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The Constant Innovator: A New Organizational Mode of Experimentation

Megan Hodge

Virginia Commonwealth University, mlhodge@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Hodge, M. (2013.) The Constant Innovator: A New Organizational Mode of Experimentation. In E. Frierson and K. Leeder (Eds.), *Planning Our Future Libraries: Blueprints for 2025*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

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Planning Our Future Libraries

Blueprints for 2025

Kim Leeder &
Eric Frierson

Editors



An Imprint of the American Library Association

Chicago 2014

Eric Frierson is a Discovery Services Engineer at EBSCO Publishing. He is formerly the head of Library Systems at St. Edward's University library, a reference and instruction librarian at the University of Texas at Arlington, and an instructional technology librarian at the University of Michigan. Frierson holds a Master of Science in Information from the University of Michigan and a bachelor's degree in computer science and English, and is a former high school teacher. His interest in library leadership stems from participation in Texas Library Association's TALL Texans program and the American Library Association's Emerging Leaders program.

Kim Leeder is director of library services at the College of Western Idaho and a co-founder of *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. Since earning her master's degree in information resources and library science at the University of Arizona in 2006, she has worked in reference, instruction, and administration at several academic and public libraries. Leeder has been recognized as an ALA Emerging Leader (2008) and a *Library Journal* Mover and Shaker (2011). She is actively involved in the American Library Association and the Association of College and Research Libraries.

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Printed in the United States of America
18 17 16 15 14 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN: 978-0-8389-1207-2 (paper) — PDF ISBN: 978-0-8389-9686-7
ePub ISBN: 978-0-8389-9688-1 — Kindle ISBN: 978-0-8389-9687-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data {~?~TN: to come}

Cover design by Kimberly Thornton. Images © Shutterstock, Inc.
Text design and composition in the Gotham and Charis SIL typefaces by Scribe, Inc.

♻️ This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

Contents

Introduction	vii
Part 1: Embracing Participation	
1 Redesigning Library Services Again: Revisiting Buckland's Manifesto <i>Brett Bonfield</i>	3
2 Radical Trust: A User-Librarian Shared Model <i>Dave Harmeyer</i>	15
Part 2: Reimagining Spaces	
3 Meaningful Space in a Digital Age <i>Ben Malczewski</i>	29
4 The Faculty Commons: Reimagining the Intellectual Heart of Campus <i>Krisellen Maloney</i>	41
5 Free-Range Librarianship: Public Librarian as Park Ranger <i>Hugh Rundle</i>	55
Part 3: Building New Infrastructure	
6 The Constant Innovator: A New Organizational Mode of Experimentation <i>Megan Hodge</i>	71
7 The Future of Funding: A Proposal for a National Library Card <i>John Chrastka</i>	83
Part 4: The Global Future	
8 International School Libraries: Current Status and Future Vision <i>Lesley Farmer</i>	95
Appendix <i>Redesigning Library Services: A Manifesto</i> (Abridged) <i>Michael Buckland</i>	109
About the Contributors	121
Index	123

THE CONSTANT INNOVATOR

A New Organizational Mode of Experimentation

Megan Hodge

Libraries are slow to change. Regardless of the reasons, whether due to administrative red tape, slow publishing processes, or an actual reluctance to change, this sluggishness is no longer tenable. While caution may have served libraries well in the past, it is now a hindrance rather than an asset: the profession is unable to take advantage of new technologies and is failing to adapt to dramatic cultural shifts. Librarians are already questioning their relevance in today's society, and library patrons are questioning it as well. Libraries have become unmoored from their core mission, are unsure of which route to take and what initiatives to pursue, and have as a result lost key opportunities to influence popular culture and perception. The public has noticed.

Herbert Gerjoux stated, "Tomorrow's illiterate will not be the man who can't read; he will be the man who has not learned how to learn" (cited in Toffler 1970, 414). Similarly, libraries are in danger of becoming like a man who cannot learn because they are too slow to embrace change. Like many institutions that were created during the bricks-and-mortar era, libraries still have an "internal constituency" of people who are afraid or unwilling to acknowledge that the information landscape has changed and that libraries must change with it (Surowiecki 2010). As Jason Griffey (2011) notes, "Experiences become expectations. The experiences that our patrons have with . . . gadgets and gizmos set their expectations for their interaction with information. We need to be watching the leading edge of the bell curve of technology so that by the time these things become embedded in our patrons' lives it doesn't take us a decade to find a way to provide library services that they recognize."

Countless brick-and-mortar stores (including sometimes library rival Barnes and Noble) have discovered that convenience trumps all. "If products are available conveniently enough and cheaply enough online," write Smith

and Pickett (2011, 41), “customers don’t care about or need a physical store and all the accoutrements that go with it.” In the early days of computers, libraries made a good-faith effort to increase convenience by transitioning from the card catalog to the online public access catalog (OPAC), but efforts have since lagged. Librarians who doubt the need for prompt action should take heed from Blockbuster’s fate (Cohan 2010). In retrospect it is easy to see how Netflix won out over Blockbuster: one has a limited selection and requires a trip to the store; the other has a seemingly endless selection, unprecedented convenience, no need to leave home, and no late fees.

This does not mean, however, that all libraries should move to an online model. Regardless of the need to innovate and update core goals and missions, libraries across the country (and indeed world) serve very different demographics. Libraries could take many different physical and virtual forms. For example, in both densely and sparsely populated areas, libraries could set up bestseller book kiosks along the lines of Redbox in places where either there isn’t enough space for a branch or usage wouldn’t be high enough to justify a staffed building. Other libraries could take the shape of Internet cafés where people without computers or Internet access at home can complete job applications, check Facebook, and meet clients and friends, perhaps with a staff member on hand to answer questions and troubleshoot the inevitable printer problems. The mobile version of a library’s website might simply serve as an “online store” where virtual reference and e-books are provided. In the many places in the United States where the public library remains the only provider of broadband Internet, libraries will more often take the shape of computer warehouses; in busy, space-limited cities, they may appear as kiosks in mass transit stations (Horrigan 2007).

A Call to Action: Taking Charge of Our Professional Destiny

Currently libraries are at the mercy of many factors outside their control: the economy, changing ideas about how to find information, and rapidly evolving technology. They are also affected by the pricing and limitations of the software—fundamental to providing basic services such as databases, integrated library systems (ILSs), and e-book delivery—that vendors provide. This is one area, at least, where libraries can regain control. It is up to librarians to take the initiative and create the software and services required to meet patron needs rather than waiting for vendors to come up with expensive solutions, especially when those solutions often fall short in providing the usability and user experience that libraries need and patrons expect. As Anthony Molaro (2012) put it, “Are the systems being designed for the user, or do we

design users for the system?” Who better understands the needs of library patrons than librarians? Database interfaces, for example, are notoriously complex; many library schools offer a class in database searching for just this reason. Librarians spend countless hours teaching patrons how to use these databases, when a more logical approach would be to start from scratch and design an interface that is effective and easy to use.

In addition to continuing services that align closely with their core mission, libraries would do well to be forward-thinking and proactive instead of reactive. Immersed in a culture that values convenience above all, libraries should be looking at how to make services more convenient to patrons. For instance, they could deliver books by mail as a literary version of Netflix. They could focus on digitizing niche collections belonging to local publications and dignitaries, television and radio stations, and amateur collectors. As Alexis Madrigal (2011) stated, “Get that stuff out of the basement and put it online for free, where people can link to, remix, and use it. But don’t just dump it there. Take advantage of what the web can do. Structure the work . . . so that people can improve on your collection.” At the bare minimum, this could consist simply of hosting a space in the form of a local wiki or Flickr stream, such as the Library of Congress and National Library of Australia are doing. Libraries could become a place where “you go to generate ideas in the first place,” innovation labs that are free and open to the public (Rundle 2011). These labs would be stocked with software and equipment (e.g., Photoshop and poster and 3D model printers) too expensive for the average person to own, and could be utilized by small businesses as well as individuals. Fayetteville (NY) Public Library’s “Fab Lab” is an example of what’s possible even now. Think about the possible return on investment on that service.

Overall, libraries should focus on anticipating what patrons want and work on meeting those needs immediately, rather than waiting years to see what trends will win out and then waiting again for vendors to create a service that meets those needs. This is not as outlandish as it might seem at first; there is a precedent for libraries—admittedly, large and well-staffed ones—in providing solutions for widespread problems that have been adopted at nearly every library in the country. For example, most libraries do not perform much original cataloging anymore; they use information provided by the Library of Congress. The Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) developed WorldCat .org, a one-stop shop where many library catalogs are shared and that made interlibrary loan incalculably easier.

Some libraries are already working on taking the ball out of the vendors’ court. Koha and Evergreen are open source ILSs developed by libraries and extensible by other libraries, unlike other vendor-created ILSs that do

not allow modification. The Kansas State Librarian is working on an alternative e-book platform, while the Darien Library in Connecticut provides a print-on-demand service for works that are self-published or in the public domain (Kelley 2001). Librarian Jim Blanton of the Chesapeake Central Library in Virginia is cofounder of ePublish or Bust, a project designed to eliminate the publisher middleman and to enable patrons to go from book concept to published work—all at their library. These are just a few examples of libraries taking control of their patrons' needs without waiting for vendor solutions.

Libraries can no longer simply provide access to information. In order to remain relevant and needed, they must do something more. As Grant (2012) points out, "We have to think about where we're adding value to that information so that when delivered to the user/member that value is recognized. Then we need to make that value part of our brand." Where do libraries add value? They help transform information into usable knowledge, as is stated explicitly in the Chesterfield County (VA) Public Library's mission statement: "Transforming data and information into usable knowledge." For all their ease of use, this is something that Google and Wikipedia cannot claim to do.

Google: A Model for Managing Innovation

Libraries continue to be underfunded and understaffed, which makes finding the time and money to create new services difficult. Many libraries have experienced layoffs, making the provision of even the bare minimum, quotidian services such as circulation and reference problematic. But in order to remain relevant and to continue providing those services that patrons will recognize as valuable now rather than 20 years ago, the time to generate, flesh out, implement, and share ideas must come from somewhere.

Some academic libraries already do this on a smaller scale by employing "emerging technologies" librarians. These librarians work with faculty and students to determine their needs, scan the literature and social media horizon for ideas, evaluate the ideas for fit within the institution, create and deliver services or tools, and make sure faculty and staff are aware of their offerings. The library of the future will look at emerging trends and technologies as well, but in a more expansive and replicable way. It is not feasible for all libraries and library systems to have an entire staff person devoted to generating big ideas; it may not even be desirable because different librarians at the same institution can have very different opinions about the same services. Frontline staff are more likely to be aware of problems in the delivery of everyday services, while technicians and administrators will be familiar with the history of such problems, attempts made to address them, and technical

limitations. A superior way to innovate is by gathering a varied mix of people to think about problems and solutions in much the same way that variety enhances a species gene pool.

Getting everyone from frontline staff up to administrators on board and actively innovating is time-consuming and could disrupt the daily functions of a library. This time must be managed somehow, and indeed there is a way. Google's "20 percent time" is an inspiring model for allocating time for innovation at a sustainable level over the long term. According to Google itself, many of its best ideas, such as Gmail and AdSense, are products of 20 percent time. There are caveats, of course: the projects must be "company related" so employees can't spend a full day working on something that will be turned into their own private business. Twenty percent of a full-time employee's workweek is eight hours, or one full workday. Trying to squeeze in an hour here and an hour there to think is probably never going to happen; meetings run over, a patron has just one more question, and too many distractions clamor for attention. Having a full eight hours, on the other hand, is analogous to having parentheses on either side of one's day: a closed office door protecting one from the minutiae that pop up just from walking across the building. Another advantage to a 20 percent time program is the ability to work from home. Telecommuting is an increasingly desirable alternative work arrangement that has the additional bonus of boosting employee morale (Mariani 2000). Alternatively, one's 20 percent time could be used to meet with a group and collaborate.

Group work is an important part of how Google handles its 20 percent time. Work in grouplets (Google-speak for "teams") happens "when the thing you really want to work on is to make a broad change across the whole organization, [and] you need something new. . . . These grouplets have practically no budget, and they have no decision-making authority. What they have is a bunch of people who are committed to an idea and willing to work to convince the rest of the company to adopt it" (Mediratta and Bick 2007). These parameters—a limited or nonexistent budget and the need for a broad change—align perfectly with library needs and resources. This shift in management style from independent work and decision making to collaborative processes can improve function at the individual library level, too.

Julie Hildebrand, director of the Independence (KS) Public Library, credits such a shift for the changes that resulted in the library winning *Library Journal's* Best Small Library in America award in 2012: "Staff are now encouraged to participate together on projects, express new ideas, and ask for help from other members of the team. Each staffer has a set of primary duties, but creativity and innovation come when they help one another with new programs

and projects” (Berry 2001). As Hildebrand told *Library Journal*, “the library was dying” when she was promoted to its directorship in 2009 (Berry 2012). With financial conditions mirroring those of many libraries across the country and world, cuts needed to be made. Hildebrand and her staff of seven effected a dramatic turnaround in two years, largely through a change in management style from autocratic to participatory. Hildebrand calls this the “key” to the Independence Public Library transformation. Instead of management making all the decisions on what needed to be changed, all staff became part of the solution. By accepting the possibility of failure—a necessary corollary of encouraging innovation—and allowing staff to step outside their job-prescribed boundaries, this library’s staff found the motivation and ability not only to improve their circumstances but also to win a major award in the process. Some examples of fantastic projects other librarians have come up with on their own time include Jason Griffey’s LibraryBox and the State Library of Queensland’s Libraryhack competition. Given the time and support, even one librarian can do something amazing.

Perhaps the most important aspect of effective national and international innovation is sharing ideas in a timely fashion. If one library comes up with an excellent new service, that library’s patrons will of course be thrilled, but that is not enough. One of the library profession’s greatest strengths is its willingness to share great ideas; libraries are not in competition with one another and the success of one does not injure that of another, even that of a neighbor. Of course libraries already share ideas through conference presentations and journal articles, and more informally through personal blog posts and social media, but the former methods are too slow and the latter either reach too small an audience or have a limited forum in which to expound and explain. Alternatives are needed.

The Practicalities: How All This Will Work

While it is not the place of this chapter to describe the nuts and bolts of how such a transformation will be achieved, the practicalities of how a shift in work distribution and practices will happen must be discussed to move this concept from theory to possibility.

First, buy-in at the highest levels of library administration is key. While it is important that library staff at all levels embrace the importance of transformation, workflow changes and staff redistribution simply will not happen without buy-in from the top down. Library leaders and managers must acknowledge, in an Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*-like moment, that libraries are at a tipping point and that idea generation and service creation are critical

for the profession's continued existence and relevancy. Librarians are already skilled at putting the needs of the individual and theoretical, such as privacy, over those of the corporate and tangible, so it is not such a stretch to put the needs of the library as an institution above those of the individual library from which a librarian receives a paycheck. It is vital that employees receive not only permission but also encouragement to pursue such projects.

Library administrators need not worry about their subordinates aimlessly wandering the Internet searching for ideas. Elisabeth Doucett (2010) has come up with an excellent strategy for finding, identifying, selecting, and obtaining good ideas. It may be challenging to determine which technologies will become part of library patrons' quotidian lives and which are simply fads, but predictive research, such as Gartner's *Hype Cycle for Emerging Technologies*, will help. Each year, Gartner Research publishes visual and narrative reports that "provide a graphic representation of the maturity and adoption of technologies and applications, and how they are potentially relevant to solving real business problems and exploiting new opportunities," tracking various technologies from their "trigger" to a "plateau of productivity" (Gartner Research, n.d.). These reports are published online for free every year, and its *Hype Cycle for Emerging Technologies* is especially useful for librarians. A similar resource is the Horizon Report (Higher Ed edition) published annually by the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative and the New Media Consortium. Taking the conjecture out of determining what is a fad and what is the future will enable librarians to become proactive, instead of reactive, by creating solutions for problems that don't yet exist.

Next, libraries of all types must create a vision to strive toward. The profession is currently in a state of flux, a condition not unlike a midlife crisis: Who are we? What do we do? Many groups have been working on creating a vision for libraries, but unless these questions are addressed first, libraries will continue to flounder, exhausting limited resources on services that users do not expect and do not use. Cutting tangential services will free up resources necessary to implement the library's vision. As Carl Grant (2012) notes, "Our end goal should always be to become the best at providing those [core] services for our library members." Creating this vision will also save time and energy that would otherwise be spent fixing historical library problems that will not apply to the library of the future. The management philosophy known as High Performance Teams works quite well in these conditions, since it operates assuming a desire to effect "major change." As Katzenbach (1994) puts it, "What sets apart [this managerial philosophy] is the degree of commitment, particularly how deeply committed the members are to one another. . . . Such commitments extend beyond company activities and even

beyond the life of the team itself.” According to this philosophy, managers set an example for their employees and “think from the right” about the ideal that the institution is striving toward, where the library’s current state is on the left and its vision is on the right. Contrasting the ideal with the current reality exposes the gap between existing services and practices and the institution’s goals. Instead of remaining mired in fixing the myriad problems that crop up in the daily function of a library, staff can instead focus on how to make the paradigm a reality.

An additional way to think proactively instead of reactively, though this time on a more local rather than universal basis, is to hire a firm or to purchase software that will conduct in-depth customer research into the library’s patron base. This sort of research is necessary to determine how librarians should focus their grouplet work time. Traditional methods of obtaining customer feedback, such as surveys, are extremely limited in their ability to reveal how patrons behave and what they need. In one well-known example, university students often clamor for their libraries to operate 24/7, but the libraries that actually accede to these requests often find that the building remains unused during the late night hours. Patrons may like the idea of a service, such as around-the-clock hours, but an expressed wish does not predict future usage. Contracting a customer research firm or purchasing customer research software “helps the library understand where patrons live, what transactions they are making, where they make those transactions, how they are behaving, what their lifestyles are. . . . It answers the questions, ‘Who are we serving? Who are we not serving?’ ‘Who do we need to serve?’ and ‘Are our service strategies matching the population?’ ” (Miller, Fialkoff, and Kelley 2012). Obtaining this information will enable the library to connect with all the physical and virtual spaces where its patrons spend their time, so new services will be known and utilized.

Achieving transformation does not require the upending of all established workflows; on the contrary, many suggestions described here are already happening at individual libraries. For example, libraries of all types have noticed a reduction in the number of reference questions that come their way. Where once librarians handled reference by triage, patrons now rely on free, web-based services like Google and Wikipedia. Rather than reacting with dismay to a reduction in reference desk needs, librarians can look at the bright side: increased time to work on projects. Less expensive library clerks or student workers can replace librarians at the desk, as indeed they already have in many libraries, to answer ready reference questions and refer more complex ones to a librarian. Even without a pressing need for change, paying a professional librarian \$20 an hour to “hang around waiting to help people

read spine labels” is arguably not the best use of taxpayer or tuition dollars (Rundle 2011).

The Google grouplets model of organized innovation takes advantage of one of the most wonderful characteristics innate to our profession: to share, rather than hoard, good ideas that work. Currently, this sharing of ideas takes place informally through word of mouth, Twitter, and blogs, and formally through journal articles and conference presentations. These methods all have serious drawbacks, discussed previously, that prevent them from being utilized as media through which to share instantaneous, useful information. However, these methods are the only substantial ways in which librarians share ideas and collaborate. Even at the institutional level, how many libraries—or organizations of any type—have a reliable, accessible medium through which to disseminate success stories? On the other end of the spectrum there is the librarian “in the field,” working “largely in isolation on a daily basis,” encountering the same challenges as her colleagues in the library the next town or state over (Rundle 2011). Not all of these problems are worth discussing at the conference or peer-reviewed-article level, but these librarians would certainly benefit from increased collaboration with their peers. As Steve Matthews (2011) points out, “Doesn’t sharing experiences with colleagues equate to professional development? Who doesn’t need professional development?”

What is needed is a centralized conduit through which information can pass so librarians need not read dozens or hundreds of different information feeds. This conduit could be a centralized repository, a Library of Congress of good ideas. Publishing all submissions would quickly result in information overload, so the conduit’s moderators could publish the best of the best and store honorable mentions in a searchable digital warehouse. Ideally, this conduit would be able to share information quickly and inexpensively and organize ideas by topic: readers’ advisory, collection management, and so on. The Netherlands-based Internet TV series *This Week in Libraries*, which “features global library news and interviews with individuals involved in library innovation,” is already doing something along these lines (“Global Reach” 2010). Such a conduit, whether an Internet television series, a podcast, or a news feed blog with quick links, could become a Channel One for librarians, where watching the latest installment at the start of every workday or week could be obligatory, as it is for many of today’s schoolchildren.

Conclusion

Bogged down by bureaucracy and professional caution, libraries in general move too slowly to embrace new technologies and cultural shifts. The current

challenge to librarians is to take the initiative and create the software and services required to meet patron needs rather than waiting for vendors to come up with solutions and then paying exorbitant amounts of money for those solutions. However, libraries continue to be underfunded and understaffed, making finding the time and money to create these services difficult. In the library of the future, there will be acknowledgment at the highest levels of library administration that idea generation and service creation are vital for the continued existence and relevance of the individual library and the profession at large. All staff will be expected and encouraged to use one workday, or roughly 20 percent of their time, to work on forward-thinking projects each week.

Librarians will return from these weekly grouplet work sessions rejuvenated and excited about ideas that can be implemented in their libraries. On these workdays, library staff will either teleconference with their colleagues around the nation and world or meet face-to-face to collaborate. There will be official clearinghouses (adaptations of sites like Dolores' List of CFPs and ALA Connect's Opportunities Exchange) where project ideas will be posted when collaborators are needed, and depending on the size and prestige of the project, appointment to some of these projects will be competitive. Library staff will also be able to develop grouplets organically through informal means.

Once projects are ready for beta testing, project librarians' home institutions will have first dibs on trying them. Projects that require additional libraries or different library types will also be posted to the central clearinghouse, with applications as necessary for the more prestigious projects. Completed projects would then be published to the global library news outlet.

The benefits of adopting a Google grouplets model of innovation are many. Libraries will no longer be bogged down by bureaucracy and professional caution, unable to adapt quickly to new technologies and cultural shifts. They will be able to take the initiative and create the software and services they need. Libraries continue to be underfunded and understaffed, but by distributing the time for innovation among all current staff members, they will have more time and money to create new services and hire new staff. Staff will enjoy improved morale because they will grow beyond their quotidian duties and become invested in the big picture of the profession. As Mediratta notes, "It sounds obvious, but people work better when they're involved in something they're passionate about" (Mediratta and Bick 2007). Most important, the profession will be nimbler and more dynamic, more effectively staying ahead of trends and providing services that not only meet the needs of patrons but also amaze them.

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