



Rafting in a library: Navigating the development of new tools and services

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Abstract:

Working in a public library and being under 30 is a lot like an extreme sport: You have to be adventurous and determined, love challenges and adrenaline rush, but always bear in mind that whatever you do will be worthwhile in the end.

Overcoming generation and attitude barriers in introducing distance learning via Moodle, real time education with web based software or QR codes embedded in the stacks was a task that Belgrade City Library's young professionals carried out successfully.

This paper shows what happens behind-the-scenes: where young professionals find their inspiration, how they carve new paths in library development, how they strive to support the library, to increase awareness of and access to its vast resources and to enhance its vital role in Belgrade municipalities.

Introduction

We are all aware that for the last ten years librarianship has been going through a number of changes. Fast development of social media in early 2000s and e-book readers at the end of the first decade had a significant impact on libraries and their services. Nowadays librarians cannot simply work on cataloguing or just be an expert in subject headings. As a librarian in all types of library settings you have to listen to users' needs and invest in self-education if you want to stay current with emerging trends and technologies in the world of libraries. Sometimes that can be very easy for young librarians who just entered the profession full with enthusiasm and willingness to learn new things. But if you have spent the last 20 or so years in an office surrounded with books and without direct contact with library users you will be shocked when you open the doors of your office and make a step into the

new user oriented librarianship (small step for a man but huge for a librarian). Shock will kind of look like this: Nothing is the same as it used to be twenty years ago. Libraries managed to get rid of that specific smell. Little kids are running around the library making noise, some people even eat and drink coffee!? What happened to the card catalog? Why do we have comfortable and colorful furniture?! etc. After the initial shock, the “old school” librarian rushes back to the office, closes the door and then tries to convince him/herself that everything was a bad dream.

Does this scenario sound familiar to you?

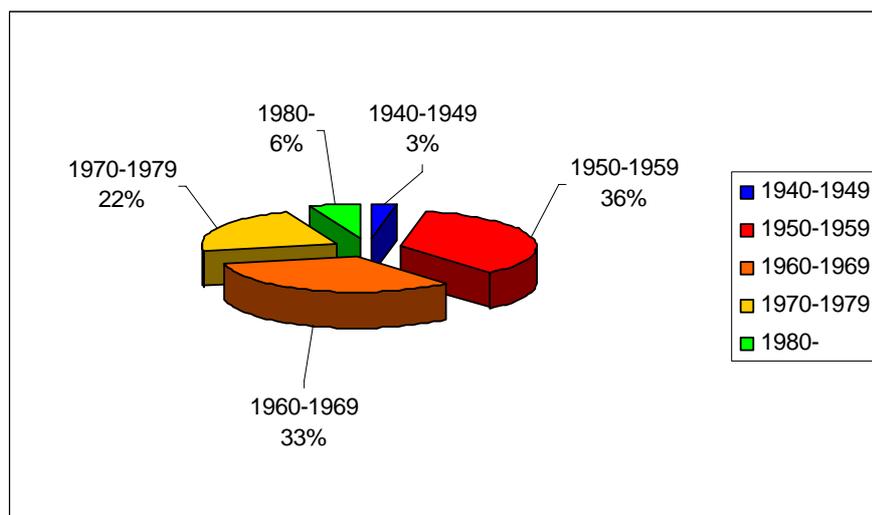
In every library there is at least a couple of librarians who still give the priority to library collections and not to the users. Usually they are very skeptical when fresh blood arrives to the library. At the beginning they can regard us as an enemy, but with positive approach and passion for our jobs we can still ignite a sparkle in them.

Briefly about the Belgrade City Library

Belgrade City Library (BCL) was founded in 1929 and since then it has gone throughout many organizational and structural changes. Today, BCL represents the largest public library network in Southeast Europe. It includes the central library, 13 municipal libraries, 70 branches and around 275 employees covering 2 million city residents. In the past several years, the BCL has been proactively involved in redefining the role and perception of the libraries in Serbia. We also started with education of our staff which further led to education of library users.

Belgrade City Library’s Development and IT Department is in charge of introducing innovative practices and creating richer patrons’ and librarians’ experience.

Staff structure is very interesting (chart below). The majority of employees is older than 50 years, followed by the 40+ and at the end there is just 6% of people younger than 30.



Picture 1: Age structure of staff in BCL

Most of our staff belongs to the baby boomer generation. They are close to retirement and usually are not able to keep up with the changes in their jobs or work environment.

Collision of generations

Wikipedia defines us (Generation X and Millennial Generation) as a generation that “is generally marked by an increased use and familiarity with communications, media, and digital technologies”. The biggest distinction between us and baby boomers is that since we are born we are almost our whole life surrounded with computers. We do not believe that bibliographic data will disappear one day when the system crashes.

We are familiar with technology by nature, but bearing in mind the enormous amount of information that can be found out there on the web, where do young professionals search for information? First, each person will search for the information in their fields of interest. My interest is education of librarians (helping them bridge the technological gap) and users with the help of new technologies. I wanted to find some way for reducing the duplicate of effort in BCL.

How to keep course

It is easier to bring information to your inbox than to search for them every day. How to get most constant up to date information?

With use of RSS feeds we can easily stay in touch with many blogs, web sites, etc. Another useful tool is the mailing list. IFLA has many divisions and most of them have their own mailing lists, also ALA has numerous mailing lists. Subscribing is very simple and once you are subscribed you can communicate with colleagues from all around the globe. Lists are very useful in terms of when you have some dilemma in your library or you are not sure how to implement new policies or services you can always send an e-mail to the list and in a short amount of time you get plenty of advices or best practices. The LinkedIn social network for professionals has many discussion groups which are also valuable sources for networking and information exchange.

Belgrade City Library in rapids

In the last year we have set some new trends by implementing:

- Distance education
- ILS maintenance
- Virtual reference
- QR codes

Distance education and ILS maintenance

In recent years, staff trainings were conducted through traditional onsite courses and seminars. Such trainings showed low impact due to organizational barriers. Due to such a widespread library network, it was impossible to hold trainings without closing some of the branches. This hurdle also resulted in poor frequency of sessions. Software development and the modernization of BCL’s IT network brought us a solution to the problems through distance learning tools. In September 2010, we decided to test internet-based software for the remote support and online presentations for one month and identify positive and negative effects using cost-benefit analysis. After the first test-training on local ILS

advanced features, the results clearly showed that future usage would reduce costs and increase staff motivation. Furthermore, we developed a strategy on a number of levels for staff and patron trainings, which will especially be beneficial to those with disabilities or time constraints. Having compared the price of a perpetual license for the software with expenditures related to organizing traditional trainings (closing the branches, staff travel costs, printed materials, refreshments, etc.), we have realized that distance learning has come to the rescue to save training costs and improve the quality and frequency of instruction for our staff and patrons. Basically the software is very simple. There is one lecturer and others just log on their computers. Sessions can be recorded and played later or reused for other groups of employees. After the first usage we have received positive reactions from library staff which gave us additional motivation for developing new courses.

Another advantage of that software is remote IT support which is very practical for maintaining the integrated library system (we have a lot of small server units in our library network). Instead of time consuming out of office work our IT department now can fix almost everything from the central building.

BCL is also a partner in Access IT 2007-2013 project. Access IT is a project related to the library digitization and it has a goal to improve digitization process in the countries where progress in this area is currently limited. For that purpose we have developed a Moodle platform which will enable us to share digitization experience with colleagues throughout the country.

Virtual reference

Growing demands for reference services pushed us to search for a reliable on line solution. We decided to buy OCLCs Question Point. After a good marketing campaign the number of service users gradually started to grow. We are still working on the implementation of chat sessions. Users are in need for fast and reliable information, and through Question Point we can provide both. Question Point works like a sophisticated e-mail service with option to store/extract questions and answers in Knowledge base (global and local base of answered questions).

QR Codes

A pilot project was launched in our development department. In that department we have a special collection of books related to library science. Some of those books are held in lockers with non-transparent doors. The idea was to create QR codes which will hold the information about the books in certain locker. QR readers are installed on staff mobile phones and now they can faster browse through collection. Also we are planning to put them in the library catalog and the art exhibitions.

Who is rafting now?

Once they master the basic internet skills, baby boomers can still be very progressive and useful workers. We had great response on distance education

because it is much quicker and more direct than seminar sessions. After a couple of months we started to receive feedback with suggestions to improve some segments of education. That was really great because most of the feedback came from older employees who were more willing to improve things and to get more involved.

Baby boomers have a lot of experience in traditional reference work. We combined their experience with the new technologies in order to expand our services. When we receive a specific question through Question Point reference service we often forward them to some of our experienced colleagues. They enjoyed research work and gradually they get more and more involved in tech part of the service.

After the initial spark you have to water the seed that's been planted in the heads of traditional librarians. Some of them will find that "new librarianship" is too demanding for them and in months to come they will probably retire. Others will be motivated to learn more and to get themselves more involved in new library services. Young librarians can still learn a lot from our older counterparts and of course at the same time they can learn from us - sometimes the technology is the thing what makes the bond between us.