

Editorial Board Thoughts: A Considerable Technology Asset that Has Little to Do with Technology

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For this issue’s editorial, I thought I would set aside the trendy topics like discovery, the cloud, and open . . . well, everything—source, data, science—and instead focus on an area that I think has more long-term implications for technologists and libraries. For technologists in libraries, probably any industry really, I believe our most important challenges aren’t technical at all. For the average “techie,” even if an issue is complex, it is often finite and ultimately traceable to a root cause—the programmer left off a semi-colon in a line of code, the support person forgot to plug in the network cable, or the systems administrator had a server choke after a critical kernel error. Debugging people issues, on the other hand, is much less reductive. People are nothing but variables who respond to conflict with emotion and can become entrenched in their perspectives (right or wrong). At a minimum, people are unpredictable. The skill set to navigate people and personalities requires patience, flexibility, seeing the importance of the relationship through the 1s and 0s, and often developing mutual trust.

Working with technology benefits from one’s intelligence (IQ), but working with people requires a deeper connection to perception, self-awareness, body language, and emotions, all parts of emotional intelligence (EQ). EQ is relevant to all areas of life and work, but I think particularly relevant to technology workers. Of particular importance are EQ traits related to emotional regulation, self-awareness, and the ability to pick up social queues. My primary reasoning for this is that technology is (1) fairly opaque to people outside of technology areas and (2) technology is driving so much of the rapid change we are experiencing in libraries. IT units in traditional organizations have a significant challenge because many root issues in technology are not well understood, and change is uncomfortable for most, so it is easy to resent technology for being such a strong catalyst for change. As a result, it is becoming more incumbent upon us in technology to not only instantiate change in our organizations but also to help manage that change through clear communication, clear expectation setting, defining reasonable timeframes that accommodate individuals’ needs to adapt to change, a commitment to shift behavior through influence, and just plain old really good listening.

I would like to issue a bit of a challenge to technology managers as you are making hiring decisions. If you want the best possible working relationships with other functional areas in the library, especially traditional areas, spend time evaluating candidates for soft skills like a relaxed demeanor; patience; clear, but not condescending, communication; and a personal commitment to

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serving others. These skills are very hard to teach. They can be developed if one is committed to developing them, but more often than not, they are innate. If a candidate has those traits as a base but also has an aptitude for understanding technology, that individual will likely be the kind of employee people will want to keep, certainly much more so than someone who has incredible technical skill but little social intelligence. For those who are interested in developing their EQ, there are many of tools available—a million management books on team building, servant leadership, influencing coworkers, providing excellent service, etc. Personally, I have found that developing a better sense of self-awareness is one of the best ways to increase one's EQ. Tests such as the Meyers Briggs Type Indicator,¹ the Strategic Leadership Type Indicator,² and the DISC,³ which categorize your personality and work-style traits, can be very effective tools for understanding how you approach your work and how your work style may affect your peers. Combined with a willingness to flex your style based on the personalities of your coworkers, these can be very powerful tools for influencing outcomes. Most importantly, I have found putting the importance of the relationship above the task or goal can make a remarkable difference in cultivating trust and collaboration. Self-awareness and flexible approaches not only have the opportunity to improve internal relationships between technology and traditional functional areas of the library, but between techies and end users. We are using technology in many new creative ways to support end users, meaning techies are more and more likely to have direct contact with users. In many ways, our reputation as a committed service profession will be affected by our tech staffs' ability to interact well with end users, and ultimately, I believe the proportion of our tech staff that have a high EQ could be one of the strongest predictors of the long-term success for technology teams in libraries.

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