Chapter 4

The Embedded Librarian: Do More With Less

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ABSTRACT

Toward the end of the 1990s libraries were the only single source and place for credible and authentic information on any given subject. The wider adoption of the Internet from the mid 1990s onwards and an increasing population using smartphones to search for information, signaled a shift in the way information is accessed and used by end-users. In a wave of rapid changes in information technology and empowered end-users, libraries all over the world experience looser relationships with their user base, creating a widening gap between its information service and supply function and the demand for information required by users. Clients, empowered by smart technologies, are capable to self-serve their information needs and bypass the services of a corporate or institutional library. In response to this shift, libraries began re-calibrating their business model from spaces filled with shelves to cultural open spaces and e-resources. This model worked initially well for libraries but the technology changes, in particular dedicated or smart applications, put libraries again on the forefront of change. The changed environment forces libraries to be more innovative and deliver more advanced services attuned to information needs of clients.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decennia libraries played an important role to advance societies by promoting reading habits, making books accessible, organize reading events to discuss a specific (new) book or to address a societal problem. The role of libraries further expanded in the 1950s and 1960s in organizing newsclips on societal developments for students and in the 80s exposure to home computers and in the nineties Internet. The technology revolution is still unfolding and nowadays libraries face an even greater challenge as consumers change their habits in the way how they consume and share information putting the function of the library at risk in its existence. The technology developments are not evenly spread around the globe but users in societies, long cut off of easy access to information, face an avalanche of possibilities to get access to information resources free and simple. The seismic shift in the last 5 years in the use of mobile devices created opportunities to have a library in your hand. In this article it is argued that the role of libraries, as we know them now, is under immense pressure to change course as a result of advanced technology developments. Despite statistics showing an increase in visits to libraries (see appendix 2), they mask the undeniable trend that visitors use the library facilities but not for lending and reading books from the library. The current technology developments empower users to bypass academic, corporate and institutional libraries in fulfilling their information needs and to form part of knowledge exchange networks. To paraphrase New York Times editor Thomas Friedman: ‘we are still at the beginning of the technology revolution’, resonates very well with the projected technology revolution. This technology revolution upon us will shape the future role print, libraries, and news as advocated by many specialists. Some believe libraries will shift into knowledge sharing and learning environments and others think that libraries remain centerpiece in various information transactions. Perhaps it will change the physical library space for cataloging and loaning books — to houses of validated and trustworthy information sources and demonstration areas of information technology (Huffington Post., 2011). The traditional ‘push’ model typical of traditional libraries will change rapidly to ‘information on demand’ services. Clearly, within this context, public and institutional libraries will need to re-invent themselves to remain relevant to their users. The changed environment forces libraries to be more innovative and deliver more advanced services attuned to information needs of clients (Mangual, A., 2015). Over the year’s libraries have adopted new models to respond to the changed information needs of users. The actions identified in this article are a first step to shift libraries away from its industrial age, supply driven and production based model towards a service model based on demand. In a sense, this is learning by doing; an experiment and attempt to achieve...