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Building Entrepreneurial Competencies in Library Staff: Getting Started

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Abstract

Library staff in public and academic libraries face challenges to build library staff competencies to serve a growing population of entrepreneurs. Most public libraries provide workforce development assistance, and of those, 48% provide entrepreneurial services to these communities (American Library Association, n.d.). What can we learn from those libraries in order to build our capacity to grow entrepreneurs? When library staff teach individuals about new technologies in our makerspaces, these community members invent new tools, or objects. How do we extend their expertise? Library staff can create pipelines to fabrication resources, patent centers, and small business resources in order to assist our communities to grow and start their own businesses. Meeting these growing needs, finding and providing information services in this vein is a part of the traditional library model. How can libraries best serve entrepreneurial-minded individuals? How can libraries boost their capacity to meet this need? What kinds of training do we need to address this issue?

Introduction

While most (99%) of public libraries offer workforce development to job seekers, 48% of libraries and library staff across the United States are offering entrepreneurial services to their communities, as part of their library's suite of services. Other libraries are just beginning, and even more are in some stage of consideration. Service to entrepreneurial types is a growing area. Many people can be considered entrepreneurs - and everyone can learn how to provide services to individuals in this group.

In this introduction, I will share some key definitions regarding entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurial services. In the following sections, I will: discuss some reasons why offering entrepreneurial services is beneficial to your community, share information about other libraries offering these services, and list identified key competencies library staff can build with specific practical steps for each suggested area.

In this article, I borrow a definition of entrepreneurship that a University Innovation Fellow, Angelica Willis, first shared on a blog written by Boise State University Student, and University Innovation Fellow, Camille Eddy. Willis, a student at North Carolina Agriculture and Technology University, defines entrepreneurship as "creating something that didn't exist before and attaching value to it," (Eddy, 2016). In this way, many library staff are already entrepreneurs. Being able to identify as an entrepreneur, or using entrepreneurial thinking, is the first step to recognizing what entrepreneurship can be. When library staff evaluate programs with data, and try new programs, and learn how their community values different types of programs, these staff members are using entrepreneurial skills to do so. This definition includes makers, farmers, Etsy store owners, local food or beverage craftspeople, teachers, educational technologists, and anyone with an idea wanting to turn it into reality.

Another key term to become familiar with is minimum viable product, which is a way to test an idea or hypothesis that doesn't cost any money. This can be a website that is marketed to a test user group promoting an idea, product or service that doesn't exist yet in order to gauge interest. Abby Fichter from Har-

vard's Innovation Lab refers to this technique as a "validation hack" (2013) – creating a resource-free way to test your idea to see if there is demand and interest.

Design Thinking is a methodology that helps entrepreneurs, or anyone leading a product or service, to create something that is really needed, and serves a real purpose. Design Thinking can be used to help anyone innovate and develop new business ideas. Design Thinking is described by the IDEO University website as a "process for creative problem solving" (2017).

Becoming familiar with these terms, tools, concepts, and processes is important because the number of new businesses and entrepreneurs is on the rise in the United States. There are many reasons why libraries may want to connect to this community, and creating a vibrant, local economy is one. Helping citizens learn new technology, and start new businesses based on this technology, should help improve the local economy, and in turn should also help improve local economies. This is particularly important in small cities through the United States who do not experience the same luxury of working in large cities with access to venture capital and many big businesses. Speaking for the states in the United States in the Pacific Northwest, Montana, Washington, and Oregon boast a strong entrepreneurial spirit compared to other states (Obschonka, M., Schmitt-Rodermund, E., Silbereisen, R. K., Gosling, S. D., & Potter, J., 2013). The Pacific Northwest libraries may want to focus more on meeting the needs of this user group, in comparison to other regions.

Librarians Hoppenfeld and Malafi (2015) note that the creation of new businesses "should have a positive effect on the economy." In this article they also discuss the different types of services that are offered at libraries across the country. These includes providing research services that are traditional, such as marketing data and research about similar companies and market share. Other services include networking, serving as an incubator, and serving as a place for patent and trademark research. Their article outlines specific ways to offer more in depth research to budding entrepreneurs, once introductory familiarization is complete, and a library team is ready to offer services to entrepreneurs.

Authors Wiens and Jackson state that of new businesses, those recently created tend to be small businesses, and they account for significant innovation and job creation, "are the primary source of job creation in the American economy. Not only that, but these firms also contribute to economic dynamism by injecting competition into markets and spurring innovation" (2015). Entrepreneurial services are natural extensions of other services that we provide such as helping community members find and apply for jobs, growing job skills in technology, and providing information resources, only the information is slightly different than other services. Entrepreneurial services begin with a reference interview, just like with any initial discussion with a library user. As many libraries are invested in helping others find new jobs, creating new businesses can help with that because "New businesses account for nearly all net new job creation and almost 20 percent of gross job creation" (Denning, 2014). Furthermore, the number of solo-entrepreneurs, or solopreneurs, is expected to grow.

Barbara Alvarez, a business liaison librarian at Westmont Public Library in Illinois, works together with other public librarians in the Chicago area to research more about how entrepreneurs work, and what their needs and values are. In 2015 Alvarez wrote, "On a national level, there are 17.9 million 'solopreneurs,' individuals who operate their business completely on their own; this number is expected to swell to 40 million by 2019." Libraries will experience this in the demand for certain services, including wireless internet,

solo desk space, and electricity. As they will be looking for those services, they will also welcome additional business expertise. Library staff must attempt to meet the needs of these users, and encourage all individuals to become entrepreneurs. Alvarez writes that 80% of the businesses in her area have only 1-4 employees, which is why providing information and other library services to these individuals is critical. Without large staff members, with a small margin of error, the folks at these businesses need to boost their skillset rapidly to keep up with their growing business needs.

The American Library Association's Libraries Transform campaign also highlights entrepreneurship as a key element of libraries. Library staff help connect entrepreneurs to tools to make their new products and prototypes. Libraries Transform (2017) reports that "business owners and employees use resources at public libraries to support their small businesses 2.8 million times every month. Entrepreneurs are increasingly using 3D printers in libraries to build prototypes of new products." Library staff need to develop core competencies in entrepreneurship to help this user group. Library staff, when empowered with these skills, can fulfill a need in the local economy. Continuing to meet this gap will help libraries remain the innovation centers of their local communities, and help to create jobs.

Which libraries are offering services to entrepreneurs?

Many libraries across the United States offer services to entrepreneurs. The most traditional of those are Patent and Trademark Resource Centers (PTRCs). The United States Patent and Trademark Office has been designating PTRCs since 1871, when disseminating patent information to libraries was critical for innovation and development in industry (USPTO, 2015). These centers now exist in most states, and help teach individuals how to search patent databases, among other services.

The University of Nevada Reno DeLaMare Library hosts both a makerspace as well as a Patent and Trademark Resource Center combined to help the community with their new business needs. As individuals work to develop new ideas in makerspaces, and using emerging technology, they develop businesses, and can do this all in one place: the library.

While there are many more examples, here are a good selection of examples I chose for their diversity of type, in hopes that each might inspire library staff and their communities to create a similar kind of space. Additionally, there are libraries doing this work everywhere, and each deserve their own case study, but they are not mentioned as work and research on their services or innovation hubs is not readily accessible at this time.

In 2015, Steven Bell noted in *Library Journal* a space that served entrepreneurial students called The Hatchery. Bell writes that this service will expand in the future to serve all students, democratizing access so that all majors may become entrepreneurs: "Increasingly, colleges and universities want to expand these services to include liberal arts, communications, science, and other majors who can likewise benefit from exploring entrepreneurial possibilities." Due to this drive and need, academic libraries should be looking for more opportunities in this area.

The University of Arizona-Tucson now has an innovation center called iSpace housed in their library (Nichols, Melo, & Dewland, 2017). The iSpace partners with groups across their campus to host events and provide a space for diverse groups to work. They see makerspaces as a space for digital humanists to work. iSpace focuses on being a multidisciplinary learning space with tools, services, and equipment

available to use.

The New York Public Library has a Small Business Resource Center (New York Public Library, n.d.). There, library staff offer traditional information services, and also business plan competitions, as well as support for immigrants starting their new businesses. Offering venture capital and other competitive grants is a common way for libraries to partner with local businesses, and help grow new business ideas.

The Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative offers Business and Entrepreneur Services (Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative, n.d.). This is accomplished with a few easy steps. The library offers flexible space where entrepreneurs can work, information services for research, and instruction about how to start a business.

Idea +Space in Pima County, Arizona provides robust entrepreneurial services (Pima County Public Library, n.d.). They consider their audience to be small businesses, entrepreneurs, nonprofits, and others looking for jobs. They offer workshops on lean startups and other business tools.

Sara Peterson-Davis writes (2015) about the space at Mid-Continent Public Library in Missouri (MCPL). There they offer Square One Business Services, where the library is “making entrepreneurs our business by offering programs that provide information and skills they need to be successful.” Peterson-Davis demonstrates that asking the entrepreneurs and listening to them when asked about their needs helps libraries grow their services. Their most popular programs were called Small Business Bootcamps and The Business of Food Trucks. Current offerings include help with business plans, and creating an entrepreneurial community.

How to Build Entrepreneurial Competencies and Begin Services to Support Entrepreneurs

In this section, I outline some key steps and easy entry points for library staff to become familiar with entrepreneurial services. Library staff who try a few of these action steps will begin their journey in entrepreneurial services. Trying a few of these ideas will help library staff get started building key competencies to serving entrepreneurs in their community. Like any good library service, the key to success is working with invested members of that community to advance the services based on feedback. In general, the core value sets for developing these services include: design thinking, user experience, makerspaces, entrepreneurship, and business skills.

Conduct an Environmental Scan of Innovation Spaces

The most critical first step for library staff interested in building entrepreneurial skills is to first get a grasp on what already exists for entrepreneurs and small business owners by making a list of the available innovation spaces (startup hubs, co-working spaces, meetup groups, small business development centers, patent and trademark centers, makerspaces) in the area.

An environmental scan is a survey of local, existing services that serve entrepreneurs within the city, or region. They serve entrepreneurs in many ways – prototyping assistance, manufacturing, software development, venture capital, and skill building. Are there places that offer such services? Conduct a scan by identifying those and listing their services. Are there businesses who cater to a specific type of entrepreneur? For example, library staff may find growing needs in the virtual reality area, and other businesses who help

the virtual reality startups design their objects.

Entrepreneurs need all kinds of services including small business centers to assist with filing forms and establishing lines of credit, connections to venture capitalists, technology meetups to find others passionate about their idea who might help them create a better product, co-working spaces to meet up and get work done without having to pay for their own office, and even places that host workshops on everything from patents to how to test good ideas through minimum viable products.

As library staff become familiar with the needs and the work of local entrepreneurs, keep track of the spaces, types of services, and their fee structure. This environmental scan will help library staff identify service gaps, if there are any, and evaluate whether or not the library can offer services that meet these gaps. Listening to individuals who use these services and leaders in this community will give library staff ideas that the library could do to help further services that overlap with the mission of the library.

Conducting customer interviews is a key skillset that can help develop library services in this area, and also is a skill that entrepreneurs and small business owners will need to use. Listen to the services mentioned by these user groups, and pay attention to pain points, and needs, that they identify.

Not only will visiting other innovation centers help library staff become familiar with these kinds of services but in addition they will be able to refer users to these spaces depending on the needs each individual user has.

Action Step: create a spreadsheet listing innovation centers in your area, visit their websites, and drop by for a tour to learn about their services. Fill out information in the spreadsheet about who they serve, what kinds of services and tools they provide, and their fee structures. Interview customers and leaders to find out more about their needs.

Design Thinking

Having a good understanding of the design thinking process will benefit library staff who want to become intrapreneurs as well as entrepreneurs. Intrapreneurs help to reimagine services, processes, and models within the library or business entity, serving internal customers, which in turn benefits external customers. Libraries and library staff routinely work as intrapreneurs. Self-recognition of library staff and librarians as intrapreneurs will benefit those users who also identify this way.

Design thinking starts with empathy for the individuals, much like all library services. Using empathy, and discussing barriers that individuals have in their work, entrepreneurs can design and prototype services and products to help these individuals do their work better.

Library staff and librarians can use design thinking methodology to improve the ways that services are analyzed and revised based on feedback. Design thinking, as a methodology, has many different action steps that libraries can also adopt, to improve services overall. Through adopting some of techniques, libraries can make a greater impact in their communities, through continuous improvement.

Action Step: Form a team and participate in the design thinking Crash Course from

the dSchool at Stanford University. After participating in this crash course, use the methodology to revise an area in library services. Create design thinking workshops for your library staff.

Co-working Spaces

Libraries may very well be the original co-working space. Full of information resources, and information services, anyone looking to start their own business or start-up can collaborate and meet in libraries. Since there is also wireless internet and electricity provided, that sets the stage for success.

As Alvarez writes (2015), entrepreneurs want to be around others like them, not working alone all day on their business. They are attracted to co-working spaces, and places like libraries, for the connection to other people.

Action Step: Visit another co-working space where members pay for access. Review ways that the library can offer services. Can the library market remote information or marketing services? Can library staff change the library spaces to attract entrepreneurs and start-up folks?

Meetup groups

Many small and large cities have meetup groups. MeetUp is a website that allows like-minded individuals to meet regarding a certain topic, activity, or idea. Many of these are based around technologies including start-ups, makerspaces, or user experience design. If these exist in a library community, it is very easy for library staff to join the groups, and attend the meetings, offering services, and listening to needs.

Action Step: Search MeetUp.com in your city for technology or entrepreneurial based meet up groups. Attend a meeting and learn what they do. See if you can speak at the next meetup to share the information services that the library offers. If you have a subscription to Lynda.com or Treehouse, many coders will be interested.

Business Model Canvas

Anyone starting up a business or new idea can use the business model canvas to develop the idea and help it come to fruition. The business model canvas is a standard tool that allows you to put a business model into one page. It is a tool that helps someone with an idea to outline different aspects of the idea so that others can help the business idea grow, see it's vitality, or probability of success. This process also helps the individual to see if they have a core market segment, or user group, and determine if it is feasible or not. The business canvas tool also helps individuals determine what kinds of resources they may need to develop the business idea.

There are many free resources, like Strategyzer Canvas, or Canvanizer, or Business Model Template, and related tools that can help library staff learn how to use the business canvas model or value proposition.

Action Step: Use Canvanizer (<https://canvanizer.com/>) to evaluate an idea. If library staff use this tool to help them develop their entrepreneurial services, they will be able to

better communicate the idea with key stakeholders, and share the resources that are needed for the idea to succeed.

Conclusion

Library communities will benefit from linking makerspaces to job seekers to starting their own businesses. Makers typically enter a library makerspace in order to come up with a solution to a problem, to develop a tool, or educational model, or create something fun. Sometimes, these ideas that makers have meet the needs of more individuals besides the individual who walked in the door. This could help benefit the local economies where libraries reside. By offering innovation spaces that allow individuals to explore their own ideas, they can develop concepts, products, and services that can benefit their local community. Library staff can build their core competencies to serve these groups.

As librarians build their skillsets in entrepreneurial services, their communities will benefit. More research needs to be done to measure this relationship. As library staff become confident regarding these skills, so will their communities.

Library staff and librarians must continually research the ideas, and developments, in the field of entrepreneurship, to constantly grow the skillsets and competencies of library staff. Library staff would benefit from researching the local needs in their individual communities and libraries. Additionally, library staff that can connect their services to new business development may find this metric valuable to key stakeholders. More research needs to be done in this area in order to improve, standardize and refine library services to entrepreneurs. While it is possible that no two libraries will offer the same kinds of entrepreneurial services, more work needs to be done in order to standardize these services across libraries.

Meanwhile, participation in these action steps will help familiarize library staff with core competencies in entrepreneurship, gain familiar language, and will hopefully use these tools to develop new library services to reach entrepreneurs and meet their needs. Library staff have traditionally offered information services to diverse groups of individuals, and becoming more familiar with this growing user group will only help libraries maintain their position as the information and innovation hubs in their communities.

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