Question: Given the seismic changes in the practice of law and the explosion of legal technology, what advice would you give law librarians on how to lead in turbulent times and how best to prepare for their next job opportunity?

Technology is having a profound impact on the practice of law, legal education, and how law libraries are serving their users. In order to support our users’ evolving needs, law librarians must be able to adapt to the changes in the profession and be agents of change.

To lead in turbulent times, law librarians must embrace their roles as initiators, evaluators, users, and teachers of technology. Staying on the cutting edge requires reading about new developments—both within and outside of the profession—and thinking critically about how to incorporate technology into library resources, services, and processes.

This is not to say that to be a leader, you have to embrace all of the latest tools and gadgets for the sake of being seen as relevant and
forward-thinking. Quite the contrary. While you should be aware of the current trends and developments, you also need to critically evaluate new advancements to determine how they may help you improve your processes or provide better resources and services to your users. While technology is evolving at a rapid pace, you can run your team ragged by constantly switching to the newest “shiny” technology. When rolling out new tech, take time to try to bring everyone along. This requires talking through the decision-making process, demonstrating the benefits to your team and your patrons, and putting in the time and resources necessary to train everyone. As is sometimes the case, you may not get everyone on board with every decision. Ultimately, this is when you as a leader will have to make a decision that is in the best long-term interest of the library and your patrons.

The same practices that will help you lead in turbulent times will also prepare you for your next job opportunity. Reading, attending conferences, and talking to peers and mentors will keep you up to date on the latest developments and trends in the profession. While you may not be an expert in technology competence, controlled digital lending, or artificial intelligence, you should be able to discuss their impact on the wider legal and law library professions. Moreover, having a growth mind-set and being a life-long learner will enable you to more easily transition to a new work environment, which will inevitably require you to learn and adopt new systems.

For example, think about West’s key topics and number system. Without having ever been exposed to a case digest, you might wonder, “What do those words and numbers mean?” Those strange words and numbers were and still are valuable things. However, with the explosion of caselaw (there are now ten times as many cases decided each year than there were 50 years ago), sifting through headnotes in digests got a little cumbersome. Then full-text searching became available, which helped respond to the problem of “judicial information overload;” however, it didn’t change the fact that there is still tremendous value in case law digests (and indexes, for that matter). Soon there will be new technologies to alleviate new information overload problems. That said, we should still learn from and incorporate tools of the past.

How do we know what the new problems to be solved will be? Figure out what the current problems are. As such, “assessment” is becoming a more prevalent aspect of our work. Assessment helps us determine what is working and what is not, as well as fine-tune our practices and processes in response to the data we gather. We must make more and more cost-benefit analyses, which is why things such as legal analytics are gaining more ground. Assessment helps us make data-driven decisions as to where to concentrate our efforts.

So, assess the present. Figure out what your strengths and weaknesses are. Determine how you can improve on your weaknesses. Then determine whether it’s worth your time to address your weaknesses. If it is, adopt a beginner’s mind-set. There is always something to learn. We are all new to the present.

Stay in the present. Every change we encounter is just a further development from the past. If we have a firm understanding of current practices, tools, and technologies, we experience smoother transitions into the future. Instead of looking ahead, spend more time at understanding how we got to where we are and why we do what we now do. By having a grasp on both the capabilities and limitations of the tools we use in our work, we can better anticipate the kinds of technological changes that are coming because technology, by and large, tends to develop in response to our current problems and needs.