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New and Noteworthy

When It's Just You – The Challenges of Solo Librarianship

Jennifer A. Bartlett

Unlike librarians working on the daily basis with other librarians and staff, when you work by yourself, the buck stops with you. One-person libraries can be a professionally isolated environment, but at the same time stimulating and interesting. Solo librarians can be found working in law libraries, hospitals, prisons, zoos, museums, small public and academic libraries, school libraries, and houses of worship. Many work as freelance information entrepreneurs, market researchers, and competitive intelligence analysts. How does the solo librarian, or "one-person librarian" (OPL) manage in the absence of daily contact with colleagues and a support system?

What is a one-person library? Author Larry Cooperman begins *Managing the One-Person Library*[1] with an overview of how solo librarian work differs from that in the traditional academic or public library setting – librarians work by themselves with perhaps one or more assistants, and are responsible for all aspects of running their library or information center: collection development, circulation, reference and research services, and so on. Key to a librarian's success under these demanding circumstances is the ability to manage time, organizational methods, change, stress, and people. Many of the advice and strategies Cooperman offers in this chapter are equally applicable to librarians working in other settings as well, of course. Other chapters focus on collection development, IT resources and internet security, cataloging, staffing, library marketing, and professional development.

A particular strength of this book is the inclusion of real-life case studies from a variety of solo librarians, including law librarians, healthcare librarians, school librarians, and others. In addition, each chapter ends with a useful summary of key points, list of references, suggestions for further reading. At under 100 pages, *Managing the One-Person Library* is a brief, readable introduction to key issues facing solo librarians.

Although no longer "new," *The New OPL Sourcebook: A Guide for Solo and Small Libraries* by Judith A. Siess remains a necessary addition to the solo librarian's bookshelf.[2] Siess was the editor and publisher of *The One-Person Library: A Newsletter for Librarians and Management* from 1998 to 2008[3] and was the first chair of the Special Libraries Association SOLO Librarians Division. The author of books including *The Visible Librarian: Asserting Your Value with Marketing and Advocacy* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2003), and *Time Management, Planning, and Prioritization for Librarians* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2002), Siess first published this title in 1997 as T*he SOLO Librarian's Sourcebook* and again in 2001 as *The OPL Sourcebook.*

OPLs, according to Siess, are a different breed of librarian:

"OPLs have more in common with other OPLs than they do with librarians in larger libraries in the same subject field. Guy St. Clair (1997) observed four common traits of OPLs: OPLs love their work; OPLs communicate; OPLs are sophisticated; and OPLs are confident. I have found that about 80 percent are OPLs by chance, only 20 percent by choice. However, many who started by chance now like it so much they wouldn't go back to a large library." (22).

One could argue about those four traits being unique to OPLs, but Siess does effectively summarize and discuss the special challenges and issues inherent in solo librarianship in her book. The 2006 update is divided into two parts. The first half of the book is written by Siess and offers an overview of One Person Librarians (OPLs), including the settings in which they are found (including international OPLs), their characteristics and a "week in the life" of a typical OPL. She then discusses key topics including general management, time management, finances, communication and marketing, technology, continuing education, and knowledge management.

In the second half of the book, John Welford provides a list of print and online reference sources, organized by subjects including business, government, literature, science, law, medicine and health, general library resources, and more. Inevitably, given the age of this edition, some of these resources are now obsolete or outdated. However, numerous other subject-oriented resource guides are readily available through various library publishers and online.

A passionate advocate for OPLs, Siess encourages a client-centered, rather than library-centered approach; it is vital to know the client's business, priorities, and mission. Marketing and advocacy is necessary in running a one-person library, as outsourcing of library services is an ongoing concern. *The New OPL Sourcebook*, even 11 years after its publication, provides excellent tools and techniques to help OPLs cope with these and other challenges they face.

Valerie Nye, in the introduction to Carol Smallwood's and Melissa J. Clapp's *How to Thrive as a Solo Librarian*,[4] writes, "In many ways, solo librarianship demand more communication and collaboration than librarians might experience in larger multi-employee libraries. A librarian working alone is the primary advocate for library collection and all of its services. This advocacy requires ongoing connections with patrons and potential patrons so that the library and its services remain vital and relevant to the people it is intended to serve." (ix).

Geared to help solo librarians keep their libraries and services vital and relevant, *How to Thrive* is a collection of 26 topical essays from experienced solo librarians in educational institutions, public libraries, archives, LIS schools, and other institutions. Topics are organized into eight sections: time management, community involvement, public relations and marketing, professional development, internet-based ideas for librarianship, administrative tasks, and assessing and moving collections. A library overviews section features profiles of three unique

information organizations. Well-organized and easy to read, this book features a wide variety of viewpoints from the field that will be of interest.

When Guy St. Clair first coined the term "one-person library" in the early 1970's, available resources geared toward this type of librarianship were scarce. Such is not the case today. In addition to print and online resources, networking support is readily available through library and subject-specific conferences and webinars.[5] Although the buck stops with the solo librarian, they are not alone!

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[1] Cooperman, Larry. *Managing the One-Person Library* (Waltham, Mass.: Chandos Publishing, 2014).

[2] Siess, Judith A. *The New OPL Sourcebook: A Guide for Solo and Small Libraries*. (Medford, N.J.: Information Today, Inc., 2006)

[3] Guy St. Clair, a knowledge management/knowledge services strategist and a past president of the Special Libraries Association (1991-1992), was one of the first librarians to establish one-person librarianship as a distinct field of professional emphasis. He began publishing *The One-Person Library: A Newsletter for Librarians and Management* with colleague Andrew Berner in 1984; Siess became editor and publisher in 1998. It ceased publication in 2008 upon Siess' retirement. St. Clair and Berner published two selective compilations of the *OPL*: *The Best of OPL: Five Years of The One-Person Library: A Newsletter for Librarians and Management* (Washington, DC: Special Libraries Association, 1990)*,* and *The Best of OPL II: Five Years of The One-Person Library, 1989-1994 (*Washington, DC: Special Libraries Association, 1996). Siess authored a compilation of her own with *The Essential OPL, 1998-2004: The Best of Seven Years of The One-Person Library: A Newsletter for Librarians and Management* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 2005). St. Clair (with Joan Williamson) also wrote *Managing the One-Person Library* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Bowker-Saur, 1986) and *Managing the New One-Person Library* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Bowker-Saur, 1992).

[4] *Smallwood, Carol and Clapp, Melissa J. How to Thrive as a Solo Librarian (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011).*

[5] For example, the Solo Librarians Division of SLA (http://solo.sla.org/) offers some open content to non-members on its webpage, including the "Flying Solo" blog and links to its Facebook page, Twitter feed, and LinkedIn account.