

Introduction

Entering a profession because it looks promising or secure is the ultimate crapshoot. ... Even more damaging to our vocational development is the belief that work is nothing more than a way to earn money. Why should we commit a third—or more—of our time to doing something that we don't care about? Why can't we get paid for being happy?¹

People have traditionally gone into librarianship with the sense that they are entering a fairly stable profession, most never intending, at least at the outset, to take their library skills to a nontraditional field. There has, however, been a longstanding interest in alternative options, as borne out by a small flurry of books and articles on the subject from the mid-1980s through the mid-90s. (A number of these are listed in Appendix D.) Now, technological advances, changes in library school education, and changes in the way our society views information work all serve to make alternative careers both more attractive and less “alternative” than they once were. Nontraditional career opportunities for info pros continue to expand, as organizations of all sizes realize the need to store, retrieve, and organize their information, and as librarians realize their ability to retool and transfer their skills. Those librarians and information professionals who can capitalize on these trends and utilize their skills in nontraditional ways can maximize their career options. *What's the Alternative?* explores some of these possibilities.

Running through these chapters is the underlying thread of transferable skills. Librarians and info pros in all types of institutions can easily apply their skills, background, and expertise to new environments, allowing us to think of information work more

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broadly than just “jobs in libraries.” What else can you do with a library degree or library experience? The facile answer is: just about anything! The thoughtful answer is: anything that uses both your skills and knowledgebase (including both your info pro skills and your additional abilities), and feeds your soul. In these pages, other info pros discuss some of the better fits they have found, but be sure to look at these options as suggestions for potential directions, rather than as a list of limited possibilities.

While you will read quite a bit here on alternative full-time career paths, you will also discover options for part-time, patchwork, or freelance nontraditional work, as well as nontraditional careers within libraries themselves. This book also discusses when, how, and why to make the jump to another field, and recommends organizations, resources, and support networks for those who are striking out on their own.

Chapter 1 talks about making the leap to an alternative career, discussing how best to make that decision and create a plan for a productive career path. Chapter 2 then suggests ways to ease into a career transition by taking a position in an organization that serves libraries and/or librarians, while Chapter 3 pushes just a bit further, talking about opportunities in organizations similar to libraries.

Chapter 4 invites you to take the plunge into self-employment, with a discussion of various ways to strike out on your own. This chapter also contains a discussion of “multiple profit centers,” with the idea that we as info pros don’t need to limit or define ourselves by a single type of work. Chapter 5 continues the self-employment theme, with information on building a business, entrepreneurship, info brokering, and becoming your own vendor.

In Chapter 6, read about continuing to work with information in nontraditional roles or in nontraditional institutions. Then, jump into Chapter 7, which talks about very different roles that you may

not expect. Chapter 8 may start you thinking about working in an information technology role outside of a library.

Chapter 9 covers nontraditional roles in traditional institutions, and explores some of the ways in which our changing field is opening up new opportunities while allowing us to remain close to home. In Chapter 10, come back into the fold, with a discussion on moving back to traditional librarianship from an alternative career, and the opportunities and pitfalls this decision presents. Lastly, Chapter 11 takes a look at where we might go from here, and the appendixes offer some additional resources, including advice on finding nontraditional jobs, a survey on alternative careers, a list of Web sites referenced, and a number of other resources for further exploration.

Whether you are a long-term librarian thinking of pursuing a different path post-retirement, a mid-career librarian experiencing burnout and feeling the need to do something different, an entry-level librarian having trouble breaking into the field, or a non-MLS library worker seeking broader opportunities, the stories and suggestions in these chapters should help spark ideas for your own alternative career. (I use the terms *librarian* and *information professional* throughout, but most of these career paths are open to all library workers and info pros, with or without an MLS.) While no book on nontraditional jobs can be comprehensive—after all, you can use your skills as an info pro to pursue just about *any* career—you will find discussions of some of the most commonly pursued options and thoughts on how your skills may best transfer.

You'll also read stories and hear advice and ideas from people working in a variety of nontraditional fields. Respondents to an online survey on alternative careers (see Appendix B) are quoted and their stories highlighted in sidebars throughout. Their willingness to share their experiences highlights the collaborative and

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giving nature of our profession, no matter where our individual career paths may take us.

My interest in alternative careers stems from my own unplanned career detour. After working in public libraries for 10 years, I'm now self-employed, stitching together multiple threads to create a personal career path outside of, yet still related to, libraries. I wish you the best of luck as you forge your own path!

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Endnotes

1. Barbara J. Winter, *Making a Living Without a Job: Winning Ways for Creating Work That You Love*, New York: Bantam, 1993: 10.