

# Introduction

*Some of us might wonder just how it is that we became, with neither our knowledge nor our consent, de facto systems geeks.*

—Chris Tovell<sup>1</sup>

Many people today who are involved in systems work in libraries fell “accidentally” into their positions, either by assignment, due to a gradual assumption of systems duties, or by luck. In some cases, their careers took an unexpected turn merely because they knew a little bit more about computers (or were younger or had graduated more recently, and were therefore thought to know more about computers!) than their coworkers. In others, these employees felt compelled to take responsibility for computer systems and services because their library’s existing technological environment was in some way failing to serve the needs of staff and patrons. Still another group once took “temporary” responsibility for a project or a system and found out too late that such arrangements have a way of becoming permanent. Systems librarians, therefore, come from a variety of backgrounds and enter their positions with both a variety of pre-existing skills and varied levels of technological comfort; most end up learning specific technologies and computer skills on the job.

Many librarians who have assumed responsibility for computer technology in their libraries have had little formal training to prepare them for their new duties. Luckily, traditional library skills have proven to supply a useful background for library systems personnel. Throughout this book, you will see quotes and examples from individuals who have used their backgrounds in librarianship to become effective systems librarians in a variety of institutions and environments. You will also find a number of tools and ideas that will be useful as you prepare yourself for a career in systems librarianship—or begin to settle into your accidental role. Along

the way, you will find reassurance: you are not alone, you do not have to be a computer programmer (hacker, MCSE) to serve as a successful systems librarian, and computer skills come and go, while library skills persevere.

In late 2001 through early 2002, 144 systems librarians responded to an online survey on their experiences. (The survey questions are reproduced at the end of the book as Appendix A.) Their responses are quoted throughout the book to help provide insight into the lives of working systems personnel in libraries. Many of the survey respondents emphasize the “accidental” nature of their careers. Typical comments include:

- “I took a night school course in BASIC programming back in 1981. I happened to type DIR at a DOS prompt in front of my supervisor. It was clear to her that I was a computer wizard! And I’ve been the one-eyed woman in the land of the blind ever since!”
- “As the newest library school graduate at my library I started working with the Internet computers that had just been installed before I came on board. I instituted library Web pages, liaised with computer support, and worked with a team creating one of our first online distance learning classes. Although I had been drawn to cataloging in library school I sort of found my niche in systems.”
- “It was the sheerest serendipity, I suppose. When I was working as a library assistant at Yale (in the late 1980s), personal computers were just beginning to become popular in the library world. Although I had no training with PCs (and certainly didn’t own one at home ... remember, they were pretty pricy beasts then!), I learned enough on the job that somehow my colleagues came to think of me as possessing ‘expertise’ (would that it were so!). So I helped support PC users in my

department, while still doing my primary job. This carried over into my first professional position—as an acquisitions librarian—and eventually so much of my job became systems-centric that the job was redescribed and I joined the ‘Dark Side.’”

- “I have been the youngest and most recent graduate hired into the libraries I have been hired to run. One of the assumptions of those people who hired me was that, due to my age, I was of the technically proficient/wired generation and could do what they did not want to.”
- “Completely accidental. I started as a reference and instruction librarian in 1990 with skimpy computer knowledge. But I got involved working on the Gopher and then the Web, and things sort of snowballed from there. I’m almost entirely self-taught.”
- “My employers just tend to put me in these kinds of jobs. I never had any intention of doing this sort of thing, but apparently there is a great need for it and I apparently have an aptitude for it. I was put on this path pretty much by chance.”
- “... because we needed to select an automation system, the director added to my duties the task of heading up the selection committee and then installing the system. It was to be temporary. That needs to be underlined, because years later, I was still doing the job. Everyone thought at the time that the system would run itself. That is, we’d install it, get everyone trained, and the only thing that would need doing is running overdue notices. Right.”
- “If I had been offered this training in library school, I probably would not have chosen to pursue it. I’m not really a geek—I’m an English major, for god’s sake!”

The accidental nature of much systems work in libraries is exacerbated by the propensity of librarians to want to solve problems. Many of us got started working with library technology merely because our library happened to have a technological issue (or issues) needing a solution, and we had the skills (or willingness) to work to find the answer. And, one truism of library work is this: if you do something once, it becomes yours forever.

Since so many of us are accidental systems personnel, and since systems librarianship is a relatively newer field, compared to traditional departments such as cataloging and reference, there has been insufficient practical material written that is intended to help give systems librarians the skills they need to succeed—especially material that is intended to show them how to use their library background to gain or feign such skills. This may seem surprising to librarians who feel overwhelmed with an onslaught of Internet articles, but most of these focus on search techniques or philosophical issues rather than hands-on systems advice. While a number of titles provide a basic introduction to technology for library managers, or for general staff working with technology in their day-to-day tasks, the literature addressing those who have made systems work their primary responsibility is fragmented. Further, there has been little specific attention given (aside from the creation of basic “computer competencies” at a number of individual libraries) to mapping out how nonsystems staff, whose responsibilities nevertheless require working with computer technology, can call on their library background to develop the ability to use such technology effectively.

Throughout this book, you will find advice and information to help you manage and interact with computer technology in your institution, whatever your level of systems responsibility. Chapters 1 and 2 provide a background in systems librarianship, outlining the skills that may be needed and attempting to define the specialty. Chapters 3–4 show how traditional library skills such as the

organization of knowledge and research techniques form the foundation of a successful career in systems. Chapters 6–7 discuss learning and teaching, focusing on instruction techniques for teaching others, and independent study skills for extending your own knowledge. Chapter 8 addresses more advanced topics, describing how library systems personnel can tackle managing large projects and managing systems staff. Chapter 9 emphasizes the real-world aspect of working with library systems and provides information on finding a job in the field (or related fields) and dealing with its attendant stresses. The conclusion and appendices round out your whirlwind course of instruction, providing resources for further reading and study. Although tips, suggestions, and descriptions of library technology are included throughout, this is not a “how-to” guide outlining every aspect of managing public-access computers or integrated library systems. Instead, this course of study shows you how to use and extend your library skills to give yourself the background you need to succeed.

Throughout the book, the terms systems librarian, automation librarian, technology librarian, and computer services librarian will be used interchangeably, reflecting the diversity of position titles in today’s libraries.

I have myself worked as an accidental systems librarian, serving as a one-person department for several years in a smaller public library. Many of the recommendations in this book are based on my own experiences, as well as on conversations with colleagues in a variety of library environments. I hope that you find systems librarianship as exciting and dynamic a field as I have, and that these suggestions, resources, and stories prove helpful in your career. Please feel free to contact me with your comments and reactions.

Rachel Singer Gordon  
rachel@lisjobs.com

## Works Cited

1. Tovell, Chris. "Whippersnappers vs. the Old Guard? Making E-Resources Training a Collaborative Experience." *Info Career Trends*, September 2001. 4 Jan. 2002 (<http://www.lisjobs.com/newsletter/archives/sept01ctovell.htm>).