

**Professional Event**

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INFO 231-10: Issues in Special Libraries and Information Centers

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## **Introduction**

Special librarians are reputed to be a curious lot—but also a busy one. All of their day-to-day duties might leave little time for equally important responsibilities, such as taking care of their own career growth.

Especially if their organization does not prioritize or support personal learning and development, it can be all too easy for a special librarian to neglect gaining new competencies, skills, and knowledge. Robinson (2019) recognized that “The special library environment . . . presents many challenges to professional development such as time constraints, limited resources and declining budgets” (p. 416). This is problematic, as the Special Library Association (2016) listed lifelong learning as one of the most important “enabling” competencies “vital for professional success and career development.”

Fortunately, there are learning and growth opportunities for information professionals who have the time and resources to take advantage of them. One of them is networking. Much networking can be done for free, for example through social media. Other avenues, such as conferences, might require travel and/or fees. Some conferences offer reduced rates or free attendance based on needs, however, and virtual or regional conferences might be more convenient than traveling far for a big national conference. McGowan, Hart, & Hum (2021) offered another benefit of regional conferences in particular, stating that those “with a focus on a specialized librarianship theme offer valuable professional development opportunities” (p. 548).

One such regional conference took place online this year when the Special Libraries Association (SLA) Europe went virtual for its 2021 event. This paper examines lessons and learnings from the speakers' presentations, grouped by the conference's themes, as well as the networking opportunities the event provided for attendees.

### **Learnings**

SLA Europe hails itself as “one of the largest regional communities of the Special Libraries Association” (Special Libraries Association Europe, n.d.). After more than a year of Covid-19, the theme of its 2021 gathering seems almost preordained: “Reflect | Redesign | Reboot.” The two-day virtual conference featured eight presentations plus career workshops, a vendor showcase, a panel discussion, and opening and closing remarks each day by SLA Europe President Amy Stubbing.

### **Reflect**

Nick Poole, Chief Executive of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and keynote speaker on the first day of the conference, addressed the “Reflect” aspect of the theme, urging attendees to look back on their own personal experiences, particularly over the last 15 months of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to take the time to absorb and understand what everyone has been through before trying to adjust and move forward with whatever the “new normal” of the post-Covid world will be.

He also did some reflecting for special librarians in Europe, especially in the United Kingdom. He covered how knowledge mobilization in the UK, “supported by librarians and knowledge specialists” in healthcare in particular, helped in the UK's response to Covid-19. And he talked about the role that librarians and information professionals played in building

organizational resilience, informed by the closeness the professionals have to their institutions and their people, that enabled users and organizations to respond to change rather than resist it. This led Poole to conclude that the biggest lesson he drew from “15 months of helping our organizations adapt to the pandemic is that digital access means . . . our skills and values have never been needed more than they are today.”

In her presentation, life coach Sarah Wolfenden focused on personal resilience and reflected on how information professionals survived the Covid-19 lockdown. She looked at the pre-pandemic situation in the UK that included stressors such as library closings and working remotely from home with children and others in the household, and how Covid-19 caused or added to these problems. Her self-care message was one of finding personal themes (e.g., lifelong learning, autonomy) and values (e.g., growth, freedom, fairness) and applying them to prioritizing how we work.

## **Redesign**

In his Day 1 talk, Poole said that information professionals should use this moment in history as an opportunity to realize that the “old normal” was not optimal, and to prioritize tackling some of the most pressing problems moving forward. In the UK, foremost is supplying businesses with the information they need to close the country’s productivity gap compared to other developed countries, while also working actively to diversify the information profession.

Colleen Cable of HBR Consulting spoke to a redesign theme centered on benchmarking. She noted how the pandemic brought greater visibility to librarians in the law field in particular as law firm leaders looked to their libraries for existing knowledge and new sources of information to keep their businesses running. She encouraged information professionals to take

advantage of their new seat at the table by continuing to communicate the value they add to their organizations, and in particular to use the data they're already collecting to demonstrate this impact. Key to this she said is for information professionals to work on their sales techniques through establishing relationships and building trust.

Michael Maher, a law librarian at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, presented his thoughts on redesigning through change management (CM). CM drivers he mentioned included technological advances, crisis response (e.g., to Covid-19), changes in consumer demands and behaviors, and competitive pressure. He argued that people do not like change, but by preparing for and doing our best to understand it—and more importantly, preparing our colleagues for it—information professionals and others can not only cope with change but take advantage of it to improve services and the organization.

## **Reboot**

While the first day of the conference mainly covered the reflect and redesign themes, Day 2 was all about rebooting, and the common thread throughout the sessions was data. Ben Longman, founder of business research company Trendtype, looked ahead to 10 types of changes the information industry can expect and should prepare for. His top change was the commoditization of data as companies and institutions realize that the information they generate has value, and that they should not give it away for free. Longman saw this as a challenge for information professionals who have relied on free data, but also as an opportunity to partner with data generators to increase access to valuable data.

Leon Saunders Calvert of the London Stock Exchange Group explored environmental, social, and governance (ESG) data as a means to two fundamental ends: “to identify companies

with business models which are positioned to partake in the decarbonized economy of the future,” and the “social license to operate,” which he explained as the “higher demand that companies . . . represent the values of the societies in which they operate.” To achieve these goals, information professionals must help their own institutions and others collect, analyze, interpret, and apply ESG data to demonstrate impact on ethical, environmental, and social issues such as human rights, sustainability, and equity.

Juliane Schneider of the non-profit Sage Bionetworks spoke about research data management (RDM) from a scientific perspective. She noted that while institutions used to fret over metadata, they now see it as a driver of value and growth. Her reboot message was one of finding partners for RDM efforts to get more done and help evangelize the importance of data and metadata.

On Day 1, Poole addressed some non-data reboot themes. He spoke of wanting the information community to “move on from responding to change to actually instigating, leading, and shaping change.” He also spoke of reducing information frictions such as copyright and pricing restrictions, platform and format issues, and the digital divide. By helping blur the lines between physical and digital and making physical location less important, Poole sees remote work as helping in this effort: “The hybrid workplace is just another step on the journey towards a vision of a frictionless information environment,” he claimed.

Looking forward, Poole spoke of skills that will serve special librarians well in becoming leaders in the organizations they support. These include collaboration, technological savvy and flexibility to procure and implement tools that will enhance information-seeking capabilities, and

professional ethics to deal with and help others deal with thorny issues such as artificial intelligence (AI).

### **Networking**

While the conference was mainly about the presentations, there were some built-in opportunities for networking in the form of small breakout rooms between sessions. For those who chose to join these virtual spaces, there were no moderators or suggested topics, just the chance to meet and chat with fellow attendees. While most attendees were from the UK, I also met people from Sweden, Switzerland, and Canada.

Before the conference, I reached out to the general information email to request information and advice. Conference Coordinator Tsveta Rafaylova responded with suggestions to join the networking breakout rooms during the conference, and to follow @slaeurope and #ReflectRedesignReboot on Twitter before and during the event. SLA Europe Digital Communications Committee member Claire Sewell urged me to ask questions in-session (which I did on three or four occasions), while Julia Bhojoo, Digital Communications Committee Chair, provided the URL for a LinkedIn page for the event.

In a “master class” on LinkedIn, Dominic Hilleard, Director of Digital Recruitment Projects at Rethink Group, recommended taking a less-is-more, quality-over-quantity approach to building a network on the platform, connecting only with people you know and trust. I nevertheless sent connection invitations on LinkedIn to a couple members I had met during the conference, and followed a few others whose profiles on the platform indicated they would rather have that level of engagement rather than direct connections. Of the connection invitations I sent, only one has not yet accepted.

## **Conclusion**

Many special librarians understand the importance of networking and rely on it for continuing education. In a survey of special librarians in Jamaica, the top three most common continuing professional development (CPD) activities involved networking or at least the opportunity to network: 73 percent of respondents reported attending seminars or workshops, 58 percent attended professional library association meetings, and 46 percent worked on professional association committees (Robinson, 2019, p. 421). Respondents also listed participation in library associations and networks as their top means of staying aware of CPD activities (p. 425).

Joyce Fedeczko, Managing Librarian and Archivist, International Fertilizer Development Center exemplified this philosophy in stating, “I maintain my professional knowledge of current information and e-library science disciplines by attending professional information management meetings, webinars, and conferences” (Megaridis, 2018, p. 114) and maintaining membership in professional associations.

Reaping even more value out of these networking, conference, and association membership activities requires repeated attendance and ongoing engagement. Not only is this best way to hear about developments and trends impacting the field of special librarianship, it also helps establish meaningful and fruitful relationships with colleagues across the profession, even across international borders.



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