

Alan Smith: The librarian who came in from the cold

(Notes taken by Chris Bolland)

NLS2 was the first time I had ever heard Alan Smith the Director of the State Library of South Australia speak. What Alan had to say was no great revelation for me but it confirmed many things I had been waiting for a leading Librarian to say. This is my take on his presentation.

“Libraries are about people”. We know that but many of our colleagues would have us believe otherwise. A common misconception (even stereotype) is that libraries are about books. That librarian’s are about books! As Alan pointed out to us, libraries are part of the service industry, they are about people. We are here to help people with their information needs. If you don’t like dealing with people, don’t work in a library.

“Never take a job you don’t like, you might get stuck in it”. How many people do you know who hate their job but do nothing about it? These days you have to take what you can get but don’t apply for a job you know you could do but don’t really want. You will grow to hate your job and probably the industry. Alan recommends we do what we “fit in to”. Makes sense to me.

Networking is an important part of our industry. Many people confuse networking and self-promotion. Alan reminded us all that networking should be done for mutual benefit. It is about familiarising yourself with your peers, engaging them and learning from them. I think we need to see networking as socialising with a purpose. If you were in a social situation you wouldn’t just list your credits and not show any interest in the person you are talking to. Well, some people might but you won’t gain many friends, just as you won’t make allies of colleagues unless you engage them.

“Position yourself to acquire skills and experience for your next ideal position”. Take a logical approach to your career. If you have an ideal position in mind, think about how you can acquire the skills you need. Rather than moving “up” in the ranks to other jobs, perhaps you should move “sideways” to gain experience and skills. Don’t wait until you are bored with your current job to plan your next move.

“Personal development must go with professional development”. I see personal development as meaning developing skills and understanding about people and learning personal skills to cope with stress and frustration that you will encounter at work. You can do as many management courses and IT training sessions as you like but if you can’t cope with having to make the tough decisions and the stress that comes with it, all the professional development in the world isn’t going to help.

I was very glad that I attended the New Librarian’s Symposium and got to hear Alan speak. As I discovered at the conference, he is also very approachable which is a quality not found in a lot of senior managers. This is itself a lesson in professional development and we should all take note.

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