IMPACT PLANNING AND ASSESSMENT – MAKING IT HAPPEN

Lithuania

Ugne Lipeikaite
National Library of Lithuania, Project “Libraries for Innovation”, Vilnius, Lithuania, and

Renata Sadunisvili
Martynas Mazvydas National Library of Lithuania, Vilnius, Lithuania

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe developments and results of the Global Libraries Initiative – the “Libraries for Innovation” project – implemented by the Martynas Mazvydas National Library of Lithuania together with the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania.

Design/methodology/approach – This is an analysis of the results of the assessment of the impact of the “Libraries for Innovation” project so far among the public libraries of Lithuania.

Findings – The findings describe a wide range of improvements to existing services, including: strengthening the capacities of public libraries; provision of opportunities for Lithuanian residents to use the internet; and the opening up of new possibilities for communication and information technologies.

Originality/value – The paper provides a wide range of improvement examples that can be easily transferred to other similar countries.

Keywords Global Libraries Initiative, Libraries for Innovation project, Public libraries, Lithuania

Paper type Case study

Lithuania

In Lithuania the “Libraries for Innovation” project is implemented by the Martynas Mazvydas National Library of Lithuania together with the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania. The extent of the project is very wide, involving more than 1,200 public libraries and approximately 2,000 librarians. After the completion of the planning phase, the project proper started in 2008 and is expected to finish in June 2012.

The essence of the “Libraries for Innovation” project lies in strengthening the capacities of public libraries; provision of opportunities for Lithuanian residents to use the Internet, and the opening up of new possibilities for communication and information technologies. The most important mission of the project is to reduce the digital divide between the information-rich and information-poor, while at the same time addressing social exclusion by paying special attention to people who have not found it possible to access and use information available on the Internet. Therefore, when the project encourages the use of public Internet access, special attention is devoted to rural residents, senior people, the disabled and other socially vulnerable groups.

This paper is based on research funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
Funds designated for the project are used for the purchase of computer hardware, connection of libraries to the internet or improvement of communication quality, organization of technical assistance, training of librarians, publicizing free Internet access, attracting residents to use public access facilities in public libraries, as well as evaluation of the impact made by the project.

When seeking to attract more adults and senior people to the public access facilities, special workshops and campaigns are organized where electronic services are introduced that may be easily adapted to daily life: these include electronic filing of tax returns, e-banking, searching for jobs, distance learning and information about health services. Residents who do not know how to use a computer are taught computer literacy and internet basics.

Efforts are also being made to radically enhance the IT competence of public library employees and to help them become active encouragers of, and assistants to, the local community by mastering the possibilities of IT.

In terms of impact evaluation, Lithuania is in the process of conducting its final study, which looks at changes wrought among public libraries throughout the lifetime of the project. Although the study will be finished in April 2012, the data below reflect the results that have already been gathered through surveys of library staff and library managers, and interviews with different stakeholders.

Previously we had conducted a baseline study (2008-2009), the first impact evaluation focused on urban libraries (2009-2010) and the second impact evaluation focused on rural libraries (2010-2011). For each of these studies, we carried out representative surveys of library public internet users, library staff, library managers, children and adult residents, as well as qualitative research into users in hard to reach groups, library managers, library staff and various stakeholders. As the research is following the same methodology and using the same evidence-collection instruments throughout, the results are comparable over time and enable the project team to highlight the main changes emerging from project activities in the libraries, among their users and affecting the wider community.

These studies highlighted a number of important changes that have happened in recent years. First of all, fundamental changes have happened in the libraries themselves. By the end of 2011, the number of library branches offering public Internet access had increased from 645 (around 50 percent of total number of libraries) in 2008 to 1,277 (over 90 percent of all public libraries) in 2011 (Figure 1). The number of computers available for users also increased substantially, from nearly 3,000 in 2008 to more than 6,000 at the end of 2011.

During the Project implementation period, the number of librarians using computers at work was constantly growing and reached its maximum in 2011 (99 percent of the library staff of all ages who participated in the survey; the remainder were working in rural libraries without Internet access) indicating that they used computers for their daily tasks.

Since 2008, computer literacy skills among library users have been constantly improving and currently the vast majority (96 percent) of library staff assess their own basic computer usage skills as at least sufficient. Only 4 percent of library staff say that they lack computer usage skills (Figure 2).

The biggest change in comparison to 2008 is shown in the growth of training of inhabitants as a way to attract new users, including members of hard to reach groups. Training on information technologies is consciously used as a mechanism to reach special groups. Comparison with the results at the beginning of project implementation shows that the amount of training sessions on information technologies has increased.
substantially. In 2010, such training was organized in 71 percent of libraries and this had risen to 92 percent of libraries during the past year. Libraries that had begun organising their training earliest reported that they organized more training on information technologies last year than in the year before (Figure 3).

Library staff were asked what they thought PAC users made use of public internet access in libraries for. Most frequently mentioned were: communication (95 percent), searching for leisure or cultural information (49 percent), work-related information (48 percent) and using Internet resources for economical activity (47 percent). As to their view of the benefits of PAC for the local community, most often mentioned were: improving communication with friends and relatives (80 percent), enriching leisure time (67 percent), getting help while performing activities related to studies (55 percent) or keeping up with current affairs (43 percent).

Meanwhile, in the opinion of a variety of different stakeholders (such as local politicians and community leaders) library PAC brings both social and economic benefits to the community. In their view, PAC is reducing social disjunction and discrimination by ensuring equal opportunities for information access and free availability of services whatever the type of settlement (rural/urban), income or age. Libraries also provide equal opportunities to actively participate in community life and
to improve the quality of life of individuals. They were seen as doing this by helping to save time and money, providing the opportunity to use various services online and to perform different operations quicker and easier, and giving the chance to reach and use largely inaccessible and invaluable sources of information, as well as making the search for jobs easier.

Library staff agree that during the entire Project implementation period, the image of the library as a modern place has constantly improved. According to the qualitative survey of library staff, library managers and stakeholders, libraries are perceived as modern, up to date institutions, which provide relevant information and tools to access information. Due to the “Libraries for Innovation” project, the perception of public libraries by communities is improving – library staff, directors and experts all agree that the relationship between the library, librarians and the community has changed. Prior to the project, libraries were perceived as being detached from the community. At present, libraries are seen as being an equal player in the community in both the eyes of the community members and of representatives of institutions.

The survey of library staff, their managers and stakeholders found a general agreement that the library mission has been extended. The Library now embraces informational, cultural, educational and social roles. This shift in perception is important, indicating that libraries have accepted the new services offered to the community form a significant part of their mission.

Despite all these positive results, the survey of library managers showed that in recent years financial support has been reduced in more than half of the libraries. For this reason the Project launched an extensive advocacy training program among the library managers as well as to the staff members. As a result of the training there is evidence of more cases of partnerships with private companies. While originally the main financial support for libraries was from government institutions, during the last year, public libraries most economic support has come from private companies (an increase by 31 percent).

This study showed that the “Libraries for Innovation” project encouraged new activities in most of the libraries. New actions or services were initiated in 93 percent of urban libraries and in 90 percent of rural libraries.

Driven by the Project activities, the staff in most of the libraries (64 percent) encourage visitors to use public or commercial online services, including mediation in...
the online population census. One library in three organises educational events for members of the community, in which there are lectures and practical activities aimed at such concerns as the enhancement of child-parent relationships. Of the library staff, 28 percent reported that charitable events and the sharing of various materials (such as books, teaching materials and toys) are being organized in their libraries. A total of 6 percent of the libraries, encouraged by the Project, participate in local politics and 4 percent of libraries have created a web site or an online blog (Figure 4).

Since the study is ongoing at the moment is premature to draw final conclusions but the current data already show a lot of positive impacts arising from the Project.

In addition to the surveys, in 2011, we have started to work on a sustainability model for impact assessment activity. The idea is to simplify the current model to enable its implementation in the future with significantly lower resources and internal data collection. (Such a streamlined model could be of benefit to other countries that are not part of Global Libraries.) We have developed a simplified questionnaire and an online data collection tool that will enable libraries to collect data from users independently. This survey is now being piloted and will be presented to library staff for further modification in March 2012.

Further reading


Corresponding author
Ugne Lipeikaite can be contacted at: ugne.lipeikaite@bibliotekospazangai.lt

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our website for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints