

How to strive for success, happiness, fulfilment and impact: a personal manifesto

This article explores the author's 'personal manifesto'. It describes the framework he devised to help him understand his style, preferences and needs in a professional context and explores the intersection of the professional and the personal, identifying links between how we think and act in the professional context and in our wider lives as individuals. The manifesto grew out of the opportunities presented by starting a new role and was formulated through making sense of the new thinking, reflection and ideas prompted by that experience. It explores a variety of themes personal to the author, such as the importance of being intellectually engaged in the professional context, the value of positivity, innovation and ambitious thinking, and the importance of positive relationships with others built around emotional intelligence.

Keywords

personal reflection; career management; interpersonal skills; emotional intelligence; innovation; technology

Introduction

This opinion piece is a personal reflection on how I sought to get the best out of starting a new role and understand my personal style, preferences and needs. Starting any new role presents an opportunity to psychologically reboot, to learn from previous mistakes and to approach things differently. It is a stimulating, energizing and motivating mix of experiences and emotions, a time of heightened thinking and processing, as one is confronted with a range of unfamiliar situations and work cultures. It is a crucial time of opportunity, both for oneself and the organization, to bring fresh thinking and build a solid foundation for the future.

What follows is my personal perspective on striving for success, happiness, fulfilment and making a difference in the professional context. Given my professional background, it is written about and for the library and information profession but contains much that would translate to other sectors.

I started at Lancaster University in October 2018, as Assistant Director for Digital Innovation and Research Services, having moved from the University of East London to a very different environment and institution. I wanted to capitalize on the opportunity, rather than reflect later that 'I could have been a contender'.¹ I also wanted to structure the new ideas, perspectives and reflections that were occurring to me and give myself a framework to capture the positivity and personal engagement.

I did not set out to write a personal manifesto, and certainly did not name it as such until fairly recently. It developed organically over time, starting as a set of notes, purely so that ideas were not forgotten. I added further thoughts and ideas to this periodically, initially to guard against memory lapses, but then found the process a genuinely enriching experience in itself. It developed into a personal manifesto, a version of which is explored below. I make no claims that it is comprehensive or



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'Starting any new role presents an opportunity to psychologically reboot, to learn from previous mistakes and to approach things differently'

2 makes sense as an overarching theory. It is deeply personal, and may have little of relevance to others, depending on what resonates with them. But it is a range of themes that I have learnt, through experience, do resonate with me and align with my style of working. It is – in short – a personal framework for thinking and acting positively.

As a set of guiding principles, the framework has given me a structure to make sense of the opportunities, challenges and inspirations I encounter professionally. Part of its value has been to tackle 'impostor syndrome'.² Whilst I have been fortunate to not experience imposter syndrome as keenly as some in the sector – indeed, colleagues have written very powerfully about feeling that they do not belong – I have found times when the perceived benchmark of success appears to be toweringly high and, with the rapid evolution of the sector, getting ever higher.

'a personal framework for thinking and acting positively'

Why did I decide to share this? In many respects it is unusual material for a professional article. However, I find great reassurance when others share personal insights in a professional context. You may not find this of value or interest at all, and that is absolutely fine. But equally, it might resonate with you. It might even prompt you to think about what your own personal manifesto looks like. Everyone is unique and different.

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Be intellectually engaged

Professional motivation derives from a passion for learning and developing knowledge, a desire to engage with big ideas, make connections between them and find ways of using them professionally. This is why professional life can deliver self-actualization and be something of value and fulfilment, rather than a chore.

It can be a pleasure and a privilege to work in our sector and being intellectually engaged in it is vital. Our work can be inspiring and fascinating, with opportunities to do something genuinely worthwhile that makes a real difference for people. As Richard Ovenden reminds us in his work about the deliberate destruction of knowledge, 'Libraries and archives share the responsibility of preserving knowledge for society'.³ Ovenden outlines five functions of libraries and archives that are lost when they are destroyed:

- supporting the education of society and specific communities
- providing a diversity of knowledge and ideas
- supporting the well-being of citizens and principles of open society
- providing a fixed reference point to preserve truth
- preserving the written record of societies and cultures.⁴

This creates a paradigm in which to work that can be intellectually fulfilling for ourselves and genuinely impactful for our users and stakeholders.

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Additionally, the interrelationship between work and life outside of work is crucial. Kim Scott highlights the important notion of 'work-life integration' as opposed to work-life balance.⁵ Although we all need a life beyond work that is enriching and satisfying, there need not be a rigid dichotomy. 'The time you spend at work can be an expression of who you are as a human being, an enormous enrichment to your life, and a boon to your friends and family.'⁶

Be outward looking and proactive

Look outwards and onwards; do not turn inwards and lose energy or enthusiasm. Strive for an inner resolve and determination. Try not to get knocked off track by setbacks or negative experiences.

- 3 Challenges and setbacks are a reality for everybody. As difficult as they are at the time, they also present an opportunity to reflect and grow. If everything is easy, we can never hope to learn and develop as individuals or as professionals. Crucially, difficult situations allow us to pause and reflect on the important point of what we might do differently next time. Likewise, if someone else's behaviour was challenging, what is it about their behaviour that was negative and can it be used as an example of how *not* to approach something?

As Susan Jeffers highlights in her seminal work *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, much of this is linked to self-confidence:

'All you have to do to diminish your fear is to develop more trust in your ability to handle whatever comes your way ... From this moment on, every time you feel afraid, remind yourself that it is simply because you are not feeling good enough about yourself.'⁷

Kim Scott's 'radical candor' theory⁸ provides a valuable framework for building confidence, resolve and determination. Although principally about people management, it has important value in other situations. The approach of caring deeply about others but also challenging directly and assertively allows you to say what you think and ask for what you want without either being (or worrying that you may be perceived as) obnoxious or not actually getting your point across.

Always push at the limits of what is possible

We should be ambitious leaders at the forefront, not content to sit in the middle of the pack and copy what others do. To fail to do this is to fail to challenge the old stereotypes of libraries and librarians.

As those who work in the profession will no doubt be acutely aware, the old stereotypes of libraries as hushed and hallowed rooms full of books, probably with arcane and officious rules, are frustratingly enduring. Although print books and physical space remain important for most libraries, they are a component of an increasingly wide-ranging array of services and collaborations, many of which have nothing to do with hard-copy books or library buildings at all. Furthermore, the public stereotype of the librarian is as enduring as ever: unfashionable, awkward gatekeepers with inadequate social skills, curious, eccentric boffins or fictional superheroes (such as Rupert Giles in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). These can range from the offensive to the comical, but all are completely inaccurate.

It is therefore vital that we continue to be ambitious and embrace opportunities for change and working in new areas, and that we should be outspoken and proud of what we have achieved. As a sector we have pushed considerably at the boundaries of what is possible for many years, and the sector has changed almost out of recognition. Libraries and librarians have reinvented themselves and the wide-ranging, complex and impactful services and collaborations we have created are marvellous.

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Experiment and innovate in controlled environments

Grow successful ideas into sustainable services that deliver real impact and value. It is acceptable to fail but fail fast and always learn from the failure. Do not throw out ideas that seem too difficult or not quite right – it may be that their time has not yet come.

It is essential to appreciate the social context in which innovative activity takes place. As O'Shea asserts, 'Humans are responsible for technological development but do not labor in conditions of their own choosing'.⁹ On the pioneering work of Charles Babbage in the early development of computing, O'Shea maintains 'Had Babbage been a bit more of a practical person, in social as well as technological matters, the world may not have

'It is acceptable to fail but fail fast and always learn from the failure'

- 4 needed to wait an extra century for his ideas to catch on'.¹⁰ It is therefore vital to learn from Babbage's mistakes and remember that innovation and new thinking are vital, but just as vital is how that innovation is translated into real-world impact.

Read – read lots, always

Think about what you read, what you can learn from it, what you can put into practice and what the impact will be. Share and debate what you read with others. Reading, thinking about what you read and engaging with others about it are the key to developing, challenging and improving your own thinking and practice. It makes you a better leader, manager, colleague and person.

This may seem an obvious thing to say to a bunch of librarians and information professionals, but it is true. Our professional lives demand a large amount of reading to engage with the extensive body of knowledge and current activity across our sector. Journals, blogs, reports and internal documentation from one's own organization are all important. The more senior you become, the broader and greater a body of knowledge you need to engage with to be successful at your job.

However, wider reading is important too. Even reading a novel gives you head space and contributes to your personal well-being, but can also teach you about yourself, with value for the work context too.

Reading is also intrinsically linked to reflection, which is essential to making good, well-reasoned decisions, avoiding rash decisions and actions and reducing the impact of unconscious bias. Daniel Kahneman's ground-breaking work *Thinking, Fast and Slow*¹¹ presents an illuminating insight into the psychology of our decision-making and the complex interworking between our impulsive, instinctive and intuitive 'gut reactions' (system 1) and our conscious reasoning (system 2). Understanding this and allowing space and time for the conscious thinking and reflection of system 2, whilst recognizing and accepting the presence of system 1, is vital. I personally find that reading is an essential component of ensuring that system 2 operates effectively.

'Reading ... is essential to making good, well-reasoned decisions'

Be inspired by others

Look at others you admire – colleagues, people in the wider sector or figures in public life – and seek to learn from them.

Everybody has others they look up to. However, this does not necessarily mean much in itself. We may admire somebody, but how does that help us? It may even become a negative force, where we inadvertently measure ourselves against the persons we admire and berate ourselves for not having reached their impeccably high standards, resulting in negative phenomena such as imposter syndrome. It is crucial to unpack what we admire about the individual and identify what we can adopt for ourselves, so that it has real personal impact. Seek to learn from the way they act and communicate, the sense of them being comfortable in their own skin or their ability to develop relationships with others. Nobody exists in a vacuum; everyone learns from everyone else, even the individuals we admire do this.

In practical terms, engaging with support groups and professional networks can be invaluable for both meeting other inspiring individuals and developing ourselves personally. Many large organizations have networks for mentoring and support¹² and bodies such as UKSG, SCONUL and LIBER are also valuable sources of support.

Technology should never be a mystery

Our role is to demystify technology and engage others with it, as well as identifying where it can have value and impact. There is no place for impenetrable 'black box' systems that other

5 colleagues do not understand, and the idea that 'knowledge is power' in this context is a fallacy.

O'Shea presents a valuable framework for achieving this in her work *Future Histories*, especially the notion that 'digital citizenship is a collective endeavour'.¹³ She repurposes the ideas of the late-eighteenth-century radical thinker Tom Paine around public participation and applies them to the digital age. Digital technology has tremendous potential to do good:

'Digital technology makes it possible to connect across space, class and culture and build resilient and sophisticated communities, without the usual institutional gatekeepers standing in the way. It has the capacity to create space for a universal, international republic, which transcends national borders and social constructs like race and gender.'¹⁴

However, lack of access to digital technology, lack of understanding of digital and the dominance of gatekeepers like Facebook and Google 'creates a power dynamic that is profoundly damaging'.¹⁵ For example, it is vital that users understand how social media sites manipulate their emotions through manipulating what content they are shown.¹⁶

In the context of our professional lives, the knowledge to understand technology, engage with it meaningfully and develop it in new directions is vital and needs to be held by all staff. This goes beyond the mere digital skills of knowing which buttons to press to perform a desired function. It requires a sophisticated form of digital fluency, where everyone understands, for instance, what an API (application programming interface) is and the potential that it offers to integrate disparate systems, even if not all of us have the technical skills to build one.¹⁷

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Don't procrastinate

Take time to reflect and consider issues from a variety of angles before deciding and acting. But it is crucial to decide and act and to do so appropriately, based on importance and urgency. If you do not act and deliver, then all of the thinking, discussion and reflection is ultimately pointless.

Practical techniques can help here, such as the 'rule of once past the desk' outlined by Butler and Hope:

'The first step is a quick assessment of what you will need to do in order to deal with the matter ... This assessment should be brief. And in making this assessment, use your values as your yardstick: do not undertake tasks that are not important to you. The second step is to decide when to tackle what you need to do. One good reason for delaying completion of the task is that you need time to mull it over. Again, this decision should be made rapidly. The third step is to put the matter aside until the allotted time. The fourth step is to carry out the action at the allotted time.'¹⁸

Additionally, it is often OK for something to be 'good enough'. Striving for perfection can result in unnecessary delays, whereas it is often preferable to deliver something 'good enough' sooner. As a line manager earlier in my career used to say: 'You don't always need a Rolls Royce, there are times when a Nissan Micra will do just as well.'

'Building and maintaining relationships with others ... is the key to success'

It's all about relationships

Building and maintaining relationships with others – your team, your wider organizational unit, across the institution and externally – is the key to success. We are each a crucial part of a complex and fascinating network, not lone individuals. If we have good relationships, achieving what we want becomes easier. Good relationships also create opportunities that flow to you from your network.

6 This was a key message that our current Director of Library Services & Learning Development brought when he joined the organization and is something that has great resonance for me personally. Part of this is being genuinely interested in others as holistic individuals and not just in what their role is or what they can do for us. Kim Scott outlines the importance of building 'radically candid' relationships, where understanding what motivates people, especially if you are building a team, is essential to building positive relationships with them.¹⁹ The essence is to 'get to know each person who reports directly to you, to have real, human relationships – relationships that change as people change'.²⁰

The centrality of human relationships is also highlighted by Butler and Hope: 'Both in our work, and in our everyday pursuits, we are constantly relating to other people.'²¹ Assertiveness in relationships is critical to ensuring that our needs and preferences are recognized as much as those of the other party. But crucially, this is not aggression, where we fail to listen to the other party, and neither is it passivity, where we do not put our point across.²² Assertiveness is the corner-stone of positive and engaging relationships that work for both parties.

Think about where power really lies

In any situation there will be a power dynamic, understanding it is crucial to managing situations and achieving your aims.

Power dynamics can be unfair, malign and unhelpful. However, they cannot be ignored, as they dictate who really has their hands on the levers of power. If you need to influence somebody, think about who has their ear. For instance, if you are taking a paper to a committee to seek their approval, take time to consider who on the committee has influence, whose opinion is seen as important, whether they are likely to be interested in your paper, what their perspective is likely to be and what you could say to get them on board. Real power often does not just lie with the chair, so take time to think about who else you need to build alliances with.

Moreover, actual decision-making rarely takes place within formal meetings. Think about whose endorsement you need and engage with them well in advance of the meeting, to build a coalition of support. Nobody who has an interest in or influence over what you are trying to achieve should learn about it at a formal meeting, especially if you need them to approve your paper. Everyone should have been consulted in advance, so that they are not only aware but also feel a sense of ownership of your proposal. So, pick up the phone, send invitations for coffee and persuade and influence in advance.

Emotional intelligence

Aim to be in tune with how you are thinking and feeling and be aware of how others may be thinking and feeling. What message or emotions might our communication convey, how will this resonate with others and is this really how we want to be perceived?

Part of working in an emotionally intelligent way involves appreciating that all individuals are different, and others will therefore often behave differently or display emotions that are different from ours. This notion has some similarity with psychological preferences tools such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator²³ that many organizations use to assess the personality types of their employees. Myers-Briggs in particular has been the subject of significant criticism, particularly for giving binary, dichotomous outcomes and viewing personality types as fixed and inherent.²⁴ However, despite the valid criticism, such tools do remind us that we are all different and that recognizing and appreciating others' differences is essential to having positive working relationships. The key is in recognizing that reality is more complex and fluid than such tools might suggest and that we have the agency to seek to change ourselves. As Goleman reminds us, 'the good news is that emotional intelligence can be learned'.²⁵ And in doing this, it is important to use our emotional intelligence to develop emotional competencies.

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7 These provide us with practical skills in self-awareness, motivation, self-regulation, empathy and adeptness in relationships.²⁶

Say 'yes' to great opportunities

Do not agonize over the details and risk the opportunity disappearing. Secure the opportunity and you can work out the details later.

This is very similar to a central concept in Susan Jeffers' work, 'Say yes to your universe'²⁷:

'The phrase "say yes" means "to agree to" those things that life hands us. Saying yes means letting go of resistance and letting in the possibilities that our universe offers in new ways of seeing the world ... Conversely, saying no means to be a victim. Saying no creates tension, exhaustion, wasted expenditure of energy, emotional upheaval – or, worse, it creates apathy.'²⁸

The point here is that we need to recognize and work with opportunities, rather than trying to control them because, for instance, the opportunity does not feel as though it has come at the right time.

I was once offered the opportunity to present at an international conference. Rather than saying yes straight away I asked for time to think about it. I did eventually say yes and the experience was a career highlight, but it taught me the importance of seizing such opportunities with both hands. This is not to say that we should acquiesce to things without thinking, or that we should take things on that genuinely are not appropriate for us, but it is positive to say yes to great opportunities and great experiences.

'most of us, most of the time, are doing better at work than we think we are'

And finally, don't be too hard on yourself!

Once I had written the above, I was conscious that it seemed, from a certain perspective, like a rather demanding set of personal rules. This is the opposite of what I had intended, namely that the personal manifesto should be an enabler, not a set of unachievable expectations. Although I have no empirical evidence to support this statement, my sense is that most of us, most of the time, are doing better at work than we think we are. And when we realize this, it is liberating and motivating.

Lastly, we must never forget the importance of self-care and looking after our own well-being, as well as that of our colleagues. As Kim Scott states with an appropriate dose of radical candor, 'You can't give a damn about others if you don't give a damn about yourself'.²⁹

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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