

STORIES FOR THE REAL WORLD

Storytelling is only for kids and it's all about imaginary things, right? Not according to **PATRICIA MCMILLAN**, who helps organisations to tell real stories about where they have been and where they are going. Patricia converts otherwise stultifying statistics into compelling tales that can excite and motivate team members. We asked Patricia, a keynote speaker at the ALIA Information Online 2017 Conference in February, to tell us about her work.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO STORYTELLING?

I think I've always been into storytelling. Some of my best early memories are of weekly trips with my mother to our public library in Mount Vernon, Ohio, where I was allowed to choose any books I wanted to borrow for the week – and I didn't have to stay in the children's section.

From the time I learned to read, I wanted to be a writer, and even in primary school I was fascinated by the craft of storytelling and what makes a story work. I grew up listening to Garrison Keillor's radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*. That introduced me to the wonderful tradition of oral storytelling.

But I took a different path when I chose a career. I also loved mathematics and majored in maths at university. In the early 1990s, I was attracted to the possibilities I could see in the internet, and that kicked off a career in information technology.

It was many years later that I discovered how this lifelong fascination I've had with stories is something I can use to help leaders and organisations.



WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT STORYTELLING?

The way it helps us to shape meaning out of the events and experiences of our lives. It's through stories that we understand what has happened – either to us or to other people. By putting a narrative around it, we can reflect on it and choose how to respond. We can envision a new story for how we want to live in the future and turn that story into a reality.

Stories are the way we experience life. We experience it metaphorically or poetically through mythology and great fiction. We experience it vicariously through real stories of other people. And we experience our own lives more consciously through our own stories. Stories are how we know what life is all about.

HOW DOES STORYTELLING HELP PEOPLE IN THEIR EVERYDAY LIVES?

We're living in a time when the default is to move from one distraction to the next, from one task to the next, from one from one day to the next, without ever stopping to take stock. To celebrate. To recalibrate. It's an unsatisfying way to live, and then before you even know what's happened, it's over.

Stories provide us with the opportunity to reflect. To recognise what we have experienced, appreciate it, learn from it and sometimes move on from it. This kind of awareness makes life richer and more satisfying.

Not to mention the fact that we all love to be immersed in a beautiful, well-crafted story. Life would be so much poorer without stories.

HOW DO YOU HELP LEADERS AND ORGANISATIONS TO USE STORYTELLING SKILLS?

I help leaders to communicate in a way that's more memorable, real and engaging – more human. And I help teams and organisations to create a culture that's aligned with their strategy and their values.

At ALIA Information Online 2017, I'll be presenting a case study from La Trobe University along with Jennifer Peasley, the University Librarian. We've worked together using storytelling to help the library envision its new strategy, communicate it, and begin to embody it in its culture. When you come to the conference you'll hear more about it.

I've also worked with leaders and teams in organisations like the National Library of Australia, the University of Queensland, the University of Sydney, the University of Auckland, MOQdigital, AARNet, the Australian National Data Service, the Queensland Cyber Infrastructure Foundation and others.

ARE THERE SPECIFIC AREAS WITHIN ORGANISATIONS WHERE STORYTELLING CAN BE PARTICULARLY HELPFUL? FOR EXAMPLE, WITH TRANSFORMATION?

Transformation is a big one because it covers so much of what's happening now in so many different organisations, and the failure rate for change programs is abysmal – anywhere from 50 to 70 per cent.

With any transformation, the first thing you need to do is create a sense of urgency so that enough people recognise the need to make a change. And a sense of urgency means that people not only understand it rationally but also feel it in their guts and they're inspired by it in their imaginations. Stories go to these places where facts and information by themselves can't go. You need a compelling narrative that helps people to feel why this transformation is needed and to picture the future they're going to create together, and it has to be something they can really relate to.

“Life would be so much poorer without stories.”

Then as the transformation initiative progresses, people need to hear about the progress that's being made. You need some quick wins, and not only do you need the wins but you also need to collect and spread the stories about them. It's incredibly motivating for people to know that their efforts are making a difference. It gives them renewed energy and confidence to keep going. But if they don't hear about what's happening, the shadow stories start to spread that the initiative isn't making any progress, or is just making things worse, and then you really do have a problem on your hands.


Finally, you need to make the changes a part of your culture, so that they'll be sustained. Stories from leaders, from customers, and from everyone on the team help with this by communicating what's important and giving real examples of the kinds of behaviours that lead to success.

HOW CAN STORYTELLING HELP LIBRARY AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS?

The role and the importance of libraries used to be obvious because you could see it. It was the place where the books were, or some other kind of physical collection, and you went to the library to access that collection.

Now that the books are going, the role of the library is not visible in the same way, and this has left a hole in people's understanding of what libraries are about.

Libraries and information professionals need to fill this hole. They need to fill it to demonstrate the value and impact they provide so that they can continue to gain funding and support; they need to fill it so they can be recognised as leaders and strategic partners in their organisations, and they need to fill it for themselves, so that they can continue to grow as a profession.

Stories can help libraries and information professionals not only to fill the hole but also to plant the seeds for their future. 

PATRICIA MCMILLAN

Storyteller

Patricia McMillan is the author of *Make It Matter: The surprising secret for leading digital transformation*.