

What Does a Crisis Look Like?

The word *crisis* invariably evokes an emotional response. It's a strong word. The fear of crises is rooted in a fear of chaos—a fear of situations that challenge our budgets, our timetables, and even our ambitions. A crisis can mean layoffs, as happened too often during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ It can mean the loss of valuable artifacts and spaces, as happened during the 2018 Kansas State University (K-State) Hale Library fire.² Invariably a crisis means loss, even if there is something to be gained during recovery.

Another part of our reaction to a crisis is fear of the unknown. Chaos goes hand in hand with a lack of information . . . something particularly troubling to information professionals. Chaos is about change and uncertainty. No report like this can prepare anyone for every eventuality, just as it cannot mitigate their losses from a crisis. But it can help other library IT managers and would-be library IT managers use some of my experiences with crises to help them prepare for the next one of theirs. My goal is to lay out things to consider and prepare for, rooted in experience.

The most important thing for you to keep in mind is that, by its nature, a crisis is a temporary condition. If you find yourself facing one, hang in there. It may not always feel like it, but you will get through it. Also bear in mind that you will make missteps. I made plenty of them, and none of them was the end of the world. You just need to get up, dust yourself off, and move forward.

When we talk about managing library IT during a crisis, we should start by defining what is meant by a crisis. In my career I have led library IT departments through two events that I would describe as crises: the 2018 fire at K-State's Hale Library, and the still-extant COVID-19 pandemic at Washington University Libraries. These represented very different types of crises, yet they presented some notable similarities in the challenges they furnished to staff and patrons alike. In

both cases access to the library spaces was disrupted, which led to a disruption in services. This, I think, is key to defining a library crisis: a condition that leads to a significant and extended disruption in services for patrons, staff, or both. While I'm adding staff as part of that conditional, generally what we see is if services of some kind are disrupted significantly for staff, it will lead to services being damaged significantly for patrons as a consequence. During a crisis, services may be disordered due to a deterioration of conditions at the library itself, a deterioration of conditions at its hosting institution (if it has one, as would be true of an academic or special library), or a deterioration of conditions in its locality. As an example of the first and second situations, the fire at Hale library caused damage to the library itself, but it also knocked out the university data center which was in the basement of the main library building. That one-two punch in service degradation would have serious repercussions for the initial recovery efforts, as we will discuss. The COVID pandemic brought with it degradation of some available university and local services, but those reductions were limited and invariably a consequence of the need for social distancing, pressure on networks due to remote work, and caution in materials handling. Far more serious local issues have come about from adverse weather events, such as the severe flooding that struck the Iowa City and Cedar Rapids areas during my last year at the University of Iowa in 2008. The extent of the flooding meant that not only were the flooded buildings themselves affected, but also electricity, networks, and other utilities.

The response by a library to a crisis is often initially defined by the amount of preparation, if any, the library is able to engage in. The COVID-19 pandemic provided several weeks of preparation and ramp-up time, although it was not entirely clear to the leadership elements at Washington University Libraries in

the earliest weeks just how serious the situation would become. However, the libraries, at the instigation and under the leadership of the university librarian, began discussions and broad strokes planning shortly after the first media indications of a potentially serious situation. This planning proved indispensable when the trajectory of the crisis suddenly and rapidly escalated, leading to the removal of most staff from campus in March 2020.

Conversely, the fire at Hale Library was entirely unexpected, catching the full university community by surprise. There had been significant and highly successful general disaster planning promulgated at K-State Libraries for some time. However, when those plans were drawn up originally, they had not included strategies for safeguarding the digital infrastructure, and such considerations were not introduced into later refinements of the plan prior to the fire. Even if they had been, they might not have predicted the full scope of the consequences of a library fire to the university IT infrastructure due to the presence of the data center in the library basement.

In both cases our library IT departments had to pivot quickly to practical action. In the first case, some planning and preparation had already transpired for the specific event, but those deliberations had to be translated into action with unexpected speed. In the second case, there was no warning, and the

existing planning by the library, while highly successful, focused on immediate, physical disaster response efforts. That meant that there was limited preparation for the library IT implications of the fire.

One takeaway from these situations is that libraries should have a technology disaster plan, or have a substantial technology element integrated into their broader organizational disaster plan. Such a disaster plan is most useful for disasters that occur as a surprise, providing technology departments little or no opportunity to perform more specific, situational planning prior to an actual response. While each organization will have unique needs, the rest of this report can assist in crafting a technology disaster plan as a way to assist in future crisis management.

Notes

1. For more details on the effects on libraries from COVID-19, see Steve Zalusky, *State of America's Libraries 2021: Special Report: COVID-19* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2021), www.ala.org/news/sites/ala.org.news/files/content/State-of-Americas-Libraries-Report-2021.pdf.
2. Jason Tidd, "After Fire Closes K-State's Hale Library, Damages 'Great Room,' KU Steps in to Help," *Wichita Eagle*, May 25, 2018, www.kansas.com/news/local/education/article211970424.html.