Chapter 11
Beyond the Pandemic:
Future Prospects for Libraries in the Cloud

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that libraries should sustain and increase allocations to cloud computing technologies following the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than falling back into old management styles. The power of the collaborative environment makes it possible to administratively restructure the library to improve efficiency in the virtual domain, where libraries will find themselves operating more and more. Remote work arrangements have altered the relationship between employee and employer, setting new expectations and demanding new ideas about operations. The author discusses how this "new normal" will necessitate changes in how directors govern their staff, especially in an era of reduced budgets.

INTRODUCTION

Libraries worldwide quickly transitioned from physical to virtual services amid the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. This rapid transformation included changing physical access hours, closing stacks, creating virtual access points, and delivering physical volumes in innovative ways (Temiz, 2020). On top of the public health toll caused by COVID-19, the pandemic response caused major declines in economic activity worldwide, as misinformation spread and obscured the severity of the dual crises.

Dramatic economic events often precede major shifts in how entire industries operate. Such catalytic events determine which organizations thrive over the long term, as new economic conditions and changed consumer behavior restructure industrial segments (Gulati, 2010). The sharp recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will be no different in this regard.

In the library, the complementary trends of service virtualization and cloud-based collaboration were well underway before 2020. The pandemic accelerated their use in the daily management of departments, project teams, and services. A literature review shows that libraries have been implementing cloud computing to improve access and service for more than a decade. However, despite widespread administrative

interest in cloud-based collaborative technologies, it took a worldwide pandemic to catalyze the various approaches into a cohesive strategy for service delivery.

As Jones notes, "Libraries have spent the past two decades increasing and expanding their digital collections, sharing these collections across jurisdictions, and exploring new licensing models like pay-per-use of Hoopla and Kanopy. Having this groundwork in place when COVID struck was foundational" (2020, p. 955).

Foundational indeed. As the pandemic began to impact the economy, libraries already possessed critical Internet-based tools and were able to effectively shift to virtual management and service models using cloud collaboration software, cloud-based discovery systems, and digital archiving platforms.

This chapter argues that libraries should sustain and increase allocations to these technologies going forward, rather than falling back into old management styles. When the public health threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic finally subsides, some libraries may revert to previous administrative models and return to providing service in "tried and true" ways. Library leaders will need to be aware of their normalcy bias because the economic changes caused by the pandemic will make some operating models insufficient in the post-pandemic world. Failing to further invest in cloud-based technologies carries significant risks.

We will discover how other industries have adapted to COVID-19 and how they handled previous economic shocks. The extreme circumstances that caused so many libraries to shut their doors can now be thought of as a "proof of concept" regarding cloud collaboration, providing important lessons about how library staff members can operate remotely going forward, using best practices established in the corporate world.

As a professional journalist in the early 2000s, this author witnessed the rapid and chaotic shift from print to online news. News organizations that were unable to create robust virtual business models suffered in myriad ways. Organizational finances were greatly impacted, as were the workforce, staff morale, subscriber base, and mission integrity. The difficult transition in the news industry is well documented (and continues), and these failures offer an important warning to libraries today.

BACKGROUND

Libraries serve an important educational function for societies. They help the underserved access critical information for research and life betterment. Additionally, in recent years as the housing crisis turned into a crisis of homelessness, public libraries have needed to design essential public services, like providing venues for job training, tax services, and places of warmth and safety (Anderson et.al., 2012, p. 178). Academic libraries provide access to digital databases, physical volumes, and rely on sharing networks to provide books and journals through Interlibrary Loan (ILL) operations.

While "service delivery" is firmly expressed in the traditional library mission, in the pandemic era libraries had to take immediate action to continue to fulfill critical services. This marks an unexpected but positive affirmation of the library's role in society. Specialized departments were asked to find novel ways to complete mission-oriented tasks, even as workforces were displaced and physical access to key resources was restricted.

Functionally distinct departments in libraries (and elsewhere) are the logical outcome of the increasing specialization of labor since the industrial revolution. This segregation of duties is often termed the "division of labor." In Western business schools, it is common practice to invoke the writings of 18th-century

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