



Making the case for an investment in self-service: St. Joseph County Public Library, South Bend, Indiana

With budget cuts on the horizon, staff at the St. Joseph County Public Library worried about their ability to maintain the facility's nationally ranked service to the community. They made a convincing case for investing in technology that could boost productivity and maintain patron satisfaction—and now that investment is paying off.

The Need

Many libraries have seen budget cuts in the past few years, a reflection of the difficult economy and the strain that it has placed on all public services. At Indiana's St. Joseph County Public Library, the economy's effects were compounded by state legislation that capped property taxes, a move that led to significant reductions in libraries' operating funds.

"We could foresee an immediate budget reduction of \$800,000 in 2009," explained Nancy L. Korpala, the library's financial services administrator. "That was about 6 percent of our budget." Cuts in the following years were projected to be even more onerous: \$1.2 million in 2010 and \$1.6 million in 2011.

The timing presented an unusual public relations challenge because the district had just passed a \$15.3 million bond issue to cover the costs of new construction and the renovation of existing buildings. (The district currently has a main library and nine branches, with an annual circulation of 2.7 million items). That meant that the public would be funding physical improvements at a time when their services were at risk of being reduced. This would be a problem in any district but especially in one that was accustomed to the highest levels of service: for the previous nine years, the St. Joseph County Public Library had consistently ranked in the top ten public libraries in the United States.

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"We needed to do something that could relieve the staff of the repetitive tasks that patrons could do themselves," Korpala said. "We needed to increase their productivity and we wanted to free them up so they could work with patrons who needed help finding a book, or answering a reference question, or getting started on the computer."

The Solution

The district decided to install a new self-service checkout and check-in system based on radio frequency identification (RFID) technology. To handle checkouts, it acquired 26 3M™ SelfCheck™ System R-Series checkout units with the SelfPay feature for paying fees and fines, along with security gates and two 3M™ Digital Library Assistants. For check-ins, the library purchased 3M™ SelfCheck™ System C-Series units for the two smallest branches, 3M™ Intelligent Return and Sorter Systems (model SL) for the four medium-sized branches and four Lyngsoe systems (sold through 3M) for the largest branches.

"Our rationale for the investment was that it was a onetime cost that would allow us to continue our high level of service with fewer staff members and less operating expense," Korpala said. The staff noted that a self-service system based on barcodes could not provide the needed increases in productivity.

RFID was more reliable, she said, and would also allow the staff to conduct fast and accurate inventories of the collection.

The library selected 3M because it was a stable company with a long history in library systems and a long track record of

Built to Exceed Expectations

continuous improvement and evolution, with new features and capabilities that reflected advances in the technology and changes in customer requirements. The staff's confidence was reinforced because they could observe the equipment in action; other vendors were not able to provide working models of their products.

The construction and renovation project, during which the RFID systems were installed, began in 2008. The library, the architect, and 3M worked closely together to ensure that the arrangement of the equipment encouraged patrons to use the self-service units. Checkout stations were located away from the service desk, for example, so that patrons wouldn't find it too easy to go to a staff member. The designs also included shelving where patrons could pick up reserved items and an area for check-in equipment in the renovated workrooms. In several locations, the entry was redesigned after an initial test suggested that patrons needed additional encouragement to use the self-service stations.

The last phase of construction and renovation was completed in October 2009.

The Result

The projected budget cuts did occur and the impact was as dramatic as predicted. As of mid-2010, the staff had been reduced from 240 to 199 positions, solely through attrition. "We are at barebones staffing right now," Korpala said. "We're really pushing ourselves."

Still, the library has been able to keep service at the high level that the public has come to expect, thanks in part to the increased use of self-service. Staff saw a big jump in the use of self-service as soon as the new and renovated buildings were opened up, and the first six months of 2010 saw an additional 20 percent increase as the public became familiar with the new equipment.

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Currently, several branches have a self-service checkout rate that is around 95 percent. System-wide, the library's self-service checkout rate is about 90 percent, although Korpala thinks 95 percent is possible. Thanks to the automated materials handling equipment, the library is also handling returns with greater efficiency. "We've removed human error from the sorting of returns, so our accuracy is much better," she said. "We've cut our turnaround—the time it takes us to get items back on the shelves—from two or three days down to just one."

As a result of these improvements, the library is handling the same number of checkouts and check-ins with a circulation staff that is 33 percent smaller than it was before the installation of RFID. As a result, Korpala expects the investment to pay for itself within five years.

She added that the staff had no problem adapting to the new procedures. "We communicated our reasons and they realized where we were going and why." To some degree, that easy transition can be traced to the library's long history as an early adopter of new technology. (For example, it was the first library in the United States, and the second in the world, to have a presence on the Internet.) "We've had 25 years of change here, and we don't expect it to be any different in the future. The staff accepts that technology and culture change, and the library needs to react to that and serve the public as economically as possible."

The public has also embraced the transition. In part, this can also be traced to the library's history as a pioneer in new technology and in part it reflects the simplicity and reliability of the new systems. "Our patrons became acclimated to the system very quickly," Korpala said. "They found the check-in and checkout very easy to use—after the initial couple of months, we almost never had to assist people—and they really like how they can quickly check out a large stack of items and be on their way."

September 2010



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