Taming Technolust

Ten Steps for Planning in a 2.0 World

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Guest Columnist

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This quarter, Michael Stephens of the popular Tame the Web blog offers advice on dodging "technolust" and how to recognize and deal with "technodivorce." It isn't all avoidance, though, as he provides ten positive steps for your library's technology planning. Michael has a pedigree in technology planning as the former Special Projects Librarian at Saint Joseph County (Ind.) Public Library. He now teaches in the LIS program at Dominican University and recently authored two *Technology Reports* on Web 2.0 for the American Library Association. If you've heard Michael speak, you will recognize his straight-from-the-hip style.—*Editor*

Back in 2004 when I started writing and speaking about technology planning, I urged librarians to be mindful of letting a desire for flashy, sexy technology outweigh conscious, carefully planned implementations. Over the years, I've returned to the topic of wise planning and "technolust" on my blog and in various publications. Simply, technolust is "an irrational love for new technology combined with unrealistic expectations for the solutions it brings."[1]

While the emerging technologies of 2004 seem quaint when seen through the lens of 2008, the issue of technolust remains. Call it a 2.0 world, the age of social networking, or whatever you'd like, but now more than ever librarians are finding themselves in a position to make decisions about new and emerging tech—when everything is in beta version and "nimble organizations" are the words of the day.

A fact: new technologies will not save your library. New tech cannot be the center of your mission as an institution. I'm still taken aback when I hear of libraries spending money for technologies without careful planning, an environmental scan of the current landscape, and a complete road map for training, roll out, buy in, and evaluation. When the latest technology hits, are you keen to add it to your library, boosting the coolness factor? For example, buying every librarian on your staff an iPhone as a way to improve reference services is probably not going to be a wise solution. You may have some happy librarians, but that type of technolust does not well serve the organization.

I believe these days we're dealing with a lot more than just lust. Consider the following other states, if you will:

Technostress: New tools and Web sites come at us daily, easily creating a feeling of unease or anxiety about how much technology we can take on or even understand. How do we keep up? How do we stay in the know, when it seems that those cutting-edge libraries we always hear about are launching yet another social tool or widget on their blog-based, RSS-

equipped, Meebo'd-to-the-hilt Web site? This anxiety can lead to poor decision making and knee-jerk reactions. It might also lead to multiple irons in the 2.0 fire at one time, spearheaded by individuals and departments all over your library. This, in turn, leads to more stress. More stress aggravates bad decisions for technology, which means more Technostress . . . well, you get the idea.

Technodivorce: It's hard to admit we've made a mistake—especially in our profession. The culture of perfect in many libraries at times prevents us from cutting the cord on projects that just aren't working. Did they really work to begin with? Many things—that IM service for young adults, the readers' advisory wiki, RSS feeds—sometimes just die on the vine from lack of use, promotion, or upkeep. Found a few months later, a dead library blog speaks volumes about project management and buy in at all levels of the organization. Who is watching this? Maybe potential new hires who are now running for the hills.

Technoshame: The librarian who steps up after one of my presentations and whispers "I don't know anything about this stuff and have no idea how to begin" might be experiencing a bit of embarrassment. The world is moving just too fast. Fear not! And feel no shame. It's never too late to kickstart an institutional learning program or learn on your own. See the tips below for more.

Technophobia: This librarian is frozen with fear about new tech. Often the reaction is to oppose vigorously. In the right position, this person can infect a good portion of the organization. Tech projects stand still until any light of day vanishes. Is it really the technology or is it rapid change that causes the fear? Sometimes I think it's more a fear of the open, transparent times we're moving into more than blog software or a wiki for planning the new branch or department.

This leads to the question, how do we plan in this shiny new world when anyone in your library can create a library blog at a free hosting site, develop an online presence at sites such as Flickr or Facebook for the library, or launch the institution's own social network with a few mouse clicks? Submitted for your approval, Ten Steps for the 2.0 Technology Plan:

1. Let go of control. The Association of College and Research Libraries offered this as a means of examining the evolving roles of academic libraries: "the culture of libraries and their staff must proceed beyond a mindset primarily of ownership and control to one that seeks to provide service and guidance in more useful ways, helping users find and use information that may be available through a range of providers, including libraries themselves, in electronic format."[2] I believe it extends farther—to all types of libraries and way beyond the electronic format only. The culture of perfect is based on control. Is your library guided by a department or an individual who holds the reigns too tightly? Often times, it's the marketing department that feels the need to control the library's story—in an age where the message has long since passed to the people. PR speak, filtered voices, and stifled projects lead down the wrong path for open libraries. Think of all the staff, all their enthusiasm, and all their creativity being set aside because none of it was in a prearranged marketing plan. Or it's the IT department holding tight to any technology initiatives. I've heard this statement more than a few times: "IT doesn't allow that." Balance is key here: all departments need to come to the table. No one area or agency can control planning and implementation. This leads to the idea of the Emerging Technology Committee: a team made up of stakeholders from all over the organization. Technology planning is best done in open, collaborative space where everyone has a voice and can share their expertise.

2. Let beta be your friend. Let your users help you work out the bugs of that new service. Admit openly that whatever you are planning is new and there may be a few kinks. Share plans and prototypes. Be sure to interact and reply. Make changes accordingly. This goes for technology projects as well as other new initiatives that might not be solely tech-based. Michelle Boule explored this at the ALA TechSource blog, stating: "Building beta is more about flexibility and allowing the participants—not the creators—to redefine the meaning of the service. Planning beta is about allowing for failure, success, and change."[3] Technolust does not survive when users are cooperating to build the service. Maybe instead of system-wide RFID, your library users might be better served with laptops or other devices for checkout. Tap into your user base to plan effectively.

3. Be transparent. Communicate and make decisions via open meetings and weblogs. Michael Casey and I advocate for transparent libraries based on open communication, a true learning organization structure, and quick and honest responses to emerging opportunities. "Transparency—putting our cards on the table—allows us to learn and grow, and it lets our community see us for all we are, including our vulnerabilities."[4] This is incredibly important for management and administration. You are the ones that need to set the standard for open communication within your institution—walk the walk and talk the talk. I'm reminded of a talk I did at a larger, well-known library system, where five minutes in the director stood up and slipped out the back door. The staff took me out for drinks the night before and one said "we hope she stays to hear you. We can't do anything without her approval and everything we put out on the Web is vetted through three departments." Pilots and prototypes are great if they are just that. Don't call it a pilot project if it's already a done deal: signed contracts, "behind the scenes" decisions to go forward, or a "this is the way it's going to be" attitude will crush any sense of collaborative planning and exploration for the library. It's a slippery slope to losing good people to other institutions.

4. Try various paths or tools to find the best fit. Don't just say "we must have a library blog because Michael says so", or

"an article in *American Libraries* says many other libraries are doing great things with a blog." Your purposes may be better served with other technologies or tools. Prototype new sites and services, and ask for and respond to feedback. Try out a blog or wiki on a limited basis. Learn from your successes and failures. Tech decisions cannot be made in a vacuum. What failed a year ago offers a learning opportunity and might help you make a better plan today.

5. Spot trends and make them opportunities. Scan the horizon for how technology is changing our world. What does it mean for your AV area if iTunes and Apple are offering downloaded rental movies? What does it mean for your reference desk if thriving online answer sites are helping your students? What does it mean when Starbucks or Panera Bread becomes the wi-fi hangout in town for folks looking for access? Read outside the field—be voracious with tech magazines like *Wired* and *Fast Company*. Monitor some tech and culture blogs. Read responses to such technologies as Amazon's Kindle, and ponder if it's a fit for your users and your mission. Being a successful trendspotter is one of the most important traits of the twenty-first-century librarian. Be aware, for example, that thriving, helpful virtual communities, open-source software platforms, and a growing irritation with what integrated library system and database vendors provide libraries could converge into a sea change for projects like Koha and Evergreen. Who knows how close we are to that tipping point, but trendspotting librarians will be far ahead of the game.

6. Offer opportunities for inclusive learning. One of the first steps of successful planning is learning the landscape. We can't deny the unparalleled success of the Learning 2.0 model of staff education as a means to inform and engage all levels of staff. Created by Helene Blowers at the Public Library of Charlotte Mecklenburg County in the summer of 2006, the system has been replicated all over the world. It works when staff are encouraged to explore and learn on their own and communicate that learning via blogs. Such a program will not fly if managers and administrators don't support it or participate as well. Middle managers: please realize that you set the tone for your department or silence it. You can make it or break it when it comes to participation in training or planning activities. One librarian recently told me that Learning 2.0 failed for her because her manager saw no use for it. Library administrators: even more rests on your shoulders. The staff know if you don't care about emerging technologies and the opportunities they bring or if you don't see the value in learning new things. Set the stage with your own participation. Mess up and learn from it. Be the poster child for the change you want for your institution. Also, create a physical and virtual sandbox for staff to play with the technologies and tools that figure into your plan. Hands-on experience equals an understanding a path toward buy in.

7. Overthink and die! Don't get hung up on preparation and first steps. Planning in this shiny new world needs to happen faster than ever before—without losing quality. How do we do this? We gather evidence from our professional literature, the library blogosphere, and other librarians.

EMERGING (AND RETREATING) TECHNOLOGIES

Michael Stephens is always on top of what is hot, so this quarter he is providing the trends portion of this column. See what's Hot! and what is decidedly not.

What's Hot

Open-source software (OSS) solutions are gaining ground as a viable alternative to commercial products. Watch closely as 2008–09 may be the time of the OSS tipping point. More libraries and library consortia are exploring open ILS configurations while the vendors scramble for better features, more transparency, and less bloat. Libraries can utilize OpenOffice and other OSS to save money for new initiatives, while spending once-allocated funds on new positions such as "Open Source Librarian" or "Emerging Technology Librarian."

Learning 2.0 programs. This winter, librarians in Minnesota adapted the super successful, often replicated learning program developed by Helene Blowers in a statewide format, offering opportunities for all types of library staff, trustees, and others the chance to participate and learn. Have you scheduled your Learning 2.0 series yet? The program, offered all over the world, is entirely free to adapt to your own circumstances.

What's Cold

Unpleasant user experience in both the physical library and virtual library spaces. Perform a signage audit to make sure your "No Cell Phones allowed" sign is long gone and replaced with a "Courtesy Please" reminder. Our signs, staff attitude, and overbearing rules tell a story about the library. The same goes for online experience. Is your Web presence usable? Inviting? Does it answer the questions and meet the needs of the folks that visit? Clear pathways, limited barriers to access, and a friendly interface.

Halfhearted attempts at seeming "2.0-ish" by vendors, big library systems, and others. Launching a blog will not make you transparent overnight. Adding a dash of 2.0 to your product line will not help if your product is built on models established at the beginning of the age of the ILS. Trying to control the message will just seem sad and outdated as we move farther into more user-centered, open environments. Listen to the conversation. Participate. Be human. Technology is only a tool. Repeat.

We ask our colleagues "how's that vendor treating you?" Spending valuable time coming up with witty acronyms and writing FAQs anticipating any and every thing that might happen can kill a project.

8. Plan to plan. Instead of willy nilly emerging technology projects, plan to plan. Create timelines and audit progress. This takes project management skills, something LIS educators (like me) should be teaching in depth! We need expertise in bringing projects to completion. Your "Digital Strategies Librarian" or "Director of Innovation and User Experience" should have impeccable management skills and be able to see the big picture. How do you find that person if you don't have one? Evaluate current jobs and duties of your library staff. What can be done to streamline workflows and free up hours for new duties and new titles. Find who is suitable, then guide projects and people well. Have effective meetings with action items and follow up. I spent more time in meetings when I became a manager in my former job than practically anything else. Planning projects focuses creativity. Meandering meetings sap creativity.

9. Create a mission statement for everything. A mission statement and vision of your tech implementation will help guide development, roll-out, and evaluation. For your tech plan, create an overarching mission and vision. Are you well-funded and well-staffed? One goal might be to experiment with emerging tech—testing the waters if you will. Tighter budget? Limited staff? Create your mission with that in mind: our institution may move a bit slower, (could it be faster?) but the decisions will be wise and based on evidence from what those folks out at the cutting edge of our marketplace are doing.

10. Evaluate your service. This is the next step in all the 2.0 talk. Sure, we've rolled out the library blog, IM reference service, wiki, and more but the final part of the anti-technolust, on-the-money technology plan is a detailed, ongoing means to gauge the use and return on investment for these new technologies. This will be the next wave of discussion you'll probably be hearing by the time you read this. How do we track use? How do we prove the usefulness of the virtual branch and digital librarian to governing bodies, boards, trustees, and those who make the funding decisions? For this, we need new models of tracking statistics and gathering stories. In my mind, the return on investment for many of the emerging technologies will be proven with qualitative data such as positive stories from users and an increased amount of participation via commenting and content creation.

We have a great opportunity to harness emerging technologies and create engaging and useful services, deeply connected to the core mission and values of librarianship. Balancing technolust in this shiny new world and planning mindfully and openly can certainly lead to success. I wish all the libraries on this road much success! Please keep us informed as it goes!

References

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