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Pivoting Like Never Before

In late December of the year that dares not speak its name, I moderated a virtual panel discussion of information managers in which they talked about what strategies they would be bringing with them into 2021 and what they would be leaving behind. (A white paper summarizing the insights from the webinar is available at go.copyright.com/l/37852/2021-01-08/whzp8w.)

Several panelists mentioned the long-term impact of providing library services in an entirely remote environment: Even those who did not have a physical collection were affected. This got me thinking about the continuing challenge of ensuring that libraries and information services continue to be seen—and funded—as essential resources, particularly when all interactions are conducted virtually. When offices were closed and both library staff and clients were working remotely, information managers had to ensure that stakeholders understood the ongoing need for the physical collection and a centralized space from which library staff could work, even if the staff was not currently using the physical collections. One library director commented that she had increased her (virtual) training program by 40% last year to raise awareness and better connect users with all the tools and resources available to them through the library.

Several panelists mentioned the need for more messaging about the library's ROI for information services. One information manager is developing new videos highlighting the libraries services; each video is customized to a department's specific concerns. Another saw an opportunity to expand the library's presence while the library staff members were working from home by repurposing a telepresence robot from the organization's security department. This has enabled the library to continue to staff information desks at remote locations and support the researchers who still must work in the office. As she noted, this initiative has enabled the library to participate in the organization's exploration of innovative ways to work in a new environment, and it has enhanced the library's reputation as agile and engaged with the organization's strategic direction.

A recurring theme among the panelists was the need to use this opportunity to rethink the research services and information resources that the library provides. When users had to scramble to figure out how to access the library remotely, they often became aware for the first time of the extent of the library's digital collections. As more offices reopen, users will likely bring to the office new information-gathering practices and expectations. Library managers can use this time to engage with practice groups and teams, learning what their specific information resource needs are now, building strategic usage of existing subscriptions, and initiating conversations about joint funding of newly appreciated digital resources.

This is also the time when the library can reexamine how it can insert its information resources and services into the workflow of its various client groups. This might mean creating browser extensions to help users obtain licensed content or building a chatbot that addresses FAqsregarding the library's services. Libraries will be taking an even more collaborative approach to providing information solutions, working with teams to explore new ways to best leverage the library's resources.

One of the more challenging aspects of offices reopening may be the struggle of library staff having to simultaneously adjust to new ways of providing existing library services while also having to discover how their client groups' needs and priorities have changed during the past year. Several panelists mentioned the importance of being open to new and unexpected ways of serving their users and of reevaluating their budget and staff priorities to reflect their organization's current environment. Information managers need to encourage all their staff to serve as the face of the library, actively listening to what each user needs now and considering what changes might help the library better meet those needs. Through this process, one information manager realized that, by paying attention to the new questions and issues being raised by users, she could identify new opportunities and innovative services. As she said, "We don't have to come up with all the ideas; we just have to be open to the opportunities that come our way."

Online searchers have always been agile, but the challenges of 2021 call for even more creativity, innovative thinking, and proactive approaches to meet the needs of users. Last year, we found many of our assumptions about where and how we work, as well as how we provide information services, were upended. This year offers us new opportunities to reexamine what services we provide, how we deliver results, and how we can use our professional skills to help our organizations thrive in changing regulatory, economic, and competitive environments. We are called to view every user interaction as another opportunity to challenge, or at least examine, our assumptions about what an information professional is in this new information environment.

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Comments? Email the editor-in-chief (marydee@xmission.com).