WHO AREN'T YOU SERVING DIGITALLY?

Everyone has heard of the Digital Divide and the serious ramifications it brings to providing information to all. This report addresses the needs of three groups disenfranchised by the explosion of electronic information:

- People with disabilities

- Older adults

- People for whom English is a second language (ESL)

These groups could immediately benefit by libraries adapting computer workstations to accommodate a wider array of the general population, offering computer instructions tailored to patron's needs, and designing usable and accessible websites.

Issues such as staff training, patron training, curriculum design, marketing programs, and funding are covered. Appendix A sums up what is happening in libraries in regard to serving patrons with disabilities.

Librarians' point of view

Librarians use the Internet because it provides them with a conduit to myriad information resources and documents located on websites throughout the world. They believe everyone has the right to be able to retrieve all pertinent information available.

Most librarians adamantly and justifiably advocate for inclusion of all government documents and decry the removal of documents from the Web (as well as their printed formats) by government agencies under the auspices of the U.S. Patriot Act. With fervor, they demand the return of documents that were removed from government websites.

Ironically, these same librarians do not champion the right for everyone to have access to information by providing them with the technology to use basic electronic resources. Librarians do not willingly disenfranchise segments of the population, but, nevertheless, disenfranchisement occurs. Unfortunately, the patrons who are not served are those who need service the most.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project released a report on April 16, 2003, entitled "The Ever-shifting Internet Population: A New Look at Internet Access and the Digital Divide," indicating that although Internet access has grown across the board, clear demographic gaps remain.[1]

Some of those disenfranchised included older adults, people with disabilities who find accessing electronic information difficult using a standard keyboard/monitor interface, patrons who have trouble following instructions that are written only in English, or those people with cognitive impairments.

Although not addressed in this report, remember that income levels, educational attainment levels, and race also are factors in Internet access.[2] Many of these people still need to have equity to the basic necessities of life.

This needed equity is particularly true for Native Americans, who in some cases still lack telecommunications services. Also left on the sidelines are those who must read directions written with the assumption that everyone reading them has a basic understanding of computers. Cyber language for them is indeed a second language.

The commonality that binds

Although the aforementioned people may not seem to have a lot in common, they are part of the digital divide. They are the underserved of the information revolution because they lack access to usable technology, inclusionary programming, usable websites, and sufficient instruction in the use of technology. Although they are the minority, they also are a part of the community that supports libraries and whom the library is charged to serve.

Why the exclusion?

Many reasons are heard as to why service exclusions exist in the library, including the following:

- No (or not enough) disabled patrons are in my community to warrant spending money on accommodations.

- The technology is difficult to use.

- The technology is too expensive.

- Seniors do not want or need special considerations.

- Seniors really do not want to learn how to use computers.

- I thought some other agency was helping with English translations.

- I thought the Library for the Blind took care of these people.

Assumptions are unfounded

All these reasons above are invalid assumptions. Many librarians think the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS), a division of the Library of Congress, takes care of all the information needs of the special populations who have disabilities.

Although the NLS does provide qualified readers with leisure reading in recorded and other formats, for the most part, it does not provide reference materials, nor does it provide access to electronic information.[3]

As to not providing special services for older adults, many librarians simply do not realize what the needs are. Although many people within the library profession are becoming part of the older adult population, they have had the need and opportunity to learn how to search databases and the Web. They simply may not realize their professional expertise has put them far ahead of others within their age range.

Failure to address the needs of patrons for whom English is a second language may be attributed to the library not being able to recruit staff who can speak,

write, comprehend, and teach in the needed language. The ability to teach and provide written instructions in the patron's native language is often overlooked, but the patron rarely complains because of the lack of English-speaking skills or embarrassment.

Libraries are one of the most respected and nonthreatening entities that everyone can use. Libraries can be the go-to place for many disenfranchised by the ongoing computer revolution.

A few laws to consider

Although making a concerted effort to extend services to all should be done because it is morally right, be aware of legal ramifications concerning services to people with disabilities. Because aging does bring about disabilities for most people, these laws affect many of those people discussed as being part of the digital divide.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

Section 504,
www.adda-sr.org/504.htm

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, enacted in 1973, requires all employers and organizations receiving federal funds to provide people with disabilities equal access to information, programs, activities, and services.

This law includes people with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, such as walking, talking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, working, and learning.

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act

Section 508,
www.section508.gov

In 1998 an amendment was made to Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, which addresses electronic resources. Under this legislation federal agencies must give disabled employees and disabled members of the public access to information that is comparable with that of employees and members of the public without disabilities—unless doing so is an undue burden.

Section 508 mandates specific conditions for Internet and Web accessibility. Electronic vendors selling products to federal agencies must make their websites accessible. Web-based resources can be independently tested for Section 508 compliance based on verifiable features and technology uses. An organization's policies and procedures for Section 508 compliance are important to ensure full accessibility of its electronic resources.

Americans With Disabilities Act

ADA, www.jan.wvu.edu/
links/adalinks.htm

The Americans With Disabilities Act was ratified in 1990. It is similar to Section 504 and extends the regulations for access to public entities such as libraries. It has specific mandates regarding physical access to buildings and equipment. Librarians should revisit the document to determine if their libraries still comply with the regulations.

Section 255 of the Telecommunications Act

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has rules requiring telecommunications manufacturers and service providers to make their products and services accessible to people with disabilities, if readily achievable. This rule may prove to be applicable to libraries offering virtual reference services.

Building bridges by becoming inclusionary

As the government and private business shift more of their information to websites, the unconnected populations stand a greater chance of not receiving needed information. Libraries need to work with their communities to provide access to appropriate hardware, meaningful instructions, and accessible websites to enable all people to join the electronic information age.

They also must seek to assure that access to hardware is accessible 24/7, which means placing equipment with community partners. Round-the-clock cyber library service is moot in communities whose patrons who do not have computers in their houses. Although placing valuable equipment in congregate facilities within the community is a risk, it may be the only way to reach portions of the underserved.

The digital divide is a serious problem. The Pew report equates today's inequity of Internet use to that of telephone usage during the Great Depression; that is, as people lost their jobs, they allowed their telephone service to be interrupted and had to rely on a neighbor or a pay phone to connect family, friends, and needed services.[4]

The library can become the friendly neighbor who lets all people without home Internet use an accessible computer in a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental environment. The library should offer appropriate instructions on usage of the tools and has a well-developed marketing plan that reaches nonusers to inform them that the library is a neighbor who wishes to be visited.

Notes

[1]Lenhart, Amanda. "The Ever-shifting Internet Population—A New Look at Internet Access and the Digital Divide." pp. 8-9. April 16, 2003. www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=88.

[2]Ibid. The survey found that 60% of Caucasians were online compared with 45% of the African American population and 54% of the Latino population. In regards to household incomes, only 38% of those with incomes under $30,000 use the Internet, compared with 86% of those whose income is above $75,000. The survey showed similar findings in educational attainment: only 23% of those who did not graduate from high school used the Internet compared with 45% of those with some high school, 72% of those with some college, and 82% of those with a college degree. Keep these numbers in mind when developing and expanding computer services. For instance, if many of your library's patrons happen to be low income and Latino, staff should develop an introductory curriculum.

[3]For more information on the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, see www.loc.gov/nls.

[4]Lenhart, p. 26.