

Introduction

Recently, I found myself in a mentoring role with a relatively young former colleague who was seeking career advice ... Early in the conversation, he asked me what I thought he had to do to convince an older, more traditional business executive inside his company that he has the experience and know-how of someone much older. My answer: “Start building a time machine into the future. Your best bet is to age.” “Well, what do I do right now?” he asked. “Keep getting older,” I replied, half seriously.

Chad Dickerson¹

We have spent a lot of time lately talking about issues facing next generation librarians (“NextGens”), whether in our literature, online, at conferences, or among colleagues. Topics range from a focus on the “graying of the profession” and the concurrent need for succession planning, to an ongoing push for recruitment and retention, to the comments and concerns of younger librarians and new grads about their experiences entering the profession. Given all the hype, one might think that now is the perfect time to enter the field—and, for many, it is. Those who find the right fit with a set of colleagues who share their professional excitement and concerns have entered the field at a fascinating juncture. They have the chance to impact their changing institutions and changing profession and to build the experiences they need to lead their libraries in the future.

Unfortunately, though, others find that the talk of upcoming shortages belies a currently tight entry-level job market, and that a number of libraries (and librarians) seem less than excited about what next generation librarians have to offer. The following pages discuss the challenges that next generation librarians face, some of which are unique to the under-40 age group, and some of which affect all librarians—new or experienced. NextGens will find discussion of various ways to survive, and thrive, in the 21st-century library environment, of ways they can capitalize on generational trends and

assumptions, and of ways to recognize when generational issues are a factor and when they are irrelevant.

For the purposes of this book, next generation librarians will be defined as those currently in their 20s and 30s, part of the groups termed Generation X (born between approximately 1965 and 1978) and Generation Y (born approximately 1979–2000). (Observers define these ranges somewhat differently, and note a certain overlap at the edges; find more on defining generations in Chapter 1.) Those individuals older or younger than these somewhat artificially-imposed ranges can keep reading as well. Older recent grads may find much, if not all, of their experience reflected in these pages and long-time librarians can gain insight into the outlook and expectations of those newer to the field. Younger MLS (Master in Library and Information Science) students, potential librarians, and paraprofessionals will also be able to relate; the term “librarian” is not used exclusively to refer to individuals with an ALA-accredited graduate degree. In fact, chapters on topics like surviving library school will be particularly pertinent to NextGens who have not yet completed their MLS degree. Library administrators and managers can find insight into the concerns and outlook of their Generation X and Y employees, helping them overcome gaps in communication and understanding that can lead to workplace friction. A final chapter addresses administrators directly.

The problem of defining and labeling generations—especially those that self-consciously eschew labels—is well-documented and leads to such temptations as defining all Xers as slackers and Yers as self-centered. We need to look at general trends, rather than falling into simplistic stereotypes. What we can say, though, is that younger librarians share a certain commonality of experience that affects how they view the profession, how their colleagues view them, and their experiences in trying to break into the library field.

Our identity as people and as professionals consists of multiple and fluid factors: I am a member of Generation X; I am a mother; I am a librarian. These factors change over time. Three years ago, I did not have a child; 35 years from now I hope to be retired. This book takes an extended look at one of these factors: our status as GenX and GenY professionals and how it currently impacts both us and the field. It describes ways we can both learn from and move beyond generational differences, so that we can work together with our colleagues at all stages and levels to transform our profession and meet the needs of 21st-century library users. This book also recognizes that NextGens are the ones responsible for moving the profession

forward over the next 20 to 30 years, giving them the responsibility to learn from and work with older colleagues now, while also discovering and planning where to go in the future. Tips are given for younger librarians entering this profession, who are dealing with colleagues who sometimes willfully deny that we are in an era of transition or that NextGens have much to contribute.

While the content inevitably reflects my own perspective and experiences as a Generation X librarian, I also have drawn upon the experiences and comments of a number of other next generation librarians through interviews, discussions, and e-mail groups such as nexgenlib-l and NEWLIB-L. Quotes and comments throughout the book come from two surveys that were posted online in January and February 2005—one for librarians, students, and library workers under age 40 and one for those age 40 and over. (Survey questions and a brief discussion can be found in Appendix A.) As Karen Schneider so simply points out in her observations on top technology trends in libraries, “information is a conversation.”² The ideas in this book inevitably grew out of conversation with others.

The following pages look at questions like:

- What is unique about younger librarians’ experiences?
- What do they share with older recent grads—and with all new librarians?
- What are NextGens’ responsibilities to the profession?
- What can NextGen librarians do now to help move their institutions—and the field as a whole—forward?
- How can multiple generations work together effectively in today’s library?
- How can NextGens avoid being their own worst enemies?

This is a “Survival Guide” for a number of reasons, ranging from many NextGens’ growing disillusionment with certain aspects of librarianship as practiced in some institutions today, to the recognition that our profession is, in a number of ways, fighting for its own survival. Next generation librarians are those who are going to be around for the next few decades to deal with the aftermath of what we do now, and are those who will oversee the field’s transformation in the future. As NextGen survey respondent Kam McHugh, Randolph Branch Manager, Memphis/Shelby County Public Library &

Information Center, Memphis, TN, puts it: “‘Next generation’ involves thinking about the future of libraries and our profession beyond the next ten years or so. Many very good librarians in their 50s are thinking about the future of libraries too, but they realize that they most likely will be retired or nearing retirement. Younger librarians think about and plan for the future, knowing they will still be actively participating in the profession.”

The chapters follow the natural progression of many younger librarians' careers, beginning with Chapter 1, on defining next generation librarianship. Chapter 2 focuses on surviving library school, and Chapters 3 and 4 provide tips on surviving the job hunt and entry-level positions. Progressing up the ladder, Chapter 5 covers moving forward into management or another institution. More general issues like image, stereotypes, and diversity are discussed in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 discusses making connections, and Chapter 8 talks about finding work/life balance. Chapter 9 takes a look at the ways in which next generation librarians might transform the profession, while Chapter 10 addresses current administrators interested in retention and succession planning. Appendix A contains the text of the two surveys used in the book, along with brief statistics and comments, while Appendix B provides a quick reference to the Web sites mentioned throughout.

I would love to hear your comments, ideas, and contributions to this ongoing conversation, and welcome any feedback at rachel@lisjobs.com.

Endnotes

1. Chad Dickerson, “What It Takes to Get Ahead,” *Infoworld* Feb. 21, 2005: 22.
2. Karen Schneider, entry on the official PLA blog, January 16, 2005, www.plablog.org/2005/01/top-technology-trends.html, 19 January 2005.