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Bridging the Staff Digital Divide in the Library Workplace with EDIA

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Abstract:

As libraries are emerging from the closures and hybrid work environments, many managers are finding the digital divide has widened among library workers at all levels. Systemic lack of equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility that already existed in the workplace prior to COVID, now is receiving heightened awareness, but needs to be addressed with concrete solutions. Organizational manifestations of the digital divide are explored, such as other library staff can do this work but your office isn't equipped to do it either onsite or remotely, or lack of IT support and instruction that meets the needs of the staff. Additionally, individual manifestations of the digital gap are examined such as stereotypes "they are: _____" (fill in the blank) or mind-sets about IT failures, avoidance and hiding challenges.

With an Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility (EDIA) lens, this paper looks at how equity can be achieved through opportunities for cross-organizational mentoring and resource sharing. Methods of building in diversity, not only in the instruction but also with the instructors, will be examined. Ways of breaking down barriers to inclusion of staff with weak IT skills on technology teams and committees in the library will be discussed. A particular focus will be on methods to promote a safe inclusive learning space that includes behind the scenes remedial help and confidence building.

Multiple approaches to break down the accessibility barriers and challenges the staff have had not only with the technology, but with learning in the new hybrid environment will go beyond those with hearing or sight challenges and include those with linguistic and community issues. Individual development plans, diagnostic tests, and "just in time" instruction will be explored. These strategies will also readily adapt to faculty students, and researchers as libraries open up and librarians need to develop new methods of library instruction grounded in EDIA.

Keywords: digital divide. computer technology skills. library staff training. diversity. workplace inclusion.

Bridging the Staff Digital Divide in the Library Workplace with EDIA

Introduction

IFLA has been at the forefront of recognizing the libraries are the key institutions to help achieve the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Access and Opportunity for All (2019). Although access to information is a primary goal, but it does not automatically translate into the ability to use the information. Watling, S., & Crawford, K. (2010). Much attention has been focused on the digital divide in countries across the globe and projects to bring broad band access to rural and underserved communities. As libraries are emerging from the closures and hybrid work environments, many managers are finding the digital divide exists under their own roof and has widened among library workers at all levels. Systemic lack equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility that already existed in the workplace prior to COVID, now is receiving heightened awareness, but needs to be addressed with concrete solutions.

Organizational manifestations of the digital divide

Within large libraries some departments may experience a digital divide with legacy programs/applications. Some areas of the library may experience slow bandwidth or frequent crashes. During COVID, many staff were permitted to telework because their work could be done remotely but other offices weren't equipped to do it remotely. In the remote telework environment there was a digital inequity across households which manifested itself with lack of internet access or even a home computer for many staff in the library, such as mail room or materials handlers.

In some library departments there is a lack of instructional and IT support with long waits for services. Additionally, some managers believe they can't see what their staff are doing in telework and don't know how to manage productivity and accountability. Licensed software to work on images may be given to web developers and staff trying to work with images for promotional flyers or to include in blog and Facebook posts struggle with basic screen capture software.

Individual manifestations of the digital divide

Individual staff members may have over the years for various reasons not kept up with the emerging technologies. Changes in the workflows or assignments may require new digital skills. Adults can try to disguise their digital gaps in various ways such as delayed, incomplete or missing work assignments, avoidance or blame shifting the conversation to other topics, they can't describe the problem with the technology but just say "My computer doesn't work." The digital literacy gap can manifest itself in various ways for example they don't know how to upload a file to a shared wiki space.

Stereotypes can abound in the library workplace and staff can consciously or unconsciously perpetuate them. They are: "_____" (fill in the blank). Staff can take on the stereotype and believe that they are incapable of learning new computer skills. Other staff will assume their colleague is not going to contribute to the team or avoid working with them.

Which of these people would many assume is tech savvy?



Many would say the young man. However, an older woman came into the reading room one day after giving tours of the library as a volunteer and asked about holdings of the periodical she wanted. After a conversation about the lack of holdings for the bound periodicals, and determining that she was a retired librarian, she became collection processing volunteer and put the holdings into the record for the periodical she wanted and even donated missing issues. The young man was embarrassed that at age 22 he didn't know how to create a PowerPoint for a presentation he was asked to do at work. It was difficult for him to remember the steps and made only a very simple presentation after instruction.

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Accessibility (EDIA) are essential overcoming the digital divide among library staff.

Equity in the professional development for library staff

With staff professional development budgets stretched thin across library departments, a focus on the latest technology courses often goes to the IT department or the technical services departments while the public facing reference staff have a hard time justifying the need for courses beyond searching the catalog, such as html, web design, writing for the web, scaling and upload images. This gap became apparent in the staff asked to create LibGuides without these skills and the multiple challenges and frustration they felt as they tried to watch basic instructional videos that were geared toward staff with these web creation skills. The perception was that librarians in other libraries have created these guides without extra courses and if staff just watched the videos they could create them as well. The solution was advocating for equitable staff development that builds in the skills that staff need to be just as successful as their colleagues in other departments or other libraries. Behind the scenes, individual staff were given one-on-one instruction on the components of the LibGuide they were creating and they successfully created the LibGuide on their area of expertise.

One innovative project that was aimed at equity in professional development was an initiative by the LC Labs entitled “Digital Library of Congress Learning Program” that invited all Library staff to participate in a weekly, theme-based online forum lead by a staff member skilled in the topics with a learn-by-doing pedagogical approach. This author led a group looking at data visualization and we discussed good graphics that informed and the bad that mislead. The group investigated and evaluated data visualizations across multiple library websites and especially enjoyed trying out the Chronicling America News Navigator (<https://news-navigator.labs.loc.gov/>). One member of the group experimented with the Tableau tool (<https://www.tableau.com/>) and demonstrated what he had created in a trial visualization. All learned from each other.

Lisa Peet notes that “staff at many libraries of all types ramped up efforts to apply an equity lens to their work and amplify the voices of marginalized creators in their communities. They worked to increase access to information for people in prisons. They stood up to those who

would censor their collections. And they advocated: for community members who needed help, for more aid to libraries to provide that help, and—perhaps most important—for themselves and one another, making mutual support a priority in the face of widespread fear, tension, and conflicting demands. Peet, L. (2022).

Fostering a sharing of technology skills among library staff across the library can go a long way in promoting equity in bridging the digital divide.

Diversity beyond the instruction

An environmental scan of the library workplace can reveal disparities in who is selected for special committees, such as the liaison to the committee for planning digitization strategy or who represents the department on a digitization project. Some staff may be overlooked because of their perceived or real lack of digitization skills. Efforts are needed to bring in diverse voices that can bring a different perspective on the metadata that is used to describe the digital objects in the online collection, for example.

Instruction can be provided to bring the staff member up to speed on digital concepts so that they can speak with others on the committee. In a recent effort to digitize a collection of scripted language rare lithographs, storyboards were needed for descriptions of the objects in the collection. After advocating for a staff member to be added to the team, behind the scenes she was given instruction on how to create storyboards and write for the web so she could include all the metadata elements that were needed. Additionally, when she was asked to update a brochure she needed help resizing images and formatting them for insertion in the content. Rather than assign it to someone else, she was given instruction on how to do it herself.

At times the instructors may need to review their learning context for diversity to ensure staff see themselves in the content. Search examples in new electronic databases can be expanded beyond "Shakespeare" to include multicultural examples such as Abdulrazak Gurnah, Tanzanian-born novelist and academic, who is the Nobel Prize winner in Literature 2021.

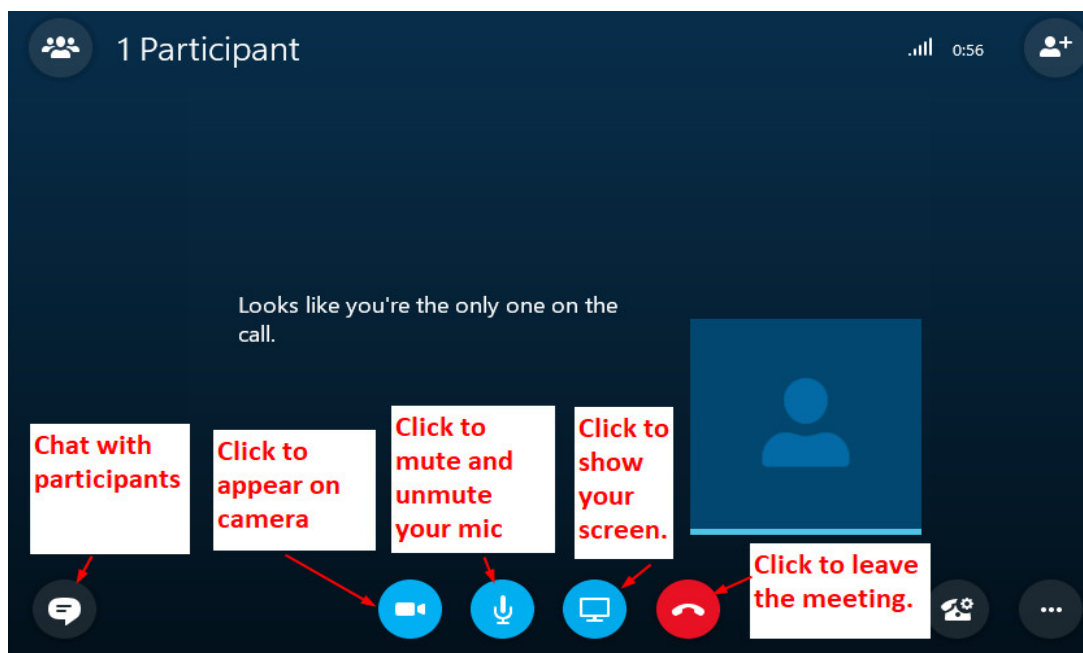
Inclusion in the instructional experience

Educating and training library and information professionals are critical components in overcoming the digital divide that can exist among the library staff in order that they may provide services and information with ever-changing technology and points of access. Sanders, C.K., Scanlon, E. (2021).

For libraries that allocate limited staff training to those who "need to know" for their jobs or that bring up budget constraints as a reason staff development is limited, there is an abundance of libraries that provide staff with the opportunity for self-directed learning on a variety of communication tools and platforms. Examples include the Learning 2.0 program (<http://plcmcl2-about.blogspot.com>) developed by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Library and Mesa County Libraries' Webolution (<http://mcpldwebolution.blogspot.com>). These programs encourage staff to experiment with unfamiliar technologies in a non-threatening manner with "sandbox time" built into meaningful exercises. Encouraging staff to play and discover new technology tools can be a stress-free way to help them learn new digital skills. Trimm, N. (2011)

One of the best resources for cataloging and technical processing staff is the Cataloging Learning Workshop (<https://www.loc.gov/catworkshop/index.html>) from the Library of Congress with a wealth of videos and exercises on all aspects of new technologies such as RDA and BiIBFRAME.

For staff caught in the digital divide to participate in online instruction successfully, background preparation is essential. A diagnostic assessment may be necessary to build in missing skills and remedial help offered in sequential learning experiences. Instructional materials can be emailed to staff ahead of the online instruction so that they may print them out and have them available to consult before, during and after the remote learning experience. Some staff may even need a graphic of the screen they will use for the online session and a private meeting to practice especially the camera, mic and screen sharing.



A safe learning environment should be created for staff with digital deficiencies so they feel comfortable reporting their problems without blame. Provide phone or email support for them when they hit a roadblock so they can move forward with their work.

When they join the group meeting, it will be important for the host to give the staff new to the online environment the opportunity to know when they will present with a Round Robin approach with perhaps more experienced staff going first. Additionally, all staff can be invited to give comments in Q & A session.

Accessibility for everyone

Library staff have had to work through multiple technology changes during the pandemic where work that was done onsite transferred to online and the instruction that previously was done in a classroom with an instructor nearby transferred to the learning online. Not only did the instructional content for the new technology skill need to be designed for an online platform but also the platform itself and the instructor using it had to overcome low bandwidth, frequent interruptions with the background environment and teaching staff how to use the online platform in order to learn the new skills.

Many librarians preparing instruction for staff are familiar with sight and hearing challenges and account for alt tags in web images for screen readers and closed captions for those who can't hear the instruction. However, those that could simply follow along as an instructor demonstrated in classroom a new technology found that they couldn't try out the techniques while watching instruction online. They fell behind as more complex skills were presented.

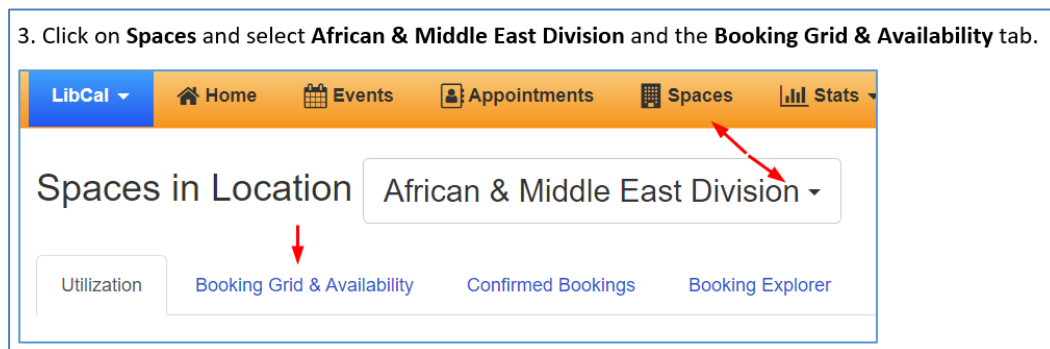
Multiple approaches to break down the accessibility barriers and challenges the staff have had not only with the technology, but with learning in the new hybrid environment are centered on "Universal Design". "Universal Design" is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability." Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, National Disability Authority.

In the practical application of "Universal Design" in the library workplace, staff had the opportunity to practice before the instructional session with the online platform to include how to have a backup plan for joining the session, for example calling in with their phone if the bandwidth was low or they were disconnected. They also learned how to do chat, when to mute and unmute, and especially how to show their screen when they were having a problem so the instructor could guide them.

There is a fear among adult learners of appearing in front of their peers with problems which can be mitigated with creating a safe learning environment for all where experimentation and learning from mistakes is encouraged because others could be experiencing the same problem.

If this approach isn't feasible, offering one on one instruction after the instruction session has worked well for those who need special help on the task at hand. Frequently, it is just one specific area that has presented a challenge or barrier and once they overcome it, they gain confidence and move forward with the group. If several people are experiencing the same problem, it can mean the application they are trying to use has a confusing interface, and instruction pointing out this specific problem can help everyone.

After the reading room reopened in July 2021, appointments were required for researchers to maintain social distancing and ensure their materials were available when they came to the library. The LibCal application was intended to be used to book a space in the reading room for the researcher, but staff interpreted the interface "**Appointments**" link as the one to use instead of "**Spaces**". After a specific instruction sheet was designed and the exact place to select was illustrated, library staff correctly booked spaces in the reading room for the researchers.



Keeping “Universal Design” principles in mind helps make instructional sessions, particularly in the online environment, accessible for everyone.

Conclusion

As libraries are facing an ever challenging and changing digital landscape, their efforts to overcome the societal digital inequities are paramount. However, they also need to look inward and identify areas where deficiencies lifelong learning particularly in digital technologies among staff have resulted in a digital divide within their walls.

An environmental scan can identify where organizational inequities exist such as with departments without the latest applications or IT support for their programs. Individual staff members may have been overlooked in placement on committees working on digitization projects because of perceptions about their technology skills. The staff may have internalized the feeling that they aren’t tech savvy or they may hide their skill gap in various ways.

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Accessibility have come to the forefront is hiring staff, program and project activities in libraries and in addressing societal digital inequities, but they are also critically important in overcome the library staff digital divide. Library workers need equitable access to not only to the IT infrastructure, such as high speed Internet connections but also the means to acquire and apply the digital skills to fully participate in the library’s outreach to the community it serves. Within the library, there are diverse voices of staff that can provide unique perspectives and important information, if only they are put on committees and given the opportunity to contribute. Inclusion in the digital library landscape means that barriers to instruction both onsite and virtually need to be investigated and remediated. Accessibility frequently is addressed at the level of those with hearing and sight challenges, but also is important to look at Universal Design in instruction that meets the needs of the greatest number of library staff.

Advocate for IT support services and identify gaps in equipment and knowledge of how to use it across the entire library to bridge the digital divide within your walls.

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