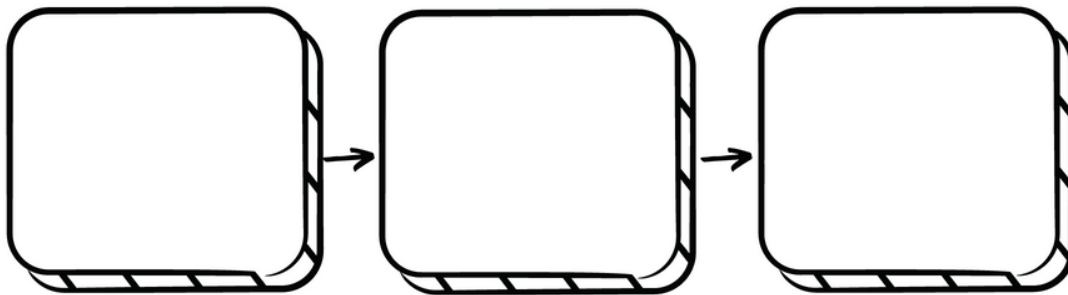


Futures Thinking and Staff Development



Why Futures Thinking?

In career planning or staff development, it can be comforting to assume that the nature of your job or career won't change much in the next five, 10, or 15 years. With futures thinking, however, you have the tools to consider where your organization or field will be in the future and focus your professional development and career growth on that anticipated path.

Futures thinking does not attempt to predict the future. Instead, it uses innovative and exploratory thinking to look at a range of possible futures, which allows you to create paths to the future you most desire. Using these tools, you can actively shape your or your organization's steps to ensure a good outcome. Futures thinking is about considering the life you want to live and developing steps to attain your goals, whether this be your own personal career or a desire to see the world change for the better.

The shift to using futures thinking for career development helps organizations lean into the future and employees envisioning possible career paths, providing a feeling of agency. When you think about it, nearly every decision we make is based on assumptions we've made about the future.

Here are some principles from futures thinking to help guide staff development:

There are multiple possible futures.

Futures thinking accounts for all possibilities: good, bad, and everything in between. It can help to use different frames to organize different future scenarios, such as: growth, collapse, discipline, and transformation.

Change can be fast and slow.

Dramatic and sudden change grabs our attention because it is quick and sometimes destructive, but slow changes also shape our future in profound ways. Keep an eye on both.

The future is shaped by external forces.

We can sometimes struggle to think about things outside of our immediate control, assuming, for example, that we have more control in our careers than perhaps we do. It is important to pay attention to external forces, like the technological, societal, political, and economic impacts that may influence our work. Pay attention to the external forces that may influence your position.

No one can predict the future, but we can all influence it.

Thinking about the future can be challenging, and it can be overwhelming to think about all the possible future paths your career could take. Considering the future in terms of what is plausible and what is preferred can help you to narrow down some of those potential paths. We all have a role in shaping our future, and planning for your future career is a way to craft the future you want.

Here are some questions that can guide you in implementing futures thinking in career planning:

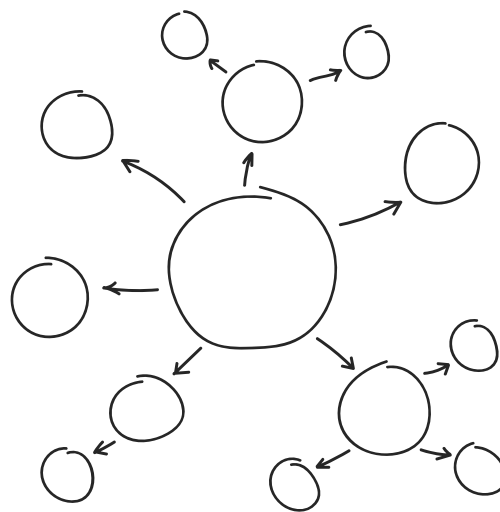
- What will your library be like in five years, 10 years, and 15 years?
- What are some of the biggest changes we can imagine in library work, and what would it be like to work in that future?
- What new and different problems will library staff face in the future?

Activities

Individual Activities

Mind map (source: [Workshop Tactics](#))

Fill a page with your thoughts by creating an interconnected map of ideas. Start with one thing and let your ideas branch off and lead to new and unexpected ones. Grab a piece of paper and a pen. Write a topic or question at the center of the page, then brainstorm related ideas and questions around it in an interconnected map.



You could use a mind map to generate ideas around:

- Career change: Explore your options for a change in the type of job you have or the kind of library you work in. Your map might lead you to find what it is you really value in a job, and that might direct you somewhere new.
- Career enhancement: A mind map is a great tool for listing all your options when considering moving up or increasing responsibility in your organization. This exercise will help you to reveal what you enjoy doing the most and where you'd like to go next.
- Career exploration: Maybe you just want to learn more about what options are available? A mind map can help with that, too.

Premortem (source: [Workshop Tactics](#))

Think about all the things that could go wrong so you can effectively plan to stop them from happening. What's the worst that could happen? Now's the time to figure that out.

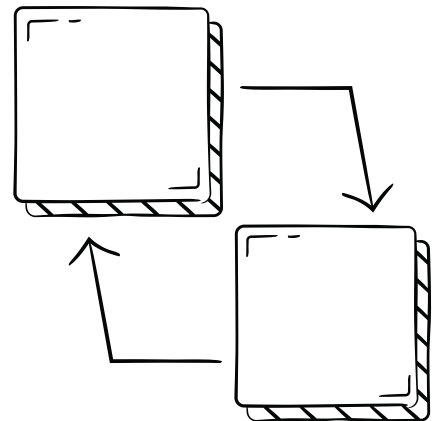
- Consider your current career development plan, then imagine that you have leapt forward in time and discovered that your plans have failed spectacularly.

- Write down every reason you can think of for why your plans failed on sticky notes. One by one, think through each possibility and group them by theme.
- Create a plan to mitigate the most certain possibilities and to investigate the most uncertain ones. This will help you be ready to prevent and prepare for any possible future failure.

Sticky Steps (source: [Workshop Tactics](#))

Start with your goal and work backwards to give yourself a clear path to get to your goal.

- Write your goal as far to the right on your drawing surface or whiteboard as possible. This goal is your desired end-state.
- Ask yourself, “What would have to happen just before this for me to succeed?” Write the answer on a sticky note and place it just to the left of your goal.
- Ask the same question for the sticky note you’ve just placed, “What would have to happen just before this for me to succeed?”
- Repeat this process until you have stepped all the way back to the present.
- Now you can make a plan to start on the first thing needed to achieve your goal.

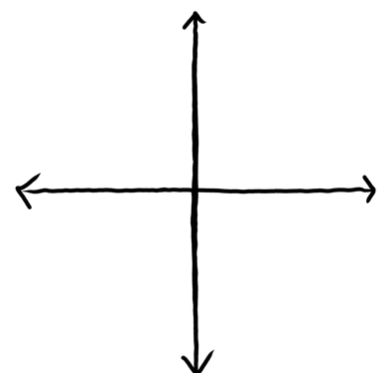


Group/Department Activities

Priority map (source: [Workshop Tactics](#))

Find out where to focus based on what’s important to the group.

- On a whiteboard or large piece of paper, draw a large plus sign. This is the base of your map.
- To label the map, pick two criteria your participants find important. Here are some commonly used examples:
 - Impact vs. Effort
 - Risk vs. Knowledge
 - Urgency vs. Importance
 - Library Needs vs. User Needs
 - Cost vs. Problem

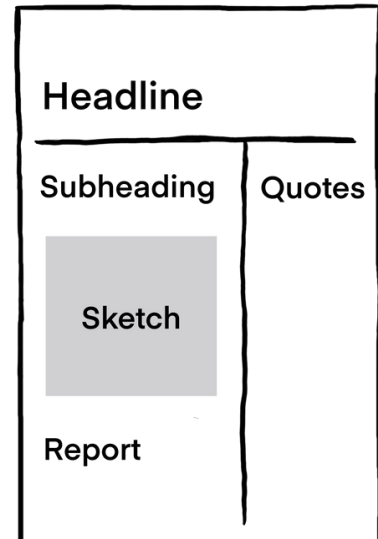


- Plot your items (using sticky notes) on the map by ranking them with the criteria you've selected. For example, you could plot program ideas as impact versus effort.

Newspaper Headline (source: [Workshop Tactics](#))

Think about your organization's future by predicting a front-page newspaper article about your organization.

- Have each participant divide a piece of paper into five sections and label them: headline, subheading, sketch, report, and quotes.
 - **Headline** - Describe the wonderful success of the organization in one attention-grabbing headline.
 - **Subheading** - Reveal more about what the story is about in one to two sentences.
 - **Sketch** - Draw something that supports the story.
 - **Report** - In bullet points, detail some highlights of the story.
 - **Quotes** - Come up with some fictional quotes from people about the accomplishments of your organization.
- Tell the group they are going to predict the future. Explain each section and ask them to complete it.
- Once everyone has completed the activity, encourage everyone to share their future vision. Pay attention to common themes and reflect on how those might be condensed into a common goal.

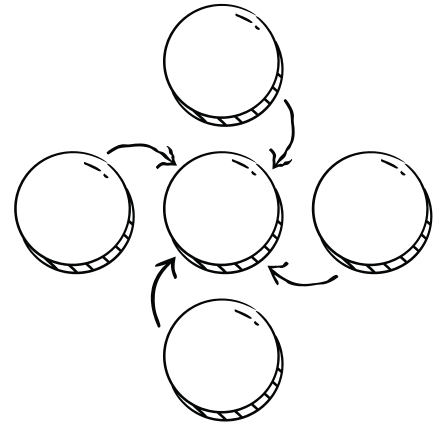


Reverse Brainstorm (Source: [Workshop Tactics](#))

Think of the worst, most despicable ideas possible, then reverse them to find a solution.

- Identify and write down your problem on a large surface so it's clear for everyone to see.
- Reverse the problem. For example:
 - **Problem:** How might we increase customer satisfaction?
 - **Anti-Problem:** How might we increase customer dissatisfaction?

- Generate ideas for the anti-problem quickly. Try to come up with eight different ideas in eight minutes, making yourself only take one minute for each idea.
- Share the ideas, then collect them and randomly distribute them back to the group.
- Ask the group to reverse the ideas they've been given. These will now become real solutions for the actual problem. For example:
 - Anti-solution: Not returning customer calls immediately upon a call request.
 - Real solution: Returning customer calls immediately upon a call request.
- Do it again and gather even more ideas, or evaluate what you've got.



Resources

Web Resources

WebJunction

In addition to creating and delivering training for library staff, WebJunction designs projects and delivers transformational programs that connect public library service to community needs, such as lifelong learning, health and wellness, and economic success. Look for these courses:

- Flexible Spaces - Flexible Futures
- Envisioning Future Library Experiences
- Future Proofing Library Spaces
- How Successful Libraries Thrive in Uncertain Times

Programming Librarian

Programming Librarian is a place for library professionals to share, learn, and be inspired to present excellent programming for their communities. Look for resources like:

- Webinar: [Media Literacy for Adults: Meeting Patrons Where They Are](#)
- Program Model: [Humanities Topical Immersion Programming](#)

Articles & Books

- Attebury, R. (2018). The Role of Administrators in Professional Development: Considerations for Facilitating Learning Among Academic Librarians. *Journal of Library Administration*, 58(5), 407-433.
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- Burnett, B. & Evans, D. (2016). *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life*. Knopf, 2016.
- Carroll, A. J., & Mallon, M. N. (2021). Using digital environments to design inclusive and sustainable communities of practice in academic libraries. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 47(5), 102380.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2021.102380>
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<https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2019.0028>
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- Hines, S. S. & Simons, M. Eds. (2015). *Library Staffing for the Future*. *Advances in Library Administration and Organization*, 34. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0732-0671201534>
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<https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1820280>
- Staley, D. J., & Malenfant, K. J. (2010). Futures thinking for academic librarians: Higher education in 2025. *Information Services & Use*, 30(1/2), 57-90.
<https://doi.org/10.3233/ISU-2010-0614>

Other Resources

- Burdett, C. & Hill, D. (2020) *Workshop Tactics*. Pip Decks; Second Edition
- Mance, I. (2021, March 10) Taking a Futurist Approach to Career Planning. Association for Talent Development. <https://www.td.org/atd-blog/taking-a-futurist-approach-to-career-planning>

Additional resources are available in Chapter 5: Additional Resources.