



URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL

INSPIRING LIBRARIES.
TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES.

Leadership Brief: Building Connected Communities

Overview

Public libraries have established themselves as vital resources in a technology-driven world. “Today, no other institution rivals the significance of public libraries as technology gateways providing a wide range of resources that meet personal and professional needs, support local economies, and build stronger communities,” wrote Washington, DC, City Administrator Rashad Young and Urban Libraries Council President and CEO Susan Benton.¹

Technology is constantly evolving, bringing both opportunities and challenges. What is nice to have one day becomes essential the next. “Meeting the growing technology needs of our communities is an expensive fiscal challenge, but it absolutely has to be a priority,” said Pat Martel, city manager of Daly City, California, and president of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). “The opportunities are what we can envision and the sky’s the limit.”

The pace of change and its immediate impact on daily life and economic success make the role of public libraries as trusted guides in a rapidly changing world increasingly vital. Every day, libraries offer programs, services, and resources that introduce the possibilities of technology, build digital literacy skills, and provide access for all.

This Leadership Brief highlights the role of libraries as community technology leaders who are uniquely qualified to bridge digital divides, support community priorities, and improve quality of life, working in close partnership with community leaders. It provides examples of how libraries are leveraging technology to deliver services that meet community needs and identifies six action strategies to achieve the best possible opportunities for the entire community.

The 21st Century Technology Landscape

“The world is now mediated through a digital environment,” said Boston Public Library Interim President David Leonard. That new environment shapes how people interact with each other and organizations, how governments operate and deliver services, the skills needed to succeed in today’s workforce, how learners acquire and use knowledge, and the role libraries play in supporting community priorities. The following themes highlight the scope of today’s digital world and the library’s role in it.

Technology is at the center of daily life. Mobile devices, apps, social media, e-government, GIS, and online everything are norms for “doing life.” Economic, educational, and social success depend on being able to participate in the digital environment.

Digital literacy is essential to navigating the knowledge economy. Thriving in the digital world requires new skills

ranging from basics, such as how to set up an e-mail account, use a mouse, or access the Internet, to more sophisticated skills, such as searching databases, applying for benefits online, accessing e-government services, or using a 3D printer. Digital literacy is particularly important for long-term economic success, including finding a job and acquiring skills needed to thrive in the workforce.

Technology is a catalyst for improved education outcomes. Digital media engages learners in new ways, supports lifelong learning, and changes the way people manage information. Libraries are at the forefront of that education revolution. High-tech learning labs, web-based read-along programs and homework help, online tutorials for test preparation, and more contribute to improved education outcomes.

Public libraries are uniquely qualified to bridge digital divides and ensure access to emerging technology. Libraries bring a wealth of assets to the challenges of the 21st century digital environment, including their status as trusted

community hubs, experience building literacy skills, track record for building partnerships, capacity to adapt to change, and ability to reach people where they are.

High-speed broadband is increasingly essential in the digital world. The Federal Communications Commission describes broadband as “the great infrastructure challenge of the early 21st century,” and “a foundation for economic growth, job creation, global competitiveness, and a better way of life.”² Despite progress in broadband deployment, significant geographic and economic divides remain. More than 50 percent of households with incomes under \$30,000 and 53 percent of rural Americans lack access to broadband speeds needed to use high-quality voice, data, graphics, and video resources.³

Social media connects citizens and their government. Electronic alerts, an interactive website, and mobile apps

help governments inform, engage, and connect with residents, build strong communities, and provide value.

Libraries as Community Technology Leaders

Technology has changed the way libraries do business, connect with the communities they serve, deliver programs and services, and support community priorities. City Manager Martel has seen the dramatic evolution of libraries during her 35 years in public service, including one stint as an interim library director. “Libraries have evolved from being places where people go to get books or magazines to serving as community centers of information in a variety of formats and gathering places where the public can share ideas, collaborate, learn, and prepare for success in life” Martel said.

Technology has made it possible for libraries to:

- Provide 24/7 access to library resources anytime, anywhere.
- Incubate new technologies and provide hands-on experience using the next essential thing.
- Broaden and deepen educational opportunities for people of all ages.
- Provide opportunities to create and publish content, invent, and collaborate in new ways.
- Connect with people in the community who never walk into a library.
- Make the library website a one-stop online shop for databases, e-government services, learning tools, and more.
- Offer e-books and other downloadable media to library users.
- Contribute to improved quality of life in the communities they serve.

But libraries need to be strategic about how they use technology to meet community needs and deliver services by (1) leveraging technology to support identified strategic goals and (2) assessing how technology enhances existing priorities rather than defining technology as a separate set of activities. “Our goal is to integrate technology into the everyday fabric of what the library is,” said Tammy Baggett, director, Durham County Public Library, Durham, NC.

“Libraries are vital links between residents and government at all levels.”

—Pat Martel, City Manager, Daly City, California

The Edge System: Building a Digital Roadmap

Edge is a performance-management system that provides a framework for assessing library technology services and developing a long-term digital strategy. Supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Edge was developed by a coalition of national organizations, including the International City/County Management Association, and led by the Urban Libraries Council. Edge is built around the first set of national benchmarks for the public library field that identify essential library technology services.

Edge gives local governments the capacity to:

- Measure the effectiveness of library technology services.
- Benchmark library services against national performance.
- Compare results to similar-sized libraries and communities.
- Create a roadmap for improving and enhancing services to better meet community needs.
- Support decisions about investing in library technology infrastructure and services.

“The Edge assessment tool enabled us to put together our technology road map for the future,” said San Antonio, Texas, City Manager Sheryl Sculley. “I’m certainly not a technology expert, but I am a futurist. I want to look three-to-five years down the road to assess where we want to be and what we need to do today to get there. Edge helped us take that long-term view.”

Strategies for Building Connected Communities

Libraries are essential to success in today's digital environment. The resources and services they provide open doors of opportunity to people of all ages and from all economic backgrounds, demystify technology for new users, and give people the skills and support to participate in the digital environment.

The following six strategies provide a framework for collaborative action to build digitally inclusive, connected communities.

1. Intentionally align library technology services and resources with community priorities.
2. Ensure that technology is integrated into the library's strategic focus.
3. Build a long-term digital strategy and regularly assess technology infrastructure, services, and community needs to support continued investment.
4. Establish partnerships that enhance the library's capacity, impact, and ability to keep pace with technology changes.
5. Participate in critical discussions about community priorities, technology needs, and library roles.
6. Prepare for the future by incubating new technologies, engaging with technology experts, and encouraging innovation.
7. Encourage and support innovation and creativity in education that goes beyond traditional models and celebrate successes, no matter how small.

Here are some examples of how libraries are supporting local priorities and building connected communities.

Access for All

- The **Free Library of Philadelphia's** Techmobile brings wireless Internet access, laptops, iPads, a printer, books, learning opportunities, and an onboard digital resource specialist to neighborhoods for hands-on experience, digital literacy training, access to job-searching resources, and more.
- The **Saint Paul Public Library** lends mobile hotspot devices to ensure that patrons aren't left in the digital dark when the library closes. The library focuses particularly on kids and teens without home Internet access so that they can use school-provided tablets and

Challenges for Libraries as Technology Leaders

- Keeping up with the rapid rate of technology advances.
- Maintaining as close to a state-of-the-art technology infrastructure as possible with limited resources.
- Building staff competence to meet changing needs—competence that is different from traditional library skills.
- Telling the library's story as a vital technology leader and using data and outcome measures to verify the story.

access educational resources such as homework help after hours.

- The **Kansas City Public Library**, in partnership with Kansas City Public Schools, Literacy Kansas City, and Connecting for Good, launched a hotspot lending program to bring Internet access to low-income families. The four-way partnership includes computer literacy training for parents to empower them to help children with homework and complete online-only job applications.⁴
- The **Grand Rapids Public Library** supports digital literacy to meet a range of needs through its *Speak with a Geek Computer Classes*. Over the past year, the library helped a world traveler set up an e-mail account to keep in contact with friends in Africa, taught basic Internet skills to a 90-year-old first-time user, and introduced word processing to an unemployed technician hoping to reenter the workforce.

Education and Innovation

- **Skokie Public Library** encourages girls in grades 6 through 8 to "embrace their inner nerd" by learning coding skills through its *Grrrls Code* educational sessions.
- **Durham County Public Library** took its STEM programming for teens to new heights by launching a teen-built capsule filled with library memorabilia into near space.
- The **Toronto Public Library's** *innovation hubs* offer access to cutting-edge technology and digital information sessions for learners of all ages to get hands-on experience, improve skills, and introduce new technology and software.

E-rate Supports Increased Library Connectivity

E-rate is the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) program that provides funds to libraries and schools to support connectivity. Launched in 1996 on the front-end of the Internet age, the FCC modernized the E-rate program in 2014 to support 21st century connectivity including:

- Increasing total annual funding from \$2.4 billion to \$3.9 billion with annual adjustments for inflation.
- Making more funds available for internal wireless networks and robust broadband while phasing out support for older technologies such as telephone service.

“By providing increased funding for WiFi service to the library systems that serve the greatest share of the U.S. population, the FCC recognized the critical need for connectivity in the 21st century and the library’s role in meeting this need,” said ULC President and CEO Susan Benton.

- The **Chicago Public Library’s** YOUmedia teen digital center is a national model for learning labs in libraries that provides access to new media, emphasizes interest-driven and production-centered learning, and connects teens to adult mentors and future career opportunities.

Workforce Development and Entrepreneurship

- **JobLINC, Memphis Public Library’s** mobile career center, helps job hunters prepare resumes, hone interviewing skills, conduct job searches, apply for jobs using onboard laptops, and connect with potential employers.
- **Boston Public Library** is redesigning and expanding its business library to create a public lab, informal networking space, and educational facility to give business users access to innovative technology tools that aren’t available anywhere else.
- **Denver Public Library** offers summer camps in neighborhood libraries to introduce at-risk teens to the possibilities of STEM careers, working with volunteer tech-industry professionals.
- The Business and Job Center at the **Richland Library, South Carolina** provides a variety of workforce resources, including 18 computers exclusively for job seekers with three-hour use periods, classes to support job success, and coaching on career strategies such as how to establish an online presence using social media.

Health and Wellness

- The **Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County** provides a wealth of online information to support health and wellness, including databases, websites, local resources, and recommended reading.
- The **Queens Library’s** *Where in Queens* app and website connect users with nearby medical and social services, including directions on how to get to the closest available resource.
- Public library technology resources have played a key role in providing access to health insurance through Affordable Care Act marketplaces. James Wadleigh, CEO of Access HealthCT, said Internet-enabled computers in public libraries were essential in helping many residents get online to enroll in insurance plans.⁵

The Next Wave

“We are on the threshold of another significant digital disruption—robotics, cloud computing, and the Internet of Everything,” said Toronto City, Canada, Librarian Vickery Bowles. “The challenge for libraries and the communities they serve is ‘are we ready?’”

“Smart” everything is the next wave, and it is coming quickly. As local governments continue to explore what it means to be a digital, connected community, public libraries can quickly adapt to new technologies, be vigilant about bridging digital divides, explore new ways to leverage technology to meet community needs, and *be ready*. Libraries are already providing programs and services that support community priorities and improve the quality of life for all residents. That role will become broader, deeper, and even more essential as the next “smart” wave arrives.

Endnotes

¹ Rashad Young and Susan Benton. “Strengthening the Library’s Strategic Role: Prepare to Focus on Public Access Technology.” *Public Management*, September 2015, 7.

² “National Broadband Plan: Connecting America,” Federal Communications Commission, March 17, 2010, <http://www.broadband.gov/plan/executive-summary/>.

³ “2015 Broadband Progress Report,” Federal Communications Commission, <https://www.fcc.gov/reports/2015-broadband-progress-report>.

⁴ Allison Kite, “KC Public Library: Hotspot for Bridging Digital Divide,” *Kansas City Business Journal*, May 29, 2015.

⁵ Panel discussion at Rising to the Challenge: Connecticut Dialogue on Public Libraries, Hartford, CT, April 13, 2015.

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