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# Acting positions: The good, the bad, and the ugly

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*"I am perplexed . . . whether to act or not to act." (Aeschylus, Suppliant Maidens, I, 379).*

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**O**n August 14, 1989, after several months of an increasingly bitter power struggle, P. W. Botha resigned as president of South Africa. The following day, F. W. de Klerk was sworn in as acting president, pending the result of elections to be held the following month. At the time, the authors of this article were respectively acting head of monographic cataloging and acting head of special collections in the General Library at the University of New Mexico. While it struck us as somewhat incongruous that a person should be acting head of a country, it also encouraged us to think about acting positions, which seem to be ubiquitous in academic libraries.

Strangely enough, since one often hears about acting positions, the subject of acting librarians is a topic that has not been addressed in the professional literature. Online searches of ERIC, LISA, Wilson Library Literature and ABI/Inform retrieved only one article of interest. This article, "The Acting or Interim Leadership Position," focuses on interim deanships in academic institutions rather than specifically on libraries.<sup>1</sup>

During these searches, however, articles were discovered on a related subject, temporary positions. These usually focus on library staff rather than librarians and do not address the practice of acting, although both types of positions share some common characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

Even though no truly pertinent citations were found for the purpose of this article, many unrelated articles were retrieved solely because the authors of those articles were in acting positions: acting associate dean, acting director, acting deputy director, and acting state librarian. This reinforces the impression that acting positions are common in libraries. In addition, it demonstrates what types of librarians have acting positions—typically, those in higher level or managerial positions, although acting positions can occur at any level in the organization.

The title "acting" covers a great variety of practices even in the same institution. The length of time can vary greatly: a librarian can be acting for a few days while the regular librarian is ill, for six

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<sup>1</sup>John E. Chapman, Judy J. Chapman, and John O. Lostetter, "The Acting or Interim Leadership Position: Expectations, Perceptions, Realities," *Health Care Management Review* 13 (Fall 1988): 81-88.

<sup>2</sup>James S. Chervinko, "Temporary Employees in Academic and Research Libraries," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 12 (September 1986): 217-20; Donna Zufan Pontau and M. Cecilia Rothschild, "T is for Temporary," *College and Research Libraries* 47 (March 1986): 150-55.

months while the permanent librarian is on sabbatical or maternity leave, for one year after a librarian resigned, or longer when the position stays unfilled. One likely reason that acting positions often occur in a library or academic setting is that advertising and filling positions takes a great deal of time.

Acting can range from a defined role—one individual acting for another for an agreed-upon length of time—to a diffuse situation where one person may unofficially act for someone else or where two or more librarians are co-acting.

The authors decided to interview acting librarians in their own institution, the University of New Mexico General Library, in an attempt to determine the benefits and the drawbacks of acting positions. Individuals in acting positions, or formerly in acting positions, were so numerous that we could have interviewed half of the professional librarians. We decided to restrict ourselves to librarians who had been acting recently and not to include positions which have a built-in acting component—e.g., the associate dean acting for the dean.<sup>3</sup>

Assuming an acting position can have many positive aspects. This must be the case, since so many people accept such positions. Some of the reasons may be quite altruistic, some may be anything but, and some may be tied directly to the specific position. We identified several major benefits which acting positions may entail. Depending upon the job in question, and the goals and objectives of the individual(s) involved, some of the things listed as positive could be perceived as negative and vice versa. Much depends upon the specific situation and upon individual expectations.

1) *Experience.* Gaining experience, usually some type of management experience, appears to be the main reason that librarians accept acting positions. Particularly if one is moving up into an acting management position, there can be some tangible benefits. One can learn whether or not one is actually interested in, or cut out for, administration. One can gain valuable experience working with other department heads or administrators. If a librarian moves up within the department, he or she may gain a greater knowledge of how the department works in all of its various facets. If the librarian is already an administrator and is taking over another department or moving into a higher level administrative job, experience in a new area will be gained. Such experience can stand one in

very good stead if one wishes to go further in administration. If the librarian is planning to apply for the job in which he or she is acting (provided, of course, that the job will eventually be posted and filled), having held the post temporarily may well be an advantage in the search process. While many librarians may be interested in going into management, one person we interviewed said that being an acting department head helped convince him that he did not like management, did not like being responsible for other people's work, and was not particularly good at supervising others. Thus, while the experience was in general a negative one, this librarian learned some valuable lessons.

2) *Building confidence and autonomy.* The fact that an individual was asked to take on an acting position is an indication that the administration has confidence in the person. Such an expression of confidence should carry over into the person's work, and as the librarian gains new experience, such as running a department, increased self-confidence and ability to handle situations should develop.<sup>4</sup>

3) *Feeling of contributing to the organization.* This may be one of the more altruistic reasons for accepting an acting position. Particularly in a team environment, librarians may take such positions not only to gain experience, but also to feel that they are contributing to the team and to the overall good of the organization.

4) *Recognition.* Librarians do not always get extra money for taking an acting position, but in some instances they do, and even if no up-front money is forthcoming, they may fare better at the next raise or merit evaluation. One librarian mentioned that while the supplemental money she received for being an acting department head was not much, and certainly did not make up for the additional responsibilities, she still appreciated that there was some recognition for assuming a higher level position.<sup>5</sup> Recognition may also take other forms. As we said earlier, the very fact that one was asked demonstrates that one is well regarded. If one is successful in the acting position, one may get a reputation for good management or administrative skills.

5) *Building good will.* Accepting an acting position, being willing to help out or to step in and take charge, generates good will with the administra-

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<sup>3</sup>Bob Perdue and Chris Piotrowski, "Supervisory Rotation: Impact on an Academic Library Reference Staff," *RQ* 25 (Spring 1986): 363-64.

<sup>5</sup>At the University of New Mexico General Library, acting positions are treated in several ways. For example, at the moment, if a person moves up from a non-management position into an acting management job, she is given a supplement of 10% of her base salary.

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<sup>3</sup>The authors would like to thank the following people in the University of New Mexico General Library for their thoughts and comments: Eulalie Brown, Judith Bernstein, Cecilia Briley, Deborah Cole, Russ Davidson, Mary Beth Johnson, Robert Migneault, and Virginia Seiser.

tion. The acting librarian can also build good will with other department heads, librarians, or staff. For example, in an academic library with a small staff, librarians may almost have to act for one another during vacations, sabbaticals, extended leave, etc. In such cases, there may be a feeling of "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine."

6) *Residual benefits.* These can take many forms. For example, if a department head temporarily runs another department, there may develop relationships with people in both departments, cross training may occur or at least be encouraged, etc.

While these are not all of the possible advantages to assuming an acting position, they do sum up the major benefits to be gained. On the other hand, there can be a great many disadvantages to acting positions. Becoming an acting librarian is not always a golden opportunity. Neither the librarian in the acting position nor the library administration may fully realize that "acting" can be detrimental to the librarian as well as to the library. Some disadvantages of acting positions are listed below.

1) *Two full-time jobs.* The most common observation, and the most obvious one, from acting librarians we interviewed was: "I have two jobs to do." That situation is the norm; the librarian in a new acting position has to continue to work a regular 40-hour week in her permanent position as well as working in the acting position—figuratively speaking—another 40-hour week. The two full-time positions and the intense pace the librarian has to maintain as a result, in some cases literally running from one department to another, leads to the evil of modern times: stress. It is commonly assumed that the acting librarian will have, and exert, all of the responsibilities of the librarian who regularly fills the role, yet often no effort is made to diminish the responsibilities of the acting librarian's primary position. This does not appear to hold true in other academic situations, where a member of the teaching faculty may be granted a reduced teaching load to compensate for accepting additional responsibilities. Few others in the library recognize readily that the acting librarian has a primary role that begins to suffer. Confronting the reality that, indeed, time is limited is the first sign that "acting" is not as desirable a position as originally thought. This may be especially true for librarians at the beginning of their careers.

In the case of a nontenured librarian in a library with faculty status, the acting librarian may have a difficult time carrying out all of the activities which are required in order to obtain tenure: scholarly research, publications, and service. "Acting" during this most demanding time of one's career can be detrimental.

It may be that an exploitative relationship is built into the acting position. One interviewee expressed it by saying she felt she was being "used."

2) *Acceptance.* Acting librarians share some of the same problems as temporary employees. For both categories of employees, acceptance and integration into the existing library staff are important components of a successful performance. Acceptance and integration are separate yet similar, and the first may be viewed as a precondition for the second. Moreover, for these two processes to occur, acting librarians must be perceived as making a contribution to the workplace equal to that of permanent employees.

Other difficulties can occur when acting librarians are below their new peers in the library hierarchy. The librarian has to fit into an already established group; the very fact of applying the label "acting" may create a separate class for those people. Those in permanent positions may also maintain a certain distance, knowing that the acting position is limited by definition. It may be difficult for the acting librarian to state opinions and to be taken seriously.<sup>6</sup>

3) *High expectations.* Other factors affect how successful the librarian can be at "acting." When the departure of the librarian who formerly held the position happened under less than favorable circumstances, or when the predecessor did not, or could not, solve problems, the acting librarian is faced with high expectations to do so. In such a case, the acting librarian is expected to take action, but if that action commits the department to a new course that is not supported by the department's staff, then success is virtually impossible.<sup>7</sup> In such a situation, if one applies for the position in which one is acting, having been acting may actually prove detrimental and lessen the chances of being hired in the permanent role.

4) *Commitment.* Since the acting librarian knows that the position is for a limited time, it can seem a waste of effort to become involved in long-range planning. The acting librarian's sense of commitment may be eroded further when the individual has no intention of applying for the position. Knowing that the new, permanent librarian may undo what one tried to accomplish in the acting position also dampens one's spirit. When the acting librarian plays the role of a caretaker, a most common occurrence, that contributes further to a sense of unimportance. One interviewee expressed it in one word: "unrewarding." Being perceived as a caretaker can also adversely influence the librarian's professional reputation by implying that he or she is not fixing problems or taking an active role in the regular position.

At a time when many libraries are planning or implementing new systems such as online catalogs, an acting librarian may lack the technical skills

<sup>6</sup>Pontau and Rothschild, 152-54.

<sup>7</sup>Chapman, Chapman, and Lostetter, 82.

necessary to carry out the changes successfully. One may feel, rightly, that there is nothing of value one can contribute. This inability to deal adequately with technological innovations adds frustration to an existing stressful situation.

5) *Support.* The role of the library administration is also a determining factor in the success of a person in an acting position. The administration is not always willing to extend its support, and this lack of assistance from above can contribute to the acting librarian's sense of frustration. In some cases the acting librarian is caught in the middle, with no support from "above" or "below."

6) *Lack of validation.* Ordinarily, the acting librarian is not chosen according to the customary search process. Whereas consultation is extensive for a regular position and interviewing is the norm, the acting librarian is often imposed by the library administration. The staff may resent that it had little or no say in the matter. Since hiring a regular librarian and hiring an acting one are not derived from equal standards, a sense of favoritism may develop among peers and inadvertently affect the librarian in the acting position.

7) *Extra money—or lack thereof.* As mentioned earlier, it is not uncommon for an administrative supplement to be added to the librarian's regular salary while she holds the acting position. The supplement is often not significant enough to be a strong motive for accepting such a position.<sup>8</sup> One interviewed librarian mentioned that the compensation was not worth the problems and headaches the acting position entailed. A small administrative

supplement may reflect the low esteem in which the acting librarian is held.

8) *Career advancement.* Assuming an acting position does not always further a librarian's career. Such positions do not carry the weight of permanent positions on a resume. It may be more helpful if the acting position is a step up from the librarian's regular position rather than a lateral move, but over time, holding many acting positions may work against a librarian's professional reputation.

### Recommendations

What follows is a word of advice from two former acting librarians. If asked to assume an acting position, one should put aside one's initial reaction ("Yeah, sure" or "No way!") and examine the benefits and drawbacks—personal, professional, and institutional. The potential acting librarian should discuss with the library management the expectations for the acting position, including a specified time period. Any acting position should have a set length of time; a six-month period seems reasonable. At the very least, the position should be reviewed at an agreed-upon date. It should also be possible for either the acting librarian or the library administration to call off the arrangement without bad feelings from either party. Furthermore, the librarian's new status, however short lived it might be, should be officially announced, along with its duration and the stated objectives. Once the expectations are clearly known, one can accept the position with some confidence of success. Even if these conditions are met, however, it is often difficult to "just say no." ■ ■

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<sup>8</sup>Perdue and Piotrowski, 364.

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## Keyword Boolean searching on WATCAT

According to a newsletter from the University of Waterloo, the UW Library is the first institution with the GEAC system to make keyword Boolean searching available on its online catalog. Since October, this feature has been operational on all public terminals located throughout the UW Libraries as well as on the dial-in version of WATCAT. The keyword component allows a search on all the major words, numbers, acronyms, and abbreviations which appear in the author, title, or subject field of a bibliographic record. The Boolean component allows the use of "and," "or," and "not" in order to combine keywords into an effective search strategy. This means that you can do an effective WATCAT search without having to know the precise title. In addition to making it possible to search with incomplete information, the new tech-

nology simplifies searching for works by corporate authors.

Boolean searching on the UW terminals can be done using a prompted Boolean search, which is a simple fill-in-the-blank approach, or by using the advanced Boolean search (ABS), with a search strategy constructed by the user. Only the ABS mode can currently be used in dial-in access. The HELP command can be used at any step in a keyword Boolean search to call up a screen that describes, in plain language, that point of the search session and offers advice or possible next steps.

For more information contact: Bruce MacNeil, Associate Librarian, Public Services, University of Waterloo Library, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1; (519) 885-1211. ■ ■