on ages, generations, and decades of employees, the reality is the newest employees, no matter their age, are confused about the current level of technology and seek to minimize duplication of policies and processes. Managers face enormous challenges in designing and maintaining communication processes that support organizational structures and that include the appropriate people and timeline to be involved in today’s decision making. Harnessing the growing number of communication modes and methods is just beginning, and research is *also* just beginning, on not only how to communicate and manage, but also on how to communicate and *lead*—not only in person, but also through the myriad technological communication modes available to today’s managers.

In addition to general communication challenges, written communication continues to suffer. Unfortunately, educational programs are not integrating enough or sometimes *any* curriculum to expand employees’ skills in writing styles critical to achieving success in today’s libraries. Narrative, technical/report, research, and persuasive are only a few of the styles needed by professionals.

## Conflicts Between Coworkers

It’s unreasonable *not* to expect conflicts between coworkers, as we often spend more time at work—awake—than we

do at home with family members, friends, or roommates. Managers should always be concerned with all levels and kinds of conflicts, but should also sort out the types of conflict between employees. Truths about conflict include the following:

- Conflict—when identified and verified—should be addressed as quickly as possible.
- There is no single fix for conflicts; that is, there is no single technique for discerning and resolving conflicts.
- There are many types of conflicts, and—understandably—different personalities handle conflict situations differently.
- Conflicts should be assessed for severity and the nature of those involved before managers proceed with how the conflict might be managed.
- Organizations with protocols for managing conflict should require standardized steps to be taken to discern and address conflicts.
- Organizations without protocols for managing conflict should strive to identify current policies that relate to conflict issues as well as to identify policies needed and then move to design the processes as quickly as possible.
- Managers and employees should take advantage of conflict resolution programs that provide trained professionals—ideally unknown to both employees—as conflict resolution specialists.
- Managers should provide an extensive education process that will enable employees to identify conflict resolution techniques inherent in good communication as well as processes for identifying and addressing conflicts in the workplace.
- Managers and employees need to realize that there are some conflicts that won’t be addressed for myriad reasons, such as: employees don’t report a particular event; several or constant conflicts for whatever reason; an individual employee’s problems are greater than is typical; an individual employee’s approach is negative or unsafe or incapable of being controlled and therefore other means need to be used to discuss conflicting issues; the conflict can’t be solved, but employees seem to be able to work together productively despite the conflict.

## Staff Resisting Change

The library profession seldom attracts individuals who love or thrive on chaos, tumult, or excessive change. Then again, who really does *thrive* in that kind of atmosphere? So whatever our environment (whether chaotic, tumultuous, or in constant or even excessive change, what we need to strive for is a realization) for all levels of employees and our customers—that there *is* change, that we plan for it, that we are

dealing with it as best we can, and that, through it all, we are providing mechanisms to assist employees in each step along the way of the change process. Although we need to have these elements in place, many of us, no matter our field or customer group, do not adapt well to change, no matter our preparation. In these frequently occurring cases sometimes the most we can do for employees is

- clearly, consistently, and “loudly” advertise what is changing with a long timeline (as long as possible) that leads up to the change;
- identify specific curriculum and training in place to assist people with change in general as well as specific changes;
- identify a specific timeline for employees to learn, adjust, and adapt as needed;
- provide paradigm shifts that illustrate how it was compared with how it is now;
- be specific about how individual jobs have changed;
- clearly articulate management expectations for the organization, for job functions, and for individual employees;
- prepare—if necessary—*specific* expectations for individual employees, job areas, and/or departments; and
- identify where necessary elements are assessed on employee evaluations.

It’s not always long-standing employees—in fact, it’s not always employees! Patrons and customers also often resist change in organizations and changes to services, and many of the same suggestions apply. For customer and patron groups we need to

- clearly, consistently and “loudly” advertise what is changing, including a long timeline that leads up to the change;
- identify any specific curriculum and training in place to assist customers with change in general as well as specific changes for areas they use or for changes that specifically affect their access or use of the facilities, services and/or resources;
- identify a specific timeline in which customers and patrons can learn, adjust, and adapt as needed;
- paradigm shifts that illustrate how it was compared with how it is now;
- be specific about how individual library areas, services, or functions have changed;
- clearly articulate *why* changes are in place and, if possible, benefits for patrons and customers of the changes; and,
- prepare, if necessary, *specific* expectations for individual employee groups (for example, “Faculty should expect . . .” or “Area teachers should be able to . . .” or “Parents will now be able to access . . .” or “From now on anyone under eighteen will . . .”)

## What Shouldn’t Change—No Matter What

We all tend to think we know what is best for employees and what patrons want and what they expect of us, but an expanding world of management workplace knowledge and user and nonuser studies is changing how we think about our employees, our customers, our potential users, and those people who will never use us but whose support is necessary. Some exciting new studies on managing employees remotely or “technologically,” as well as studies on customers and how they use technology, what they think of information, how they use information, and what they need from libraries and information centers, shed new light on how we do what we do. Managers need to assess what applies to libraries, to management and administration, to umbrella institutions, to employees, to users and nonusers, and to target populations.

There are classic elements, however, of business in general, of nonprofit business, and certainly of the library and information field which—no matter the field of research or the data gathered—are “givens” for how we should do business. There are classic elements, however, of business in general, of nonprofit business, and certainly of the library and information field which—no matter the field of research or the data gathered—are “givens” for how we should do business. We must always focus on the user and our interactions with users—no matter the type of library. Yes, we love our collections. Yes, we fight for the best possible facilities. But our gold standard is and always should be how we design environments to meet user needs; how we design services; how we organize our resources and services and access to resources and services to provide, as much as possible, self-directed use of what we offer; how we teach users what knowledge and information is; how we connect our users to what they need; and how we personalize, as much as possible, services to meet user needs. The oldest collection, the least technological facility, and the least offering of services is enriched by the professional who knows what *is* there, who it is for, and how to connect users to it.

## Working With Our Strengths

Our first audit should be the competency or “talent” audit of library employees. What might you offer patrons through employee knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes? What services can you and should you build around staff competencies? How do you advertise or tout the strengths of staff and how the library provides these strengths to better meet patron needs? Working with staff strengths means not only focusing on customers and patrons, but—most importantly—focusing on employees. Should you build or buy or commit to major services because one employee possesses talents? Probably not, as employees leave and desire growth and change, and talents are often

needed intermittently. However, should employee talents be assessed and matched to enhance design and delivery to meet patron needs? Yes, absolutely.

## Staying Ahead of the Curve

We have a big job. In many columns I have talked about the fact that we still have to be all things to all people and that just as we are learning our basics, we discover that things are different—that there’s more, or there’s less, or there are changes. Determining a reasonable “curve” and designing methods of not only reaching but staying ahead of that curve is a critical process for all levels and types of employees in all types of libraries. Integrating change functions with “staying ahead of the curve” is also important as—obviously—what is ahead of the curve is possibly different from what you are doing now. How are managers determining the following:

- What is a reasonable curve for patrons, employees and the library? That is, what resources are available and can be devoted to maintaining and growing versus reaching ahead?
- How and who monitors future directions to the curve, and then how do those directions get assessed for commitment to reaching those future curve elements?
- How is information about the future and the curve disseminated to all employees?
- Who designs—once you’ve decided to reach—how the library “gets there?” How will you bring others in the organization along with you?
- What processes will the organization use to parcel out the identifying and monitoring of “what’s next” on the curve to appropriate employees?
- How will you gather data and design to integrate “what’s new” into your existing resources and services?

Making room for growth and change and in general—remaining open to tomorrow and the future—is a struggle for many managers and many employees in libraries. For decades libraries went through major changes and with

each one—text to images, stand-alone to networked, face-to-face integrated with remote, limitations to myriad possibilities. There was the feeling “whew, we weathered that, let’s celebrate and rest.” Our library culture hasn’t necessarily embraced the parallel activities of maintaining what we do, expanding naturally, and growing. What makes things more difficult is that in the midst of trying to grow and change, many of us have had to take giant steps back—more times that we care to acknowledge. Instead of continuously moving ahead, in many libraries the annual budget process has included building back up to where the library was before the last round of budget cuts.

Sadly, many libraries are in the midst of making those major cuts and changes now as recession economics predicts longer periods of decreased or no funding. Organizations are shifting back and libraries are having (again) to reevaluate not only direction but also vision and mission statements. This being said, the reality is that whether we are going forward or backward, things are changing. Processes in place for expansion and change go both ways, and both employees and patrons need as much direction and attention for going backward as for going forward—especially as we strive to articulate the “backward” in less negative, yet still realistic, ways. Clearly our glasses are both half full and half empty, which necessitates *real* predictions for this decade that might well include

- a reevaluation of a future that costs money while we have less money to spend;
- a need to assess our change functions to ensure they accommodate the “backwards” discussions;
- revision and redesign of training curriculum that allows for addressing more negative elements of the future;
- design of processes that address the revision of vision, mission, and goals;
- use of processes to accommodate possible downsizing;
- articulation of “not more, but less and why” content for customers and patrons;
- new training for employees that identifies coping mechanisms for “what’s not” rather than “what’s next.”