Saying Good-bye: The New Normal

By Kathryn H. Carpenter

For a long while, a favorite topic of conversation among librarians has been being busy, with variations as to how, why, what, and who kept us all running hard. Being busy is not the new normal, it’s the old normal and a mundane one at that, since for most colleagues, being busy consists of emails, meetings, and other repetitious activities. Creative, challenging work like developing new services, integrating ourselves more significantly in curricula, serving as external referees, and refining the data we collect and how we make use of it is not considered being busy, it’s referred to as working hard on an interesting project.

In the past few months, all that busyness has been pushed aside by a new process at work: saying good-bye. The process of change by any other name would be as difficult; transition, separation, obsolescence, or upgrades don’t sound like they are any easier to accomplish than changing is. Transitioning to a new organizational structure, installing new discovery systems, and upgrading use data gathering are change processes that relieve old pressures and provide new, positive outcomes. Such processes can be labor intensive or costly to implement but they also result in new, shiny, effective ways of working with our users.

Retirement, resignation, or illness and death are change processes that divide colleagues between those who stay and those who leave, a much more emotional change to negotiate. Of these, retirement has the most impact. Many colleagues of an age where retirement is logical to consider postponed any action during the economic downturn of the late 2000s, so they are moving forward with their plans at the same
time that those eligible today are deciding to take that next important step. The recent, abrupt changes to pension plans for some public employees is accelerating the practical need, if not the emotional desire, to retire now. That we wish our retirees well goes without saying; they have had long, productive professional lives and it is reasonable for them to focus on personal priorities when they choose do that. We just don’t want them to leave the organization.

We also wish our colleagues who resign to move to more demanding leadership positions or to practice their profession in new settings the best of luck and offer them congratulations. We support their growth and encourage future accomplishments. We just don’t want them to leave us.

A tragedy when it occurs, illness or death has claimed some of our colleagues. The gap that they leave behind is never filled and we think of them and miss them always. Convalescence means absence, a good-bye that is merely temporary, and the fond hope for a new normal that is an improvement on the old normal, at least for the individual colleagues concerned.

Ultimately, after all the good-byes, we will begin to say hello to all the new colleagues who join our organization. We will welcome them to our goals, our priorities, our culture, and our college (our library). We won’t forget the colleagues who went before them, who made the organization what it is, especially if they come back to visit with us once in a while.

As for me, I will focus on making improvements to my “gaite Parisienne,” launching my teenage daughter into her life as an adult, and filling a lot of faculty positions at the Library of the Health Sciences.

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