

The library of the future

By Maqsood Ahmad Shaheen

THE first signal of change in any environment is the change of knowledge. Once knowledge is updated, adaptation to change becomes easier. The library at every centre of learning must essentially be the first to herald in change, because this is where knowledge is gathered, integrated and finally put to test in real life conditions.

For several years now, a quiet revolution has been storming the reading room in every library across the world. The revolution is called 'Change Management': learning to cope with change, thereby introducing new and better concepts to manage it. In moving from being just information storehouses, to becoming active participants in the learning process, libraries have gained more importance in the minds of people all over the world.

Today, in-house electronic access and remote access are easy ways of accessing the archives of

any topic, and have become vital for anyone who banks on research information. Providing these services with limited financial and human resources often proves a daunting task for libraries.

Instead of asking whether or not libraries will be around in 2101, we should be asking, "What will they be like? How will they function?" If we insist on tilting them to the expensive tech model, we should assume some will be phased out, others will merge, and still others will sprout technology-based storefronts. The first question that comes up is what to do with physical collections and their role in the future. Digital versus print spending has steadily risen, and today digital makes up 52 per cent of content purchases worldwide.

All decisions about future libraries need to be in the context of what users want and need. Largely, users prefer to use online sources to find their information, while a visit to the physical library is well down the list.

First choice: online

People conducting research go online first, and they are increasingly becoming self-sufficient. Further, they are very satisfied with this arrangement. When asked

how they prefer to get information, information seekers express an overwhelming preference to look for it themselves. The next most popular way to get information is through regular updates (alerts).

Self-seeking of information is not necessarily an online activity, but at a deeper level, those who exhibit this preference do strongly favor online media.

The majority of information seekers begin their self-seeking activity on the open Internet, seeking free content. The next most prevalent preference is to get information from their organization's intranet. On the other hand, going to a physical library is only the fifth most common preference. It becomes very clear that the information user preference is self-seeking via online tools available at the desktop.

Fast delivery: electronic

Most people say they prefer to seek and receive information in an electronic format (internet, intranet, e-mail, other electronic formats) or by telephone. Very few say print is their preferred medium for seeking and receiving information. The shift to a print preference comes when

information seekers are asked how they prefer to use the information once they have found it.

The challenge

As libraries work to achieve this anytime/anywhere access, they struggle to allocate limited resources in a way that supports the reality of today while laying a foundation for the future. This means shifting money and staff from traditional library functions (including maintenance of the physical library and print collection) to digital content, deployment technologies, and supporting services. This entails managing your function and its offerings' life cycle and migrating offerings to meet changing market needs.

A common misconception is that eliminating a physical library in favor of a virtual one will result in cost savings. In fact, studies at international level have shown that libraries which have "gone virtual" have moderately higher budgets than those that haven't, but there's still a payoff for making the shift.

This payoff comes in the critical cost-per-user ratio, which shows that, because virtual libraries have wider reach than physical ones, more users are benefiting from the resources dedicated to the electronic collections than is the case in traditional libraries. Becoming virtual makes the library

accessible and attractive to a host of new users who otherwise would not patronize it.

Virtualization of library facilities has increased cooperation, as well. Online finding aids and request systems have enhanced lending among campus libraries. The "union catalog" concept has reached its natural conclusion, aided by network technology.

The future

S. R. Ranganathan's five laws of library science are still practicable in this electronic age. Here are some common attributes of the library of the future:

1. The geographic difference of the user and the information is not important. Users can get information, wherever it is.
2. The library's goal is access, not ownership. Information is provided "just in time," rather than being collected and owned "just in case."
3. Information relevant to a particular user market is integrated and organized, making it accessible at the point of need.
4. The information professional's role is one of trusted advisor, consultant, teacher, and facilitator. A "do with" rather than a "do for" philosophy predominates. The users' information literacy becomes paramount.
5. The librarian is a gateway, not a gatekeeper.
6. Physical libraries are collaborative spaces, not just print collections.

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Ranganathan



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