



## OFFICE HOURS

# Agents of Change

By Michael Stephens

I MUST ADMIT MY EYEBROWS raised when one of my students in the Hyperlinked Library class shared a job description in our discussion devoted to emerging ideas and trends. Trenton Public Library (TPL), NJ, was looking for an “Innovation Catalyst Librarian.” The interest grew as my students dissected the duties and requirements, comparing their own experiences and suitability for such a position. I have seen a lot of cutting-edge job descriptions before, but this one was different.

*Merriam-Webster* defines a catalyst as “an agent that provokes or speeds significant change or action.” TPL was searching for “a passionate, creative, type-A professional who will be instrumental in helping lead our organization into significant and meaningful change!” This position, intended for a Librarian I, merits some consideration. Let’s unpack the duties and requirements. I’d argue that in ten years (or less) this type of job will be the norm for incoming employees, of the full stack persuasion and beyond.

### No speed limit

This job is not for the timid or those inclined to take “baby steps,” a phrase that haunted meetings during my public librarian career:

We are not interested in snail-paced incremental change but rather overhauling everything from policy to staff training, from technology to programming and more, immediately.

I’ve often called for positions for recent grads to “hit the ground running” and this seems to fit the bill. No easing into the work but a “no speed limit, this is the fast lane” approach that might seem daunting for new hires as well as longtime employees. Red flag one.

This job requires creativity and curiosity as standard operating procedure.

We want to create an environment where you won’t just advise us on the next “big thing”—with only your own vision as the limit—you can *create* the next big thing!

This must require extensive support from administration, a high degree of transparency for all steps taken, and staff buy-in across the board. Red flag two.

This job breaks down the pyramid of permissions and hierarchy of rules that pervades many organizations, most probably stifling innovation.

The successful candidate will, with a great deal of autonomy, work directly for the Library Director. They will engage in all aspects of professional librarianship.

From the change agent’s mouth to your ear, dear director. Red flag three.

### Too fast and too hard?

The red flags are points that concern me. Each—fast rate of change, needing buy-in from all, and answering directly

### Remedy

The antidote to our concerns may lie here: this job “goes to the field.”

They will work in all areas of the library so as to be versed in where and what improvements and change are needed.

The catalyst will be visible, hopefully willing to listen to frontline staff and bring concerns back to administration. Seeing firsthand what it’s like to be on desk should yield insights.

I see similarities in these facets to the initiatives of MIT Libraries’ “Future of Libraries” task force. Charged with extensive visioning and addressing the “transformative changes in culture, technology, publishing, research, and pedagogy,” this is a group to watch. That its participatory “Idea bank” seeks to tap into the wants and needs of all stakeholders, with shared posts rising up a leaderboard via “Support This Idea” voting, goes way beyond opaque planning sessions of carefully selected

## Bringing the library up to speed with rapid change may conflict with traditional operational methods

to the director—has potential to alienate certain staff and create rifts in the organization.

Daniel Kiely, a student in the Hyperlinked Library, felt this concern as well: “I held back from writing about my initial reaction to this job posting, which was fear,” he wrote. “Instead of asking for type A, this posting should ask for thick skin. I have seen and experienced the blowback from librarians clinging to their ‘way of doing things,’ and it can be harsh. I only hope that the library director is of a like mind.”

The type A thing stuck in my mind, too, but I’d like to believe the authors were thinking of someone who could handle the chaos of an organization in the thick of change.

groups. Currently on top: “Move the books somewhere else,” followed closely by “keep the books.”

This out-of-the-ordinary job indicates that the library is seeking to get up to speed with rapid change and improvements. This may conflict with traditional library operational methods, but the pace of development and advancement is far faster today. TPL may make a great case study for a future column. I also wish the MIT Libraries task force Godspeed with its visioning work. Both of these libraries are pointed toward an important goal.

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