

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Libraries: The Challenges and Opportunities

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## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Libraries: The Challenges and Opportunities**

**Abstract:** Profound changes are occurring in the work, educational and social environments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that have significant implications for how libraries function, the services they offer and the ways in which those services are provided. The challenges libraries confront as they transition from the way they've operated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to a model that incorporates new materials formats, technologies and ways of learning present an extraordinary opportunity for libraries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be leaders in a rapidly changing and increasingly global economy. However, to do so, they must have buildings, staff and services that reflect the expectations of users today.

Library associations are needed now more than ever for the promotion and improvement of library and information services. Developing their members' skills in effective advocacy techniques for "delivering the message" to legislators, administrators and other individuals controlling financial resources; alerting members about legislation or policies under discussion with a direct impact on libraries; and "on-the-ground" advocacy—all key association responsibilities—ensure that libraries are dynamic and responsive to the communities they serve. Library associations are also a cost-effective source for training that keeps members abreast of technological innovations.

**Introduction:** Libraries, which are unique in being freely open to all, play a critical role in preparing individuals for the changed workplaces of the global economy. By their very nature, libraries are equipped to guide individuals in the development of skills in

information, communications and technological literacy; critical thinking; and problem solving.

We have been witnessing a major “paradigm shift.” As described in the 2009 report *Museums, Libraries, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills*, throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was not unusual for people to hold only one or two jobs during their career, to have expertise in a single field and to engage in job competition primarily at the local level. Especially in the first half of the century, manufacturing and agriculture were dominant and work performed tended to be routine and hands-on. A hierarchical, top-down organizational structure was the norm and getting an education generally meant pursuing formal degrees.

Today it is expected that we will hold numerous jobs in our lifetimes, have a mastery of several or more rapidly changing fields and be able to function successfully in a multifaceted organizational culture (bottom-up, top-down and side-to-side). Jobs are not only less routine, but also often demand flexibility, the ability to be innovative and sophisticated technological and interactive skills for the achievement of personal and professional success. To respond to the increasing pace of change, it is assumed that we will engage in lifelong learning.<sup>1</sup>

**Body of the Paper:** How do our school, public and academic libraries ensure that they are leaders in this new social, cultural, political, educational and economic order? While the relevancy of libraries may seem challenged by the swift evolution of the needs of a global marketplace and the wealth of digital information now available, in fact there is no institution that can equal libraries in offering accessibility to knowledge and guidance in

search strategies for obtaining information, regardless of format, and analyzing its value.

Developing and enhancing 21<sup>st</sup> century skills “is a compelling national imperative.”

These skills “are no longer simply desirable—they are necessary.”<sup>2</sup> The challenges for libraries and librarians are to integrate these skills tangibly, visibly and effectively in the resources and services provided and to support their users in the development of such skills. Libraries must assert themselves in making known the importance of what they have to offer. Their message must be powerfully crafted, qualitatively and quantitatively, so that their impact on the lives and success of their users and communities is readily understood.

The changes underway are basic and foundational ones. It is our responsibility, as library leaders, to do some intense soul searching and to examine thoroughly and honestly how we currently operate and how we need to operate to be relevant 21<sup>st</sup> century institutions. Following are several of the major issues and questions we must confront.

### *The Library as a Place and Physical Structure: Are We Prepared for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?*

Most libraries today were built prior to the explosion of digital information and the demand for easy and ready access to it. Over the next quarter century, we must address the rebuilding or remodeling of most of these facilities not only to ensure connectivity to digital sources, but also to reflect entirely different ways of being used for

research and learning. Libraries must rethink the basic tenets that drove how their interiors were designed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While library buildings were previously constructed around library operations, “in recent years, we have reawakened to the fact that libraries are fundamentally about people—how they learn, how they use information, and how they participate in the life of a learning community.”<sup>3</sup>

Not only do we have a changed set of expectations about the services a library should offer, we have an increased level of expectations about the library’s appearance and convenience. Customers demand “high-quality facilities, resources, and services. They want a library that is focused on their needs, and they have no intention of going out of their way to meet the library’s needs and expectations.”<sup>4</sup>

Key concepts in the library’s design must include the personalization of the user’s experience, recognizing that different needs mean different solutions. Not only should there be spaces for the solitary user, but also for those who work with others. Libraries designed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century focus on plenty of comfortable seats, numerous and widespread electrical outlets for accommodating laptop computers, wireless access, signage, maps and directories, lockers and coffee shops or cafes. In large public or academic libraries, the standard should be an information desk at the entrance to help users find the resources they need or to direct them to the areas of the library where more in-depth help can be provided. Teaching and learning centers where faculty and graduate teaching assistants can get help with technology, produce visual aids and check out media programs for class use and collaborative study rooms are essential for major libraries.

As we design or retrofit our libraries, we must not only research the needs of current and potential customers, we must also involve them in the design of the spaces and services. The collaborative style of young people today and the lifelong learning needs of older people should serve as the guideposts for the building's elements and the services it contains. In academic libraries, where the huge investment in the structure, materials and staffing is under increased scrutiny, the process for planning a library "must include the library director, members of the administration, trustees, students and faculty, and it must begin *before* a program for space needs is developed."<sup>5</sup>

But buildings are just one part of the picture.

### *The Library Workforce: Do We Have Staff with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Knowledge and Skills?*

The bedrock of our profession will always be its core competencies and values: the commitment to preserving the human record for future generations, ensuring access to knowledge, our beliefs in intellectual freedom and the right to privacy, and the importance of an educated citizenry to sustaining a democracy. However, librarians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must also have skills in strategic planning, budgeting and the management of human resources and projects, as well as the ability to communicate with a variety of audiences. They must blend traditional and technological skills, be flexible, able to anticipate change and willing to fearlessly alter the library's services to address those changes.

The recent downturn in the U.S. economy affected the pensions of millions throughout the country. Many librarians of the boomer generation were forced to delay their retirements as they waited for their investments to recover some or all of their lost value. This has had the regrettable consequence of limiting job openings and preventing the hiring of talented graduates from library programs with the very skills needed most. These newer librarians are often familiar with digital technologies from an early age and can apply their energy, enthusiasm, creativity and expertise to the use of multimedia that is an increasing percentage of our library resources. In reaching out to users in new ways, they instinctively employ social software. Their skills in envisioning the combinations of print and “streaming video, podcasts, digitized images, 3-D animations, screencasts, etc.—to engage students and enhance the learning experience” are precisely those of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are “blended librarians,” versed in print and online tools, ready to meet the user on the user’s terms,<sup>6</sup> and they are valuable potential team members for envisioning library services of the future, identifying appropriate service delivery models and effectively communicating their availability to a similarly new generation of users.

Young people today are impatient and unwilling to put the focus on process. For them, the focus is on completion. They expect an open flow of information in contrast to a tightly controlled flow. They want a career path that is based on learning, growth and challenge. In fact, they believe even entry-level jobs should be personally rewarding. Work-life balance is more important than anything else to them, in fact, more important than money.<sup>7</sup>

Our challenge in transforming 20<sup>th</sup> into 21<sup>st</sup> century libraries is rooted in providing new or revamped buildings, offering new technologies, new service models (24/7 with instant access, speed of information delivery and convenience) and technologically expert staff with the skills to integrate vast digital and multimedia resources. As library leaders, we must transform our organizational structures to ensure we attract and keep the 21<sup>st</sup> century staff essential to the success of the profession and our institutions.

### *21<sup>st</sup> Century Library Associations: Ensuring the Future of Libraries and Librarianship*

The top priorities for the members of the American Library Association (ALA) are advocacy for libraries and access to information for professional growth. Although ALA has an Office for Library Advocacy, its advocacy commitment underlies all parts of the organization. The association views advocacy in a broad conceptual sense and has made it goal No. 1 of the strategic plan. For ALA and its members, advocacy includes support for research and evaluation to provide evidence of the value and impact of libraries; the mobilizing, supporting and sustaining of grassroots advocacy for libraries and library funding at the local, state and federal levels; and collaborations that secure legislation favorable to libraries. The availability of the Internet and rapid online communication have been a boon for library advocacy. There are a wealth of toolkits with tips, techniques and data for advocates available on the ALA website as part of its “Advocacy University.” These resources are available to anyone who joins the association and transcend differences in countries and cultures. The valuable

information they provide is useful for library supporters, whether they are in the U.S. or in Mexico.

ALA has a Washington Office that has been very successful in keeping members up to date on legislative developments influencing libraries and their funding. In addition, through ALA's online Legislative Action Center, advocates can send customized messages to members of the U.S. Congress. With the recent economic downturn and budgetary cuts to services, the value of this tool and network has been demonstrated repeatedly for our libraries. Importantly, this software is commercially available and can be used by other library associations seeking an effective means of reaching their government officials for support on policy or financial issues. To fund the libraries of the future, we all must begin the process of reaching out to those who "control the purse strings" today and be able to do so in a one-on-one way.

The Internet has connected ALA members with learning opportunities beyond anything previously available. Conferences have always been venues for the "business of the association," valuable networking opportunities with other professionals and sources of up-to-date information on technology, products and services. However, the ability to lead members in the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills has taken a major leap forward in the past year with an exponential increase in the number of webinars and e-learning opportunities offered. As funding has become more difficult to obtain for travel to conferences or classes, the ease of access and reasonable cost of webinars and e-learning courses makes them an effective option for staff to continue their professional growth. For librarians in small and rural libraries and for those who have never been

able to attend a conference, these online training opportunities have been particularly popular. “The Anywhere Library: A Primer for the Mobile Web,” “Creating iGoogle Gadgets for Your Library Users” and “Superpower Your Browser: Open Source Research Tools,” all sponsored by ALA’s Association of College and Research Libraries, provide just a few examples of how this means of connecting with members serves to ensure that library staff are abreast of the technologies that can serve their users. These learning tools can be shared with other associations and their members, benefiting librarians regardless of where they are located.

**Conclusion:** The 21<sup>st</sup> century holds great promise for libraries. Rather than being doomed to irrelevance by the widespread availability of digital resources, libraries are depended upon now more than ever. “The library is the only centralized location where new and emerging information technologies can be combined with traditional knowledge resources in a user-focused, service-rich environment that support today’s social and educational patterns of learning, teaching, and research.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, contrary to some predictions, library usage has been increasing dramatically. “These increases are particularly common at libraries and institutions that have worked with their architects and planners to anticipate the full impact of the integration of new information technologies throughout their facilities.”<sup>9</sup>

The challenges for libraries today are to ensure they have or are planning for the facilities, services and staff of the future and that they are building support with those controlling the financial means for ensuring that we will have 21<sup>st</sup> century libraries to meet the needs of this new century.

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