From the Editor: Gold-Collar Librarians

Many of us either act as managers at some level within our libraries or aspire to positions where we can. In thinking about library management, we soon learn that there is more art than science to management and that the field contains no shortage of theory, opinion, and commentary from a variety of sources. To prepare ourselves for managerial responsibilities, we take courses in library and business schools, and we read, choosing from among the numerous scholarly and practical management titles published each year. Although librarianship as a whole has generated a substantial literature on administration and management, the literature dealing with the special concerns of law librarians is slight. Thus, we turn to the general management literature for insight. Despite the less than perfect fit between the concerns of profit-making institutions and those of most libraries, the best of the management literature can be instructive for library managers.

One recent work with a perspective that may prove helpful in the library setting as well as the corporate is Robert E. Kelley's The Gold-Collar Worker. Kelley’s premise is that old models of management no longer work well either for organizations or for their employees in an age where work is increasingly information-based and dependent on the thinking ability of employees. This is not a revolutionary thesis. What is thought-provoking about the book, however, is the idea that the organizational goals will be accomplished in this new era only if managers provide an environment where employees feel that they can accomplish their personal goals within the organizational setting. What the book has to offer law librarians, whether we are in management positions or not, are some new ways to think about ourselves and our careers, and about the relationship between our individual goals and aspirations and the goals of the organizations for which we work.

Who are the gold-collar workers? For Kelley, they are that growing percentage of the work force involved with creating and using information in a variety of forms. Gold-collar workers often operate independently, whether


3. See generally id. at 6-16.
they work for themselves or within larger organizations, but their work frequently requires collaboration and the support and stimulation that they receive from other professionals. Their skill levels are such that they often know more about their individual jobs and responsibilities than their managers do, and they are indistinguishable from management both intellectually and socially. These well-documented characteristics—an educated work force, higher levels of technical skill, greater specialization, and more reliance on information—reflect the changing nature of work in late twentieth century America.

Kelley concentrates on the effects of these and other societal changes on the values and expectations that the information worker brings to the job. Not only are the new workers not predisposed to subordinate their personal goals to those of the organization, but they are more prepared than earlier generations to move elsewhere if they are not attaining personal satisfaction through their work. Because their marketable skills stem from their education and ability to think ("brainpower," as Kelley calls it), gold-collar workers are more self-confident and feel less dependent on their employer for long-term security than traditional white-collar workers. They realize that they are hard to replace because of their knowledge base; consequently, they are more demanding that employers meet their needs both for autonomy and for participation in policy formulation. Although economic and other rewards are important to the gold-collar worker, economic sanctions are less effective because gold-collar workers are prepared to take their skills elsewhere if they feel that their needs are not being met. Frequently, they already have parlayed their professional skills and interests, and have more options available to them than have employees in the past. Gold-collar employees are more interested in moonlighting, consulting, and developing other outside projects that make use of their knowledge and skills than in the traditional route to success—working up the corporate ladder within a single organization. These interests in self-development and changes in attitude toward the organization carry with them new and significant implications for management.

The manager's role becomes much more complex and demanding in a setting where employees feel less need and incentive to adapt their goals to those of the organization. The challenge for the manager is to channel the various individual goals of the gold-collar workers into activities that support and achieve the goals of the organization. Traditional theories of motivation no longer apply. The manager's role is to develop a climate where employees are self-motivated and where they feel free enough in pursuing their own interests through their jobs that they willingly align those interests with the goals of the organization. The results will be an innovative work force, higher levels of productivity, lower turnover, less discontent, and greater managerial effectiveness. To reach these results, the manager must provide a stimulating work environment, encourage democratic decision-making, and
create an acceptable reward system and the potential for self-determination on the job. Much of Kelley’s book provides advice on how to do this.4

What does this analysis offer to law librarians? Should we consider ourselves “gold-collar workers?” Most librarians certainly do not share in the affluence implied by such a term. Yet, in many other ways, today’s librarians, like other information professionals, possess the same specialized skills and have the same career aspirations and needs as the group identified by Kelley. Within law librarianship, both technical and public service specialists have the education and technical sophistication necessary to establish a relationship with their employer similar to that Kelley describes. Skilled and experienced technical services librarians are at a premium in law librarianship, as are proven reference librarians and administrators at all levels. Not only do their skills allow law librarians to be mobile, but like Kelley’s gold-collar workers, they are capable of applying their skills in projects outside the institutional setting, either to supplement or to replace a traditional law library career. Consultantships and advisory services, editing and publishing, data base searching, filing and organization services for smaller libraries, positions with vendors, teaching, and writing are a few examples of the sorts of activities law librarians can engage in profitably on the basis of their professional skills. Such opportunities are increasingly available to wider segments of the profession.

Today’s law libraries therefore face the same management dilemmas as organizations in other sectors. As our profession becomes more highly skilled, as more opportunities to apply those skills outside the library become available, and as law librarians seek out new ways to apply their skills and training, it will be up to law library managers to see that the staff’s creative energies are applied in support of the library’s goals. If Kelley’s characterization is applicable, the future effectiveness of law libraries will depend as much on how well they respond to the needs of individual employees as on how well the individuals adapt to and accept the institutional goals. The library manager’s dilemma is in how best to encourage the pursuit of individual goals in ways that contribute to those of the library as an institution. Its resolution requires leadership that recognizes the blurred lines between management and staff, that seeks out staff with strong needs for individual accomplishment and frees them to be innovative and creative within the library workplace. This means encouraging staff to seek out those opportunities within and outside the library that not only satisfy individual needs for accomplishment, but that also will provide eventual payback to the institution.

Compared to managers of other organizations, most law library managers wishing to implement Kelley’s ideas have an advantage in the relatively small size of law library staffs. This creates a greater potential for flexibility in

4. See id. at chs. 6 & 7.
organizational structure and job design, and means that most law librarians are less specialized than their counterparts in larger research libraries. Inevitably, there are some programs (e.g., rare books, preservation, data base searching) for which too few resources are available or for which there is too little ongoing demand to justify full-time staffing. Many such programs can be implemented successfully using the special skills and interests of staff members whose primary institutional responsibilities lie elsewhere. Locating the right person for the job requires that managers understand not only the library's organizational needs and structure, but the interests and needs of individual staff members. The same requirement holds in designing appropriate reward systems. Librarianship is unlikely ever to rank among the highest paid professions. Yet once some progress has been achieved in that area, successful managers will establish a broad enough system of nonmonetary rewards to meet the varying needs of staff members to develop personally and professionally. Sabbatical or other leave opportunities should be available for employees, either for research or to prevent burnout. Staff interested in moving on to administrative jobs elsewhere should be given the opportunity to test their own management skills with some administrative and supervisory responsibilities. Interested staff should be encouraged to participate in non-library activities and projects of the parent institution; law school examples might be occasional teaching, attending faculty seminars, joining student projects and groups. Staff interested in pursuing their own research should be encouraged to share their results with the rest of the staff in professional seminars, as well as through publication.

Success in whatever is done will depend on the law library manager's sensitivity to the individual needs and aspirations of the staff and a creative approach toward developing those individual interests in ways that pay back to the library and its larger institution. Accomplishing this also requires an active commitment to meeting the employees' needs for meaningful participation in policy formulation as well as implementation. In a gold-collar era, this must stem not from the humanistic motivations that historically have supported the participatory management movement, but from a realization that concern with employee needs may be the only way successfully to meet the library's goals.

If Kelley is correct, the effectiveness of libraries and other organizations in the future will be closely tied to a manager's ability to unleash the individual potential of the new library professional. This need for innovative managerial techniques takes place at a time when libraries as organizations are growing more complex internally and are increasingly dependent for their success on relationships with other libraries and with the outside sources, electronic and otherwise, that supply the services and data they provide. The Gold-Collar Worker is not aimed specifically at the library work place, but it does provide insight into the effects of societal changes on institution and
employee. Like the best of the management literature, its ideas can be applied to the law library setting and contribute to our own developing theories of law library management.

Dick Danner