Reinventing Libraries for Post-Pandemic Success
The global pandemic has accelerated key changes that were already under way in many libraries, including a shift in priority from print to digital resources and a move toward more customer self-service.

As library system leaders plan for the future, they have a unique opportunity to leverage federal pandemic relief aid and build on the changes they made during this time to more effectively serve their patrons’ needs.

What will this require? In partnership with Spectrum Enterprise, Library Journal talked with a wide range of library leaders, including directors and board members from large library systems and small branches alike, to get their insights. Here’s what they had to say about the future of libraries in the post-pandemic world.

**KEY CHANGES**

Libraries met the challenges of COVID-19 with creative solutions to preserve the health and safety of their staff and patrons, while reinforcing their role as a vital community resource during a time of crisis. Innovations included curbside service, drop-off and pick-up lockers, and self-service kiosks, among others.

“Library services had to become more flexible to serve our patrons effectively during the pandemic,” says Susan Quinn, director of the Ocean County Library System in New Jersey.

The changes that Ocean County made were typical of many libraries. They included a move toward more self-service and automation of library services, as well as more virtual programming options for patrons.

For instance, Ocean County gave patrons the ability to get a virtual library card so they could access the system’s collection of e-books, audiobooks, research databases, and other digital resources. The county moved to self-service holds and transitioned to online programming where possible, including virtual story hours.

In 2019, Ocean County Library installed self-service kiosks for patrons to check books in and out at all 21 library locations for greater efficiencies in circulation services. “Some library patrons were resistant to using the kiosks pre-pandemic,” Quinn says. “However, during the pandemic the kiosks allowed us to reopen our buildings to the public. The public adapted to the use of the self-service kiosks, and it is now the preferred method for checking out books.”

Even before COVID-19 emerged, libraries were already transitioning more of their holdings from print to digital formats: From fiscal years 2014 to 2018, the average spending per person on physical materials in U.S. libraries declined by 6 percent, while the average per person spending on electronic materials increased by 31 percent.¹

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The pandemic further hastened this trend, while proving the value of digital collections. As libraries closed their physical branches during the early part of the pandemic, patrons could still access electronic resources remotely.

“Not that we needed one, but this experience was a reminder of the crucial role that online resources play in the life of a 21st century library,” says Matt Bruun, chair of the Fitchburg Public Library Board of Trustees in Massachusetts. “I hope more users learned how much they can avail themselves of the library without even having to leave home.”

THE ‘NEW NORMAL’

The changes that libraries made during the pandemic reflect larger trends across our society, and many of these transformations will continue long after the pandemic is over.

An October 2020 survey from global research firm McKinsey & Company found that responses to COVID-19 accelerated the adoption of digital technologies across all industry sectors by several years—and that many of these changes could become permanent.

Thirty-seven percent of organizations report an increased use of technology in operations, and 50 percent say this change will remain. Thirty-four percent report an increasing migration of applications to the cloud; 54 percent say this change will stick. When respondents were asked why their organizations didn’t implement these changes before the pandemic, just over half say that they weren’t a top business priority. The crisis removed this barrier.

The introduction of new library services for the convenience of patrons changed peoples’ expectations, and there is no going back to the pre-pandemic way of doing things.

“Patrons expect that some library services and innovations that came into practice during the pandemic will continue to be provided going forward,” Quinn says. For example, “parents and guardians who may not have had the opportunity to come to a children’s program in-person due to work schedules or other challenges may now view the virtual program option as a needed service.”

SUCCEEDS AND CHALLENGES

The changes that libraries have made since March 2020 have resulted in many successes—and some key challenges for leaders to solve.

Shifting meetings to an online format made attendance more convenient for many staff members, particularly in larger library systems. “Zoom meetings helped us be more effective in many ways, and they allowed more staff voices in various meetings since there are fewer distance and time barriers,” says Lynn Williamson, chief of the Free Library of Philadelphia’s Neighborhood Library Services Division. “Especially in a system that is geographically spread out like ours, Zoom meetings can help a lot—and I’m confident we will keep using them after the pandemic.”
However, in relying more on digital formats for delivering essential services and resources, library leaders need to be cognizant of the barrier this creates for some users. “In some ways, this allowed us a different kind of reach into our communities, but we also know that we are missing a lot of people who don’t have home internet access or who cannot attend outdoor programming,” Williamson says. “Our patrons still need us for job searches, printing resumes, and interacting online with government services.”

The reliance on technology for library access, even something as simple as using a cell phone to access curbside pickup, can widen the divide between those who have access to (and understanding of) technology and those who don’t. For instance, older adults who don’t use smart phones might have trouble navigating the library without being able to enter the building in person.

“Virtual library programs are here to stay, but there is still a need for in-person library programs to provide community connection,” Quinn says. “When libraries were closed to the public and services went virtual, there were many people in our community who were left out and isolated. Our county has a large population of senior citizens, and senior isolation was a real issue. Likewise, not all of our senior citizens were tech savvy.”

Some libraries discovered that online access to holdings is not a substitute for physically browsing a collection. “We learned that most of our users want to browse the shelves rather than place holds online or over the phone,” Bruun says. “There is certainly a lot of that, but there is a lot of browsing as well. Our new nonfiction, for example, barely circulated during the curbside service period.”

**SUPPORTING TRANSFORMATION**

Successfully building on the changes brought on by the pandemic will require new tools, policies, network infrastructure, and librarian skills. “Staff training is important,” Quinn observes. For instance, librarians must understand how to help patrons navigate digital resources and find what they’re looking for.

Training, staffing, equipment, and digital infrastructure—especially broadband access—require sufficient funding. Library leaders will need to make strategic investments in all of these areas to support continued transformation.

“We were fortunate in Fitchburg that we have cultivated a robust array of digital offerings for a long time, including tutorials on how to access and use them, so we were well-positioned to help our users from day one (of the pandemic),” Bruun says. “Being comfortable with these new technological innovations has long been important to modern librarians, and it will continue to be going forward as more folks take advantage of resources available 24/7.”
Transformation will require much more than strategic investment, however. As the pandemic called attention to huge differences in how citizens of different ages, socio-economic status, ethnicities, and geographies experience the world, library leaders must use diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as a lens through which all decisions are made.

“Equity is truly foundational to the mission of any public library,” Bruun says. “While we knew the value of providing digital resources to our users, we know that there are many community members who may not have access to the tools they need to take advantage of them. Losing access to the physical library for so many months was truly impactful for them, and we continue to explore ways to support access for all of our users.”

The Free Library of Philadelphia has a Chief DEI Officer who serves as Chair of the Board of Trustees’ Diversity and Inclusion Steering Committee. Several of the library’s key policies are being reevaluated through a DEI lens, and executive staff have recently agreed on a series of DEI goals and objectives.

“We’ve done some work on DEI, but we still have a long way to go,” Williamson says. “We are more frequently centering diversity, equity, and inclusion in our internal discussions, but there are no easy answers.”

LESSONS LEARNED

Effective transformation also requires the right mindset among library leaders. Leading change in uncertain times relies on “a cultural readiness to experiment, fail, and try again,” says Jim Duncan, executive director of the Colorado Library Consortium.

Here are three key strategies for success:

1. **Listen to users’ needs.**

   “Listen to your users, be mindful of what they need, and be ready to adapt in response,” Bruun advises. “Thriving libraries are not static, nor do they exist in a vacuum. Understanding this is key to being the resource your community requires.”

2. **Be open to change.**

   “Libraries are known for holding on to things, including outdated services, policies, and practices,” Duncan says. “Evolving libraries are unafraid of questioning these operational details. A library needs to keep one foot planted in the now while keeping the other leg moving toward the future.”
Don’t go it alone.

Success is a team effort. “Throughout the pandemic, our staff had to think outside of the box and rely on critical thinking and problem solving skills to accomplish (our) goals,” Quinn says. “I am fortunate that we have a really smart and dedicated staff. It takes a team to navigate challenging times.”

Leaders should lean on peer institutions as well as their staff. Look for potential partners among neighboring libraries, Duncan recommends, as this can help libraries extend their limited resources. “In many states, library resource sharing is essential to closing gaps in access, infrastructure, and expertise,” he says. “Libraries working together form a chain, a strong and attractive archipelago. A library alone is just an island, independent but exposed to the ruthlessness of the ocean.”

Libraries have responded to the challenges of the last few years with creative thinking and a can-do spirit, resulting in a host of new ways to serve patrons. Building on these innovations requires an understanding of what has worked well, what hasn’t, where gaps in access remain, and how libraries can help fill them.

Quinn summarizes her advice as follows: “Since change has always been and always will be part of the human condition, take a deep breath, know that you’re not alone, surround yourself with advisors and staff who are smarter than yourself, listen to your community about what they need, and do the very best job that you can.”

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ABOUT THE SURVEY

Library Journal's internet connectivity survey was created to learn whether U.S. public libraries have web access and affordability issues, and how COVID-19 has changed their approach to providing WiFi access to patrons. The survey was developed in coordination with Spectrum Enterprise. A survey invitation was emailed to a list of approximately 11,000 U.S. public libraries, with an emphasis on directors and IT specialists, in August 2020. The survey closed in September with 238 responses. Forty-seven percent of survey responses come from small libraries (serving populations under 25,000), 26 percent come from medium-sized libraries (serving 25,000 to 99,999 people), and 27 percent come from large libraries (serving 100,000 or more). Library directors and assistant directors account for 37 percent of the sample, followed by 8 percent each from technology managers/specialists, branch managers, and public services managers. Tabulation and analysis of the survey results was conducted by Library Journal.

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