SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU SAY YES

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There are all kinds of exciting opportunities in the information profession, and sometimes we find ourselves in danger of burning out because we can't help but say yes to all of them. This article gives some pointers on how to balance the yes' and the no's in your career.

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For me it was around four years into my library career, when I'd discovered blogs and conferences and events, and I wanted to do every single exciting thing I could even though most of it was in my own time. In the end it became overwhelming and stopped being enjoyable, so I started saying 'no' in certain situations. It was actually quite liberating. I always tried to recommend someone else who could speak or take part instead, so the events didn't suffer, and amazingly people didn't stop asking me to do things, so there were still opportunities to be had.

How do you strike the balance between saying yes, and turning down something potentially great for your career development? Here are some questions to ask yourself when it all feels too much and you have to make some changes. Or, better still, *before* it gets to that stage.

Q1: How important is this to my specific goals?

All sorts of things count towards your Continuous Professional Development (CPD). But what's really important is to consider what is going to contribute to YOUR career development specifically. When you're first starting out you need to expose yourself to all sorts of ideas and sectors, but after a while we all need to focus. Does this opportunity help you fulfil employment criteria for a specific role you're aiming for?

There's really no such thing as an 'all-purpose CV' which takes in everything you've done. Job applications in our profession are all about tailoring your experience and skills to the specific role being offered - there's little room, in most cases (not all) for general experiences which sound quite nice but won't be used in the job itself.

So if you get asked to chair or take part in a conference panel on The Future of Libraries, for example, does that help you tick off an essential personal specification on a job application? If so, great; if not, even if the conference is prestigious, it might not actually turn out to mean much, in real terms, that you were on the panel. You might describe this as 'generic CPD' (Continuing Professional Development)– it's surprising how little generic CPD can be *used* to further your career.

So ask yourself, where do I want to go next? And does this thing I've been asked to do potentially help me get there, or not?

Q2: Do I have the emotional energy to throw myself into this?

If you put all your energy into every talk you give, you have to ask yourself if you have enough in the tank to do it justice given the number of other things you may already be doing. It's not just the time spent preparing and delivering – if you're an introvert, as a lot us are (me included), it's the emotional energy of being 'on' all day.

Q3: Where does this fit with my wider calendar?

Think about your professional life-cycle. If you're coming to the end of a massive project on a Friday,

chances are doing a talk the following Monday will cause you stress about both activities because you need the emotional space to focus on each one individually.

Are there big events in your personal life going on? Sometimes they can be all consuming and the last thing you need is to plan a talk. Other times planning a talk can be the escape you need.

Q4: Is this new, or more of the same? Does this have the potential to lead to other exciting things?

Sometimes it can be worth finding a way to say yes to something if you can see more opportunities opening up as a result - as long as those opportunities are specifically relevant to your interests and goals, of course. Perhaps you'll get to share ideas with a whole new audience, or extend your network, or be introduced to people whose interests perfectly match your own, or forced to do some proper research into an area you know less about than you'd like.

If it's a closed loop with no real paths out to new opportunities, that may be enough of a reason to say no. Ask what this opportunity offers that nothing else does.

All that said, fun is important! Sometimes it can trump all of the considerations above, because a fun experience leaves you fizzing with energy and motivation.

Q5: An extra question for white males

If you're a white male and you're asked to give a keynote or be on a panel, it might be worth asking the organisers to tell you a little about the other speakers. Is it going to be the all-too-common library conference situation where all the keynotes are male and white?

I'm not trying to preach that if you're white and male like I am you should turn down your dream conference talk because the other two speakers are both white blokes too - but I do think it's important to ask the question and ensure the organisers have considered it. We need to encourage diversity in our profession, and the onus is on all of us (not just event organisers) to make sure we hear from a variety of voices.

It feels GREAT to say no. Knowing you're not adding additional pressure to your work-life balance. In my experience, opportunities still come up. It's not like saying no once forever puts the CPD genie back in the bottle. I keep a list of things I've said no to (partly because I want to show my employer that when I do ask to attend a conference in work time, it's for a good, considered reason, and not just something I do at every opportunity) and honestly there's some pretty great stuff on there which it would have been fun to be a part of. But I don't for a minute sit around wishing I'd said 'yes'. Because if I had, who knows how much I'd've been able to enjoy the things I DID agree to - maybe I would have been too busy to prepare properly (I get massively stressed out if I'm under-prepared for a talk, even by a tiny amount) or I would have been so exhausted by All The Things that I wouldn't have truly enjoyed any of them.

So to maintain a healthy relationship between work, life, day job, CPD, creativity, energy reserves and all of that, learning to say no is a genuinely important skill. Don't *always* say no. But at least ask yourself some questions before you say yes...