

Navigating Uncertainty: A Human-Centered Assessment Compass for Digital Preservation Practitioners

Digital preservation can sometimes feel like being adrift in open water - uncertain conditions, shifting priorities, and no single map to follow. This model complements technical assessments like the [NDSA Levels of Preservation](#) by centering the human experience of stewardship work. While tools like the NDSA Levels assess systems, infrastructure, and workflows, this framework focuses on the people who do the work: their confidence, safety, relationships, and sense of community.

This tool isn't a checklist or a fixed destination; it's a compass: a way to orient yourself, take stock of your position, and choose where to steer next. Sustainable stewardship isn't just about tools or policies, it's about care, connection, and collective growth. Those at the highest maturity levels aren't "experts" above others; they're guides who help create visibility, trust, and safe passage for others on their own timelines. Whether you're seeking safe harbor, testing new waters, or just trying to stay afloat, this compass is designed to support your journey, on your terms, at your pace.

Aspects	Navigational Points			
	Run Aground (Level 1)	Adrift (Level 2)	Charting a Course (Level 3)	True North (Level 4)
Sustainable Resourcing	The work is understaffed or roles are unclear. Individuals are stretched thin, covering multiple responsibilities with little support or recognition. Burnout feels inevitable, and turnover is high.	Some staffing is in place, but roles may overlap or shift frequently. Capacity feels fragile - progress depends heavily on a few key people holding everything together. Support exists in theory but feels inconsistent in practice.	Roles and responsibilities are clearer, staffing aligns better with the work. Growing confidence that the workload is manageable. Advocacy for new positions or fair distribution of labor is met with some institutional support.	Staffing is realistic, stable, and resourced with long-term sustainability in mind. Roles are clear, growth is supported, and workload is human-scaled. The organization invests in professional development, retention, and succession planning, fostering shared stewardship.
Confidence & Self-Efficacy	Feeling overwhelmed or underqualified. Often second guessing. Struggling with impostor syndrome.	Has some knowledge or tools but still lacks trust in their own judgment. May rely heavily on external validation.	Feels more capable and informed. Becoming comfortable making decisions.	Strong self-trust and clarity of purpose. Models vulnerability, shares learning openly, and uplifts others.
Support and Belonging	Feeling isolated, invisible, or unsure who to turn to. Unsure if one belongs in the field.	Some connections exist, but they may feel shallow, conditional, or infrequent.	Starting to feel seen and valued by a community. Can reach out to peers or mentors for support.	Builds and sustains belonging for others. Fosters community, creates safer spaces, and holds doors open for others.
Institutional Safety and Validation	Work is undervalued, invisible or questioned. Advocacy feels unsafe or risky.	Some support exists, but it may be unstable or conditional. Advocacy sometimes meets resistance.	Work is recognized and supported. Feels safe naming challenges and proposing solutions.	Shapes organizational culture. Models advocacy and systemic thinking. Helps create safer conditions for others.
Emotional Resilience	Frequently overwhelmed or burnt out. Work feels draining or defeating.	Manages stress with effort, but unsustainably. May experience guilt or perfectionism.	Has tools or practices to sustain emotional well being. Sets healthy boundaries and recovers from setbacks.	Shares strategies, supports others in resilience, and contributes to cultures of care.
Reflection & Growth	Little time or capacity for reflection. Work feels reactive or chaotic.	Reflection occurs occasionally, often prompted externally (e.g., reviews, feedback).	Regularly engages in self-assessment and course-correction. Embraces learning and feedback.	Fosters a culture of reflection. Models humility, experimentation, and lifelong learning.

Guide to Using This Framework

Aspects

1. **Sustainable Resourcing** - *Are there enough people? Are responsibilities clear? Is labor distributed in ways that protect well-being and foster retention?*
2. **Confidence & Self-Efficacy** – *How secure do I feel in my knowledge, decision-making, and ability to advocate for preservation work?*
3. **Support & Belonging** – *Do I have meaningful connections with peers or mentors? Do I feel part of a community of practice?*
4. **Institutional Safety & Validation** – *Is my work respected and resourced by my organization? Do I feel safe advocating for this work? Do I face precarity?*
5. **Emotional Resilience & Sustainability** – *Am I able to manage stress, burnout, and uncertainty in this work? Do I feel emotionally sustained?*
6. **Reflective Practice & Growth Mindset** – *Do I regularly take time to reflect on my work and growth? Am I open to change and experimentation? Do I have the support to grow?*

Navigational Points

- 1. Run Aground** Feeling stuck, overwhelmed, stranded, or in crisis. Confidence is low, support is lacking, and the work feels unsustainable. You're treading water, just trying to survive. Tasks feel overwhelming, support is minimal, and validation is lacking. Individuals feel alone or out of depth. *"I feel like I'm stuck here"*
- 2. Adrift** You have some direction and tools, but you're navigating without a clear sense of destination or steady guidance. You're doing your best but often feel uncertain or alone. Some tools or networks exist, but confidence or institutional recognition is shaky. *"I know enough to get by, but I often feel unsure or invisible."*
- 3. Charting a Course** You've finally found your bearings. There's growing confidence, reliable support, and a sense of direction. You begin to mentor others, trust yourself, and feel anchored in your work. Individuals can advocate for themselves, have meaningful peer connections, and feel some degree of sustainability. *"I feel supported and capable."*
- 4. True North** You've found a steady sense of direction and purpose. You are self-aware, confident, and offer quiet guidance - not by steering others, but by modeling clarity and care. You help create safety and trust, making it easier for others to find their own bearings when they're ready. Individuals at this level are not just navigating the system, but shaping it - mentoring others, improving structures, and cultivating community. *"I'm resourced, confident, and giving back."*



Sample Reflection Prompts

Use these questions individually or in peer dialogue:

- Which aspects feel most challenging to me right now, and why?
- Where am I feeling growth or momentum?
- Do I have any people, communities, or practices that act as my “True North”—helping me stay steady and oriented? Am I offering that kind of guidance or support for someone else?
- What kind of scaffolding, support, or experiences would help me move from one level to the next in a specific domain?
- What systems or relationships are contributing to (or inhibiting) my sense of sustainability?
- What is within my control?

Suggested Uses:

- Pair with technical assessments (e.g., [NDSA Levels](#), [DPC-RAM](#)) for a holistic snapshot of institutional practices and individual experiences.
- Use during mentoring check-ins or peer coaching. Peer mentors might use this to check in with participants emotionally, not just professionally, and offer scaffolding where needed.
- Support professional development conversations with supervisors. It could be used as part of performance reviews, coaching conversations, or reflective journaling within a community of practice. Institutions can utilize it to reflect on how their environments *nurture or inhibit* digital preservation practitioners — especially those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Notes about the framework: *Navigating Uncertainty* is an original, human-centered assessment model created by the [Digital POWRR team](#). It was developed as a companion to technical frameworks like the NDSA Levels of Preservation, with a focus on the emotional, relational, and institutional realities of doing stewardship work. While not based on any single theory or methodology, it incorporates the team’s ongoing focus on human-centered care, peer mentorship, reflection, and building resilience in under-resourced cultural heritage contexts. We are grateful to the communities and colleagues whose honesty and vulnerability shaped this work. This framework is not about measuring success through output—it’s about understanding, supporting, and honoring the lived experience of the people doing the work.

Growth across these domains is rarely linear, and individuals may find themselves at a “True North” level in some areas while still feeling like they have run aground or are adrift in others. Some domains—like confidence or reflection—may be influenced by personal practice and healing, while others—like institutional safety or belonging—are deeply shaped by external environments and systemic barriers. This framework is not a ladder to climb, but a tool for compassionate self-understanding and peer support. Your sense of direction may waver. That doesn’t mean you’ve lost it.

Although this framework was developed with digital preservation practitioners in mind, its aspects and levels reflect experiences shared across many roles in libraries, archives, and cultural heritage organizations. Anyone doing emotionally complex, care-driven work in under-resourced contexts may find it resonant.

Using This Framework in Challenging Workplaces

The "Navigating Uncertainty" model is meant to affirm the *whole human experience* of doing stewardship work—including the pain of navigating environments that cloud your sense of direction. Many people operate in institutions that leave them isolated, overextended, or invisible. This framework cannot fix that—but it can offer clarity, language, and pathways for personal and collective care.

1. Name What's Happening: If you find yourself at "Run Aground" or "Adrift" in multiple domains, it doesn't mean *you're* failing. It often means your environment is not offering what you need. Naming your position helps shift the narrative from self-blame to structural awareness. – *"I'm not broken - I'm just unsupported in this domain."*

2. Focus on What You *Can* Influence: You may not be able to shift institutional culture alone, but you can nurture certain domains through intentional self-work, peer connection, or external community support. Emotional sustainability doesn't come from toughness, it comes from care, clarity, and small, consistent practices.

Here are some ways people may strengthen their sense of agency:

- **Confidence** through low-stakes practice (e.g., sandboxing tools or mock presentations), peer coaching, affirming feedback loops, and setting achievable goals.
- **Reflection** through journaling, co-mentoring, or dedicated "sense-making" time after difficult meetings or decisions.
- **Emotional resilience** through: boundary-setting (e.g., limiting after-hours communication, declining unresourced requests), recovery time (taking breaks even when not "finished"), celebration of invisible labor and small wins, and connecting with others who validate your experience, even if they're outside your institution
- **Support and belonging** by seeking affinity groups, digital communities (e.g., Slack groups, Discords, working groups, committees, listservs), or forming informal peer pods, even with just one or two trusted people.
- **Self-compassion** by replacing harsh inner narratives with kinder ones: *"I did my best with what I had."* *"It makes sense that this feels hard."* *"I can rest without guilt."*

3. Find or Form Guiding Points: Even in toxic environments, trusted guides and steady reference points exist. Consider using this model in small peer groups to:

- Name where each person is across domains
- Normalize fluctuation and struggle
- Offer mutual encouragement or witness

4. Map Your Boundaries: If you feel like you've run aground across all domains for a sustained time, this model may help you see that your environment is causing harm, not that you need to "be tougher." Your sense of direction and well-being deserve protection. Sometimes, leaving a job is an act of stewardship. The framework can offer language for asking questions like: *"Is this a rough patch, or a harmful pattern?"* *"Do I have any power to change my conditions here?"* and *"If I stay, what part of myself will I lose?"*

5. Invite Gentle Use in Teams (If Safe): In some workplaces, this framework might be shared as a reflection tool - not for evaluation, but for conversation. Example prompts:

- *"Which domain feels most steady for you right now?"*
- *"Which one feels turbulent or under-supported?"*
- *"What might help you feel more anchored or seen?"*

Using This Framework In Supportive Workplaces

This model isn't only for those navigating toxic or under-resourced environments, it's equally powerful in supportive settings where leadership is actively seeking to build sustainable, affirming cultures. When applied from the "top down," the framework can help administrators, supervisors, and allies understand the emotional and relational dimensions of digital stewardship work and act with intentional care.

Supportive leaders can use the framework to strengthen practice in the following ways:

1. **Foster technical growth:** Supportive workplaces recognize that digital preservation is a dynamic and evolving field. Rather than expecting staff to arrive as experts, they invest in continuous learning. This includes providing time and funding for workshops, courses, and conferences - but it also means creating space for exploration, experimentation, and even failure. When staff are encouraged to learn in public and share what they're discovering, it reinforces a growth mindset and can help build collective knowledge.
2. **Provide autonomy:** Trust is a cornerstone of healthy digital preservation work. Empower practitioners to make decisions, test approaches, and shape their own workflows. Avoid micromanagement and instead offer clear goals, supportive check-ins, and space to adapt methods to local needs. Autonomy signals respect for practitioner expertise and cultivates intrinsic motivation, both of which are essential for long-term engagement in this often complex and ambiguous work.
3. **Incubate early career practitioners:** Early-career staff bring energy, curiosity, and new perspectives to digital preservation - but they often lack institutional power or confidence. Supportive workplaces create scaffolding rather than pressure, offering mentorship, peer connection, and clear, manageable pathways into the work. Recognizing potential over credentials, and creating room to grow without fear of failure, helps build the next generation of sustainable stewards.
4. **Cross pollinate within organizations/communities:** Digital preservation thrives in ecosystems, not silos. Encourage staff to collaborate across departments, disciplines, and roles. Build intentional bridges between IT, archives, Special Collections, records management, digital scholarship, and other adjacent areas. When practitioners can share ideas, tools, and challenges across boundaries, it not only strengthens their work - it builds empathy and resilience across the organization or community as a whole.
5. **Model emotional intelligence and transparency:** Supportive leaders set the tone. By modeling emotional intelligence - acknowledging uncertainty, naming discomfort, owning mistakes - administrators give practitioners permission to do the same. Transparent communication around priorities, risks, and tradeoffs also helps staff feel respected and informed, rather than managed or siloed.
6. **Value relational work:** Much of digital preservation success depends not just on technical execution, but on relationship-building - across teams, with community members, and within broader professional networks. Make this invisible labor visible. Recognize and reward staff for mentoring, coalition-building, peer learning, and community engagement as legitimate, essential parts of the job, not extracurriculars.
7. **Design for sustainability, not heroics:** Avoid relying on exceptional individuals to "make it work" in spite of systemic barriers. Instead, assess workloads, redistribute responsibilities when needed, and plan with sustainability in mind. Build in time for recovery after big pushes, and encourage pacing over perfection. Even in supportive workplaces, burnout can emerge when passion and pressure go unchecked.