On many days it seems not possible for libraries to absorb more: more new technology; more new products; more new services; more new tasks; budget cuts; staff reductions. Automation, outsourcing, and workflow redesign aimed at increasing efficiency and lowering costs may have already tightened your processes to the breaking point. You may not have capacity to absorb another thing. It might be time to say no.

But as librarians, we don’t want to say no. We can’t really afford to say no. And it’s foolish to say no to the new stuff. It’s the new stuff that administrators expect and patrons demand. It’s the new stuff that will allow the library to reinvent itself for a vigorous future. In very many libraries, the time has come to say no to some of the old stuff, which is often the hardest thing to do.

In fact, we cling to the old; the familiar. We are drawn to tasks we know how to do well. We justify activity and expense with classic images of pristine catalogs and collections, even as they lose relevance. We value old-fashioned library aesthetics to which patrons are oblivious. We tend toward print materials over digital content because we can see when it backlogs, and we understand how it works.

In order to move far and well into the future, it is important to re-evaluate library services and workflow priorities often. We must think clearly about the value or the service provided, and be bold about removing steps and tasks in favor of newer, more important ones. Those that will be eliminated are not inherently bad. They may once have been critical and even now, may offer some diminished value. But service pressures require that we eliminate low-value and non-critical tasks regardless of their original intent because there are so many newer and more vital tasks to be accomplished.

The following is intended to stimulate thinking about “low-value” tasks that may still be performed in your library. Each one that remains may provide a real opportunity to do something better. Some are big. Some are small.

- Stop using overly complex fund structures (and small itemized endowments)
- Stop multiple, item specific, mid-stream searches
Stop making system print outs (especially for single items)
Stop inserting routing slips and colored flags
Stop using free text fields
Stop signing purchase orders
Stop applying book plates
Stop manual transcription of information from the system
Stop manual tallies
Stop writing narrative monthly reports
Stop item by item book selection
Stop putting new books out for review
Stop "checking all" as a standard workflow routine
Stop keeping paper files that replicate information stored in the system
Stop storing publisher catalogs
Stop photocopying
Stop periodical check-in, at least for some categories of material
Stop binding journals
Stop upgrading third-party catalog records
Stop trying to eliminate duplicate call numbers
Stop accepting gifts
Stop maintaining physical shelf-lists
Stop building files of items not held
Stop cataloging unsolicited serials

Many of these tasks are obviously inefficient and may only exist as a result of inattention. Some exist because of organizational momentum; some are legacy tasks from a previous era; some exist because of inconsequential restrictions on system access; some are closely associated with the library culture; and some still exist because certain staff members are ill-equipped for change. Others on the list may seem inconsequential, not worthy of reconsideration, requiring just a couple of seconds per item. Still others may seem absolutely primary to your organization, and/or outside the bounds of immediate control. In the end, none of these reasons fully justifies continuance of low-value tasks. We must challenge all these assumptions to move forward.

More generally, we should seek to recognize and question outdated remnants of pre-automation routines, manual transcription, item by item decisions or tasks, redundant systems, repetition, procedures that introduce error, and seeking the perfect in favor of the good. In all these ways we will better serve the patron when we just say no.