

E-Government and Employment Support Services

Addressing Challenges for Public Libraries

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Abstract

As more employers and government agencies provide information exclusively in a digital format, communities rely on public library staff and technology services more than ever. At the same time, libraries are also facing demands due to reduced budgets and staffing. This chapter of The Transforming Public Library Technology Infrastructure provides data, tools, and best practices to help libraries address and overcome service challenges.

Major Challenges

According to the *2010–2011 Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey*, 80.7 percent of public libraries provide patrons assistance in applying for or accessing e-government services.¹ (E-government is defined as “the use of technology, predominantly the Internet, as a means to deliver government services to citizens, businesses, and other entities”). The survey also asked about job-seeking services provided by public libraries. Nearly 91 percent of the libraries surveyed reported providing access to job databases and other job opportunity resources.² Two areas, e-government and employment support services, are placing significant demands on public libraries, all while budgets are being cut and staffing levels reduced.

The survey included a wide range of questions regarding e-government and employment services. The following statements on the survey were generally rated as the most challenging for public libraries:

- Library does not have enough staff to effectively help patrons with their e-government/employment seeking needs.
- Library staff does not have the necessary expertise to meet patron e-government/employment seeking needs.
- Library has too few computer workstations to meet patron demand.

Inadequate staffing, topping the list of greatest challenges, was closely followed by lack of staff expertise, particularly relating to e-government assistance. Some libraries stated that they do not have enough workstations to meet the e-government and employment needs of their community. Most libraries, even those without dedicated computers for e-government and employment services, were able to extend the computer workstation times for patrons to complete forms and applications.

While public libraries are experiencing increased demands for e-government and employment support services, they are also facing demands due to reduced budgets and staffing. A number of libraries are developing training resources and creating partnerships to address these challenges. Perhaps public libraries should consider calculating the costs of both technology infrastructure and staffing in providing e-government and employment assistance. After all, public libraries are increasingly taking on the roles of other government agencies.

Dealing with Staff Shortages

Public libraries across the country have been enduring budget reductions resulting in fewer staff to assist patrons. E-government and employment queries often require a significant amount of staff time, particularly when patrons do not possess adequate computer skills to complete online applications. A typical employment transaction often includes teaching the patron how to use a computer; helping the patron complete an online unemployment form; guiding the patron through employment websites; and finally assisting with an online job application. This type of transaction can take an hour or more of staff time.

One technique library staff may use in addressing this type of patron query is to incorporate video tutorials. This reduces the amount of time spent directly addressing the needs of a single patron. Libraries can produce their own videos or use video tutorials created by other agencies. Pasco County Library Cooperative created a Basic Skills Toolbox. A video tutorial, divided into six short chapters (1–4 minutes each), includes links to a mouse tutorial and other computer skills tutorials. Each chapter details a different aspect of using a computer, including using a mouse, opening programs, and typing a Web address in the browser address bar. The library staff member plays this video tutorial on a library computer that looks exactly like the one in the tutorial. While viewing the video, the patron is also looking at the actual computer and its components. This allows the patron to become comfortable with the computer he or she is about to use. The staff member instructs the patron to notify the staff member when each chapter ends; the staff member then advances to the next chapter for the patron. While this patron is viewing the video, the staff member is free to help other patrons. Once the patron views all six chapters of the video, the library staff member suggests that the patron try using the mouse tutorial included in the Toolbox until he or she becomes familiar with operating a mouse. Once the patron is comfortable, the staff member links the patron to the Goodwill Community Foundation website, where a number of tutorials on computer basics, using the Internet, Excel and other programs can be found.

Pasco County Library Basic Skills Toolbox
www.pascolibraries.org/egovtools.shtml

Mousercise! tutorial
www.pbclibrary.org/mousing/mousercise.htm

Goodwill Community Foundation Free Online Learning
www.gcflearnfree.org

Some library staff integrate tutorials produced by other agencies. For example, Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation created a series of videos to help job seekers. In the *Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey*, most public libraries rated Internet connection speed as well as filters and firewalls as their least important challenges, so it appears most libraries have the technology infrastructure to support accessing and viewing these types of video tutorials.

*Agency for Workforce Innovation:
Workforce Services Video*
www.floridajobs.org/workforce/videos/index.htm

Another technique public libraries are utilizing to manage staff time is scheduling pre-arranged appointments to assist patrons with e-government, employment and other inquiries. Staff schedules appointments at times when library activity is slower or when additional staff members are available to help. One library that has implemented an online appointment system is the Skokie Public Library (SPL). SPL matches the patron with a librarian that has expertise in their area of need. Through the use of targeted appointments and video tutorials libraries can efficiently manage staff time while addressing the patrons' needs.

SPL Book a Librarian
www.skokielibrary.info/s_info/book_librarian.asp

Staff Lacking Expertise

The *Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey* found that another major challenge for public libraries is the library staff lacking the necessary expertise to meet patron e-government and employment-seeking needs. While a lack of expertise in employment seeking was not viewed as being as great a concern as e-government services, both areas were considered challenges. There are a number of ways that library staff can obtain the training they need to improve their skills in these areas. Several agencies provide training sessions for library staff including WebJunction, the American Library Association, and many state libraries. One employment support training initiative is Project Compass, a collaboration between the State Library of North Carolina and WebJunction. This initiative, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, supports public libraries' efforts to meet the urgent and growing needs of the unemployed. Through Project Compass, WebJunction and the State Library of

North Carolina coordinated summits throughout the country and have compiled a comprehensive menu of workforce resources. Additionally, WebJunction has developed a series of online resources to provide public library staff with training in e-government. The American Library Association also offers online training webinars and has created the comprehensive E-Government Toolkit, which includes a list of e-government training programs and services. Through online training programs offered by WebJunction, the American Library Association, and state libraries like the State Library of North Carolina, public library staff can develop the skills and expertise necessary in addressing the needs of patrons with employment support and e-government needs.

Project Compass

www.webjunction.org/project-compass

WebJunction Workforce Resources

www.webjunction.org/workforce-resources

WebJunction Introduction to E-Government

www.webjunction.org/gi21-intro-egovernment?p_p_id=OCLC_ARTICLES&p_p_lifecycle=1&p_p_state=normal

Another important need of library staff is a shared online resource focused on aggregating e-government and employment support information in one place. In Florida, Pasco County Library Cooperative developed a statewide resource—*Get Help Florida*, a web portal that provides links to federal, state, and local government resources as well as links to nonprofit social service agencies. Also provided on the *Get Help Florida* web portal is a link to the Florida statewide virtual reference chat service, Ask a Librarian. This resource allows visitors to chat live with a Florida librarian. Orange County Library System (Florida) is currently developing another statewide database, *The Right Service at the Right Time*, which connects citizens in need with the appropriate services. *The Right Service at the Right Time* is an online tool that asks users a series of questions that result in a list of services that user may be eligible for. It is anticipated that *The Right Service at the Time* and *Get Help Florida* will link together to ensure that Floridians and library staff throughout the state have access to a comprehensive one-stop resource. The New Jersey State Library created a similar resource, *Get Help from the New Jersey State Library*, which provides links to workforce, financial, housing, and health resources and more. Other states could create similar online tools where knowledge and expertise can be shared. Ideally, a federal web portal would be developed linking all state resources.

Get Help Florida

www.gethelpflorida.org

Ask a Librarian

www.askalibrarian.org

The Right Service at the Right Time

www.rightservicefl.org

Get Help from the New Jersey State Library

<http://gethelp.njlibraries.org>

Another way libraries are gaining expertise is by forming partnerships with government and social service agencies. In the area of employment support services, some libraries have partnered with their local CareerOneStop (OneStop) center. Some public libraries have partnered with OneStop centers to host workshops where representatives from the OneStop help patrons write resumes as well as find and apply for jobs. In some instances, the library supplies the computers and the OneStop staff provides the training. With government funding, a number of OneStop centers have purchased mobile OneStop vehicles. The mobile OneStop is a large RV equipped with computers, using satellite technology to connect to the Internet, and staffed with career professionals. In Pasco County, Florida, the mobile OneStop parks outside the library branches. The library advertises the dates the mobile OneStop visits the library and refers job seekers to OneStop.

Similar types of partnerships are developing between public libraries and government or social service agencies. The Orange County Library System (Florida), for example, has partnered with the US Citizenship and Immigration Service to offer classes and other programs for patrons seeking citizenship. The Alachua County Library District has partnered with a variety of social service agencies to create *The Library Partnership*, which is a unique branch of the Library District located in an impoverished area in the city of Gainesville, Florida. In these types of partnerships, the library staff collaborates with local social service or government agencies in offering programs and services to library patrons. In addition to providing services in the library, such arrangements allow staff members to foster communication with these social service and government agencies, thus making it possible for them to provide referrals for the library patron. An example of how these coordinated services could be provided is the following: library staff members attend community meetings with the local children's services board, community service councils, United Way, or other organization to assess what programs already exist in the area, so that libraries are not duplicating services offered by other agencies.

CareerOneStop
www.careeronestop.org

OCLS Citizenship and Immigration Programs
www.ocls.info/virtual/galleries/topical/citizenship.asp

The Library Partnership
www.aclib.us/library-partnership

Inadequate Number of Workstations

According to the *Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey*, the third most commonly cited challenge to public libraries, particularly urban libraries, in meeting e-government needs is the lack of an adequate number of computer workstations.³ Many libraries have no problem extending computer time limits for patrons completing employment forms; however, in some cases this is not possible due to a lack of computer workstations. One option to address the shortage is to purchase or assign laptops for employment or e-government use only. In Pasco County, the library has purchased, with Library Services and Technology Act grant funds, two to four laptop computers per branch that can be used only for job seeking or e-government-related purposes. To prevent their theft, these laptops are equipped with specially designed locks that enable them to be locked to tables. Generally, the laptops are locked to tables near the information desk, enabling the staff to help the patron while still attending to their other duties at the information desk. Additionally, such close proximity affords the patron easy access to the telephone available at the information desk, which can be used to call agencies for more detailed instructions or to call home for missing information. If the patron is completing forms for which privacy or extensive staff help is required, the laptops can be moved to a conference room or other private location. Some libraries allow the patron to check out a laptop for use within the library; the patron can then use the laptop anywhere in the library he or she chooses.

Many patrons have their own laptops, so providing free wireless services in public libraries can help address the problems presented by not having enough workstations or patrons being unable to complete forms due to time constraints. As the *Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey* revealed, 85.7 percent of public libraries provide wireless service.⁴ Ideally, the wireless service in the library will have a reasonable level of security since library patrons are submitting forms that include personal information, such as social security numbers. The Florida Division of Library and Information Services provides an online guide, “Best Practices for Patron Computers,” to help libraries

assess Internet security on library computers where e-government and employment transactions are taking place. One suggestion included in the guide is to utilize hard drive protection products. “These programs work by tricking Windows into seeing a hard drive that is actually simulated in software. This software hard drive pretends to work normally while Windows is being used, allowing changes as expected. However, these changes are not actually being recorded on the real hard drive; they are instead a part of the simulation. When the computer is rebooted, the simulated changes are discarded, and the computer boots back up to a known good state.”⁵ By offering free, secure wireless services for personal laptop use and providing dedicated laptops for patron use, public libraries are able to address the challenge of not having enough computer workstations to complete online employment or e-government forms.

EGovFlorida: Best Practices for Patron Computers

<http://egovflorida.pbworks.com/w/page/26078233/Best-Practices-for-Patron-Computers>

EGovFlorida: Hard Drive Protection Programs

<http://egovflorida.pbworks.com/w/page/26078558/Hard-Drive-Protection-Programs>

Calculating the Costs

Clearly, public libraries are investing a considerable amount of staff time and technology resources in providing patrons access to and assistance with e-government and employment services. Public libraries have taken on the roles of CareerOneStop centers and a variety of government agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service, the US Citizenship and Immigration Service, and the Social Security Administration, among others. Some libraries are gathering statistics and other data in an attempt to determine the types of e-government and employment queries library staff are dealing with; the length of time library staff spends assisting patrons with e-government and employment transactions; and the technology costs associated with fulfilling the roles of these government agencies.

In Florida, the Pasco County Library Cooperative (PCLC) has partnered with the Florida State University Information Use Management and Policy Institute (Information Institute) in developing a method of recording e-government statistics. The Information Institute and PCLC developed reference query logs (librarian logs) to track the length of time staff members spend assisting library patrons with e-government

or employment queries; the length of time the library patron spends using a dedicated laptop for e-government or employment purposes; and the type of e-government or employment query. PCLC has revised the librarian logs several times. Most of the revisions resulted from library staff making suggestions on how to decrease the amount of time spent compiling statistics. Implementing these suggestions has increased efficiency about 50 percent. These statistics help PCLC determine what types of e-government programs to offer; which types of agencies would be the most beneficial partners; what type of additional staff training is needed; and the costs of providing e-government and employment services. PCLC staff compiles this data monthly and posts the information on the website. For example, in March 2011 the majority of e-government queries were related to taxes, compared to January 2011, when the majority of queries were related to helping patrons find employment. PCLC staff members also record on their time sheets the amount of time they spend assisting library patrons with e-government and employment queries. The library's accounting staff multiplies the number of hours spent by staff helping patrons with e-government and employment queries by the employee's hourly rate plus benefits to determine the library's costs associated with e-government. Additionally, PCLC keeps a record of all purchases relating to e-government and employment such as the costs of the dedicated laptops, wireless services, and associated software. For the 2010–2011 fiscal year, PCLC will spend more than \$200,000 in staff time and computer resources in support of e-government

and employment assistance to library patrons. A full national study determining the staffing and technology costs incurred by public libraries in the provision of e-government and employment support activities is warranted. These results could be used in advocating for more library funding.

Information Institute/FSU
www.ii.fsu.edu

*Pasco County Library Cooperative-
E-Government Tools*
www.pascolibraries.org/egovtools.shtml

Notes

1. John Carlo Bertot, Kathryn Sigler, Elizabeth DeCoster, Abigail McDermott, Sarah M. Katz, Lesley A. Langa, and Justin M. Grimes, *2010–2011 Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey: Survey Findings and Results* (College Park, MD: Information Policy and Access Center, 2011), 1, www.ala.org/ala/research/initiatives/plftas/2010_2011/index.cfm.
2. *Ibid.*, 46.
3. *Ibid.*, 42.
4. *Ibid.*, 29.
5. Florida Division of Library and Information Services, “Hard Drive Protection Programs,” *EGovFlorida* wiki, <http://egovflorida.pbworks.com/w/page/26078558/Hard-Drive-Protection-Programs> (accessed May 28, 2011).