

Breaking with tradition

By Danielle LaFrance.

"Why did we decide to break with tradition?" is a question Vancouver Public Library's session, aptly titled "Breaking with tradition," asked themselves. VPL used their time to describe the one-year old transition from a traditional desk-bound service to a multiple access point, or roving reference, approach to information service. Dawn Ibey, Sophie Middleton, Pippa Rogers, Lianne Watt, and Yukiko Tosa shared their perspectives on the transition and together illustrated what this new mobile information service model currently looks like. Considering many libraries nationwide are either in the midst of such a transition or in the process of brainstorming, this session was valuable for identifying what works, what doesn't, and what needs to be reevaluated.

VPL's decision to make changes to the way they approach service did not happen in isolation. Referencing Sandra Singh's paper on pressures public libraries face to provide service in a rapidly changing and in-flux information environment, a completely distinct way to meet patron's needs beckoned the managers beyond a mere tweak. The decrease in reference statistics was a particular reality VPL contended with as well as recognizing the ways in which the interests of patron's had changed over time. Reorganizing the collection to a single Dewey run, developing all new departments, changing staff models, and recognizing the demand for new technologies and digital literacy was the infrastructure for an entirely new business model.

What were the major changes spatially? Rather than greeted by a librarian locked to the information desk, patrons access information by way of the call centre and chat, directly to librarians as a scheduled one-on-one session or can be found by a rover. Staff communication and workflow is contingent upon chat software as the roving system involves leading patrons to the exact source which can leave empty staffing gaps on floors. It isn't called a Mission Control position for nothing! With staff equipped with iPads on their hips searching for titles, who will be keeping up with who now?

Speakers addressed how scheduling has taken up a lot of coordination as staff can be assigned to nine different service points at the Central Branch. The mention of additional staffing hours was a hopeful note, as it not only ensures more community

engagement but more opportunities for new librarians to enter their careers.

Flexibility is key in this model especially as issues arise. Speakers were keen to disclose the heartache of the flip with staff anxieties and stress levels high. The transition marked an opportunity to assess the subject competencies of staff and identify the staff members with deep subject experience. Often this type of roll out involves trepidation over the disablement of knowledge specialization. VPL ensured inclusion of staff in the decision-making was a precedent and was mindful of overloading staff with too much information and training in order to work towards staff strengths.

It's important to note the transition did not involve a "practice run" and "best practices" took place as they rolled out. The illustration this session presented was necessarily complex, because so much of the shift from old to new was going on in tandem. For instance, the redesigning of new signifiers (an open, unhinged space) to promote connectivity was a challenge when patrons had a long-term relationship to old signifiers (the information desk). The advent of new technologies and new digital environments does not have to entail a complete over throw with tradition. Patron's criticisms have been listened to with great attention while also keeping in mind the initial agency for the change: better serving patrons in a changing world.

There is one thing to talk about change and another thing to make that change. Any spatial shifts to the traditional structure of the library are rightly met with hesitation, as it is often the last free and public space available. In writing this, the amount of mindfulness and thought involved in VPL's process was a significant take away for participants during the session. Not all branches are similar just as not all public libraries are similar. It will be interesting to see how VPL's roving reference model influences other systems and vice versa. "We are still a work in progress."

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