

Editorial Board Thoughts: Information Technology in Libraries: Anxiety and Exhilaration

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A few weeks ago a valued colleague left our library to move his young family back home to Pittsburgh. Insofar as we were a two-man department, I spent the weeks following the announcement of his imminent departure picking his brain about various projects, their codebases, potential rough spots, existing trouble tickets, etc. He left, and I immediately inherited nine-years-worth of projects and custom code including all the "micro-services" that feed into our various well-designed, high-profile, and high-performing (thanks to him) Websites.

This was all, naturally, anxiety-producing.

Almost immediately, things began to break.

Early on, a calendar embedded in a custom WordPress theme crucial to the functioning of two of our revenue-generating departments broke. The external vendor simply made disappear the calendar we were screenscraping. Poof, gone. I quickly created an OK-but-less-than-ideal workaround and we were back in business, at least for the time being.

Then, two days before the July 4 holiday, our Calendar Managers started reporting that our Google-Calendar-based system was disallowing a change to "CLOSED" for that Saturday. I somehow forced a CLOSED notification, at least for our main library building, but no matter what any of us did we could not get such a notification to show up for a few of our other facilities. I spent quite bit of time studying the custom, middleware code that sits between our Google Calendars and our Website, and could see where the magic was happening. I now think I know what to do -- and all I have to do is express it in that nutty programming language/platform that the kids are using these days, Ruby on Rails. I've never written a line of Ruby in my life, but it's now or never.

A little voice inside me keeps saying, "You're swimming in the deep end now -- paddle harder, and try not to sink."

While these surprise events were happening, we also switched source code management systems, so a migration was in order there, my longingly-awaited new workstation came in (and I'm sure you all know how painstaking it is to migrate all idiosyncratic data/apps/settings to a new workstation and ensure it's all present, functioning, and secure before DBAN-nuking your old drives), we decommissioned a central service that had been in

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production since 2006, we fully upgraded our Wordpress Multisite including all plugins and themes, fixing what broke in the upgrade, and I got into the groove of working on any and all trouble tickets/change requests that spontaneously appeared, popping up like mushrooms in the verdant vale of my worklife.

This was all largely in addition to my own job.

So now I find myself surgically removing/stitching up code in recently-diseased custom Wordpress themes, adding Ruby code to a crucial piece of our Website infrastructure, and learning as much as I can -- but quick -- about the wonderful and incredibly powerful Bootstrap framework upon which most of our sites are built.

Surely it's anxiety-producing? You bet.

But it's thrilling and exhilarating was well. I'm paddling hard, and so far my head remains above water. Many days, I just can't wait to get to work and start paddling.

This aging IT Guy suddenly feels ten years younger!

(But isn't all this paddling supposed to somehow result in a Swimmer's Body? Patiently waiting...)

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