



*Column: A New Generation in Librarianship*

## Conquering Imposter Syndrome: A System Librarian's Journey to a Well-Rounded Skill Set

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### ABSTRACT

Imposter Syndrome is an experience that many new professionals struggle with in their day-to-day work lives. With a strong technological background, succeeding in a systems librarian role seems natural and easy. However, some responsibilities require more traditional skills associated with librarianship, like reference services, instructional support, and collection management. This column emphasizes the significance of professional development and the necessity in gaining a skill set that ensures a more well-rounded library professional and library employee. It offers a head-on approach to combating the feeling of inadequacy when changing one's career. Imposter syndrome does not have to be a long-term feeling.

### KEYWORDS

systems librarian, imposter syndrome, professional development

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It seemed as if I had been preparing professionally to become a librarian as early as elementary school. Reading was necessary to my existence, much like breathing or eating. Frequent visits to the library made me a regular—not only in my city’s library, but also in the surrounding cities.’ I spent most of my free time surfing the catalog, leisurely browsing the shelves, inquiring with the reference librarians, and again, reading voraciously (an adage commonly heard among professionals in the field). Being a bibliophile can form a solid foundation for a future librarian, but these habits only scratch the surface of the roles and responsibilities assigned to reference, collection management, and liaison librarians. Much like those outside of the profession, I was ill-informed and accepted a common misconception that being a librarian has to do with loving books and reading. Unsurprisingly, I later discovered that my enthusiasm for consuming words and frequenting the building gave me a false sense of security upon entering the professional field.

As a self-proclaimed professional through regular patronage, I decided to spend my undergraduate and graduate education focusing entirely on technology. Additionally, the decision to focus on technology felt like a strategic approach for my career path to stay employed long-term in a field that has sometimes been described as irrelevant and dying. Therefore, I declared myself a computer information systems major. I sought out internships at libraries with a technology focus and took a few years off before graduate school to become an information technology professional. These experiences allowed me to establish a robust skill set supporting technology—both in general and within libraries, public and academic institutions alike. My proficiency with technology provided me with a competitive edge when job hunting, specifically as a systems librarian. I felt prepared and confident interviewing and entering the job force to handle tasks associated with systems librarian positions. However, I soon realized that, apart from my education, I lacked the basic skills that most librarians (excluding those in systems) would possess, even at an entry-level.

### **Systems Roles and Responsibilities**

Changing careers is a nerve-wracking experience. Fortunately, I secured a systems librarian position with a technology-based focus in academia. Much of the job description included roles and responsibilities which felt comfortable and familiar given my background and previous positions. I felt confident in providing leadership and expertise in developing and executing short- and long-term technology strategies. I also had previous experience managing websites for libraries and archives. That experience set me up to offer web strategy support to the library and archives as my new position required. I had been acting as a systems administrator to over forty businesses and their associated systems for five-plus years. Supporting the library’s integrated system was not just a duty; it felt second nature to me. My systems librarian role was also tasked with providing ILS support to two additional universities. I had also worked at a managed service provider, which is an information technology company supported by various companies with no other formal associations. I found enjoyment in

working within my personal wheelhouse, particularly in dealing with library technology. Up until this point in my career, I had been developing the necessary skill set to succeed as a systems librarian.

However, the position description also included some skills outside of these primary sets. The systems librarian was responsible for minimal reference duties. The position would act as liaison to assigned academic departments, requiring instructional support. Participation in collection development among fellow faculty librarians would be needed as well. Given that I started the systems librarian position during the summer when most students were gone, I remained blissfully unaware of some essential additional skills required to be a well-rounded librarian. Additionally, I was under the false assumption that I would be able to handle any associated duties based on my college education. I also believed I could actively participate in reference interviews based on my long (and continuous) tenure as a public library patron.

### **Imposter Syndrome**

As the summer sun waned and the fall semester began, I began to face challenges in my new position for which I was not quite ready. As the students returned to campus, I was assigned specific hours on the reference desk. This seemed easy enough. However, I was quickly confronted by a lack of knowledge about the university's databases. I received questions about seeking education resources, but I had no clue which databases would best meet their needs. I had to rely on the veteran reference librarians around me before I could offer patrons a thoughtful and educated response. It was my first taste of being ill-equipped to serve patrons with the resources they were seeking. Next, I was in a situation where I had liaison duties to perform. A professor from the business department approached me about presenting to their class on available resources to discuss APA style. I was immediately reminded of my inadequate knowledge regarding our databases. This was followed by panic and a sense of urgency to quickly become more efficient in the dos and don'ts of APA citations. While I had some knowledge and experience, I certainly was not comfortable presenting APA rules at an undergraduate level. My final example came during our collection development committee meeting, which includes the faculty librarians. It was apparent that I lacked knowledge about the collection needs of my liaison department. I also made suggestions for cuts in liaison areas that did not fall under my responsibility, but the librarians within those areas were kind enough to quietly tell me of my faux pas.

During my first month or two in the position, I was filled with confidence. I did not know everything, but I was quickly oriented with the systems used by my institution. However, the first month of the school semester made me seriously question if I was prepared to perform the non-technology-related functions associated with being a librarian. I faced numerous situations and examples that made me question whether I was less of a librarian than my counterparts. The core differences between being a technology professional and a librarian with a technology-

oriented role—namely reference, liaising, and collection management—became blazingly apparent. I did not feel I was on the same caliber of librarian as my reference, collection management, and cataloging colleagues. While the realization was disappointing, it was not a situation that I had to settle for.

### Tips and Tricks

Understanding that I had a strong handle on my primary skills and a loose grip on the secondary skills required recognition on my part. During my first employee evaluation (four months post-hire), I had to express to fellow faculty librarians and the Dean of the library my goal for the next year was to invest time and effort into developing a better understanding and comfort with reference services, instructional support, and collection management. I developed a simple, yet effective plan that involved an investment in learning to overcome imposter syndrome and to establish myself professionally as the librarian I wanted to be.

My plan began with our collections, an essential foundation for being a well-rounded library professional. I needed to learn about the resources that we readily had available. This involved going through our website, specifically focusing on the databases page to learn about the resources available within them. I read and reviewed information and subject matter related to our subscribed databases. Next, I focused on the liaison areas which I was responsible for, including creating a report that contained a list of all physical titles falling within a certain range. I went through the titles to understand the covered material, previous librarians' focus areas, and areas for building or weeding.

Research became an essential strategy. Like any librarian, I began to pursue materials that would help me to improve my skills related to reference interviews, instructional sessions, and collection management. This involved using Interlibrary Loan to read books such as *Shelf-by-Shelf Weeding* (by Rebecca Vnuk), *Collection Development and Management for 21st Century Library Collections* (by Vicki L. Gregory), *Personal Librarians* (by Lynne Bisko, Heather Buchansky, Brian C. Gray and E. Gail Reese), *Teaching Business Information Literacy* (by Genifer Snipes, Marlinda Karo, Ash E. Faulkner, and Lauren Reiter), and more. I also sought out articles that applied to my goal. For example, the *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* and *Library Journal* provided valuable insights and information on my journey to gain knowledge.

Joining professional organizations aided my professional development. Through organizations like the American Library Association, I found round tables that supported my goals to enhance an additional skill set. For example, I joined the Learning Round Table, Library Research Round Table, and the New Members Round Table. Many of these round tables have committees providing training opportunities for their members throughout the years. For instance, I have attended workshops like “Choosing Your Words in APA Style and Driving Student Success,” (offered by APA Style, featuring Chelsea Lee and Samantha Denny) which

greatly contributed to improving my soft skill set. Professional organizations offer excellent online training and courses catering to professionals, whether novice or advanced. Additionally, many of these organizations have conferences. I have been fortunate to attend a few since starting in my current role. Instead of focusing solely on technology- or system-related presentations, I sought out speakers discussing subjects like collection development, reference, and instructional support, which were crucial to my professional development.

I needed to ask for help and support from my co-workers since it was necessary to be successful. They are the key players who have actively contributed to developing the collection, collaborated with faculty, and played a crucial role in establishing current library policies. Having discussions about their processes for activities like weeding or collection development proved incredibly helpful, providing me valuable insight and guidance. They also provided insight into being an effective liaison and approaches in communicating with professors. Acknowledging my lack of instructional support experience, they generously invited me to sit in on their instructional sessions, providing a valuable learning opportunity. They were and are always available when I am asked a reference question by a patron. In general, they have been interested in supporting me with advice, guidance, and assistance with anything that I bring to them. They are educators, not only to our students but to new faculty members such as myself. Utilizing their wealth of professional experience and knowledge proved to be a great asset, significantly contributing to the successful achievement of my goals.

The last and greatest lesson that I learned was exposing myself to situations to test my newfound skills. It is easy to be turned off by an experience where you feel inadequate. But part of learning is facing those challenges with a head-on approach. It is like exposure therapy; if it does not work once, deciding never to try it again certainly is not an option. Reassess your approach, create a plan, and try again. I had to remind myself that imposter syndrome would not define my career. Only I can do that.

### **Conclusion**

Imposter syndrome can sneak up on anyone, even those who feel the most prepared. The key to combating these mostly false illusions is to take proactive steps, allowing yourself growth in areas where you feel ineffective. I am not promising that the tips and tricks that helped me gain a respectable additional skill set will be useful for everyone. However, anyone can use these suggestions as a base, add a few of their own, and work to lose that pesky feeling of inadequacy. While feeling like an imposter can be a fleeting emotion, adopting lifelong learning practices can serve as an enduring tool to combat it throughout one's career. After gaining more experience and a better understanding of the profession, I can appreciate that the systems librarian needs a wide set of skills to be the best librarian possible.