

Building Bridges with Bricks That are Thrown Toward You

Wondering how to build a strong, stable and resilient information profession? Start by breaking rules.

BY JANICE R. LACHANCE, SLA CEO

As we gather from all over the world in Seattle for SLA 2008, the theme of this year's Annual Conference & INFO-EXPO is, appropriately enough, "Breaking Rules, Building Bridges." Why is this theme apropos for the world's premier conference and exhibition for librarians and info pros? Ignoring the obvious that Seattle is dependent upon an impressive network of bridges linking local neighborhoods and nearby cities, the theme describes accurately what info pros must do to be successful in the rapidly changing world of information.

Like it or not, the profession is under-siege by historical forces not seen since the invention of the printing press. Does this mean you should simply give up and throw in the towel? Absolutely not! I came across a quote recently by legendary broadcaster David Brinkley that resonated with me. I am paraphrasing slightly, but he said, "Successful people are those who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at them." We certainly have accumulated our fair share of bricks in recent years. Now, it is time for us to begin building a reenergized, dynamic, and relevant profession that can not only meet the increasingly challenging demands of your customers today, but also will allow you to play a greater leadership role in a reconstituted information industry of tomorrow.

If you are wondering how we can build a strong, stable and resilient information profession that will meet the needs of the technologically-centric world of tomorrow, I believe it begins by breaking rules. I believe you must redefine the profession and your place in it. Specifically, you have to attack the stereotypes and conventional wisdom of what it means to be a librarian or info pro in today's growing digital economy. And, you must be willing and able to reinvent yourself, as often as necessary, to meet the evolving information needs of your enterprise or industry.

In order to play by this new set of rules, the successful information professional of tomorrow will have to be flexible and well grounded in everything from financial business practices to information technology, and from supervisory management to marketing. And, she or he will have to embody four characteristics I believe are indispensable to success; a willingness to take calculated risks, an appreciation for the value of continued, life-long learning, the ability to think strategically about your role and your organization, and the courage to be a leader. By reinventing yourself, by breaking the rules intended by design or happenstance to pigeonhole you inside your organization, you have the opportunity to grow, develop and succeed like never before.

As a way to help you on this road to success, SLA has undertaken an extensive examination of the profession and the association. The purpose of this research-focused

project is to align your roles and responsibilities with the changing needs of tomorrow's enterprise. As a result of this Alignment Project, we will develop communications messages and common language about SLA and the profession that will express better and more clearly than ever before the value you and the profession provide.

Some of you may be asking, "If we are breaking rules, why should we care about building bridges?" The reason is exactly the same as why it is in your best interest to think long and hard about reinventing yourselves. Change.

I do not want to belabor the point, but technology has shifted expectations for information from, "What can you give me and when can I get it?" to "What can you give me right now?" The need for speed of information combined with the complexity of business challenges today make it almost essential for info pros to have formal or informal networks of friends and colleagues throughout the world to help them solve difficult problems. And with the corporate mergers and acquisitions taking place seemingly overnight, and other changes buffeting the information marketplace, it is beneficial to have a network you can call on if you are seeking new employment. It is no surprise that the number one reason librarians and info pros say they join SLA is for networking opportunities. Given the value of networking to large numbers of you, there is no reason to believe this will change anytime soon.

Providing networking opportunities, offering easily accessible continuing education, and advocating on behalf of you and the profession is the mission of SLA. By meeting your needs in these very important ways, the association seeks to increase the stature of the profession and help you succeed as a professional. We do not only want to help you enhance your career, we want to help you ignite it. By "Breaking Rules, Building Bridges," I know SLA can do that. SLA