

Case study

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# The Evolve Project

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The Evolve Project



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The Evolve Project is an open collaborative platform that aims to change the way people see libraries, led by Brian Pichman and Dave Hesse. The goal of the Evolve Project is to help libraries **create** stories and become more engaging. Libraries should no longer be a process (check in and out books), but an experience. To accomplish this, libraries need to create new ways to learn and explore.

The project was born when we noticed there was a drop of patron activity after the Summer Reading program at our library, the Mokena Community Public Library District in Mokena, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. During the summer, there's a lot more engagement with programs and fun activities – so circulation numbers are up and library spaces are busy. We concluded that a complete redesign and overhaul of interactive technology would encourage more children to come to the library, all year long.

We first identified five pillars that should be a focal point for the redesign.

- **Innovation**
  - This must be an original, disruptive activity. If someone else is using an innovative idea, feel free to adopt it, but tweak it to make it unique to your library.
- **Interaction**
  - Your space must allow interaction, so patrons will learn and grow. This is necessary to maintain interest in the environment, collection, and programs.
- **Discovery**
  - By allowing an open play environment (with elements from places like museums and playgrounds) the things patrons discover will help create lasting memories and keep them coming back.
- **Collaboration**
  - People will collaborate naturally if they're focusing on something fun. By allowing spaces for collaboration, this will lead to more discoveries and adventures.
- **Invention**
  - Allow patrons to build things. By encouraging them to build and create, they will bring along friends and family members to see their creation or invite them to return to the library to create something entirely new.

We then took those focal points, and created various areas within our library setting. We reached out to new start-up companies and asked for their help and assistance. During this project, Sifteo, Sphero, and Sound Egg stepped up and provided not only discounted products, but also promotional material to help put this library on the map. A few of these areas included:

- **Creation Station**, which consisted of six touch screen computers that used Sifteo Cubes (interactive cubes) and Lego WeDos. This space was designed to allow the children a place to play, interact, and build.
- **Gaming Station**, to allow children to play video games that we had in our collection. We wanted to attract new audiences (gamers), and encourage the idea of gamification within library space. An underlying concept with most video games is they follow a plot and require coordination amongst fellow players and characters within the game.
- **Menageri-E**, a digital petting zoo or e-bar. We used untethered tablets to allow children to pick up an e-reader and play with it at any time. We wanted to keep them unlocked so children would be comfortable with playing with the devices to learn, interact, and explore.
- **Music Station**, which included Sound Eggs (semi soundproof chairs in shape of an egg) where we encouraged users to hook up their own music or borrow our own to listen to music in a fun and very cool chair.
- **Multimedia Room**, containing a touch-based Smart Board as well as a DVD player, Blu-Ray Player, document camera, and computer. We wanted to let people to use this room as a meeting space to work on projects together.

We also reached out to a company called Library Furniture International. The President, Scott Fairbanks, was so impressed by our design, which integrated technology everywhere; he agreed to help us create a one-of-a-kind space. We chose fun bright colors, and worked hard on opening up the layout. We wanted the layout to be modular in design to allow for a constant evolution and change. Moreover, we also utilized Smart Tables to encourage collaboration and interaction through touch-based educational games on a table top. Additionally, we modified the shelves so the covers of the children books were face out (versus spine out). Children do read a book by its cover.

We focused heavily on vendors and suppliers and did most of the physical labour ourselves to remain in budget. We were able to completely renovate the children's library well under a budget of £165,000 and within a timeline of three months. Google even came out and made this library one of the first to have a virtual tour inside a building. Some of the remarks the children made included "wow, it looks bigger" and "will there be a line when you open, and when should we start lining up?" All of the technology that we purchased through this project we also allowed the children to check-out and take home, along with inexpensive refurbished laptops.

In regards to additional programming, we purchased a complete laser-tag system from Ubisoft, called Battle Tag. We allowed teens to play laser tag after hours in the library space, and it was a huge success; existing library patrons who knew about the programme told their friends and brought in new patrons. We also purchased Sphero Balls to create competitive racing throughout the library. Sphero Ball is a robotic ball that you can control with your smart phone, similar to the way a remote control car works. Additionally, we used Sphero as an engagement tool. Relatively speaking, when librarians approach children about the benefits of the library while they visit schools or other locations, children don't always respond to and retain that conversation. But if we're driving the ball around the hallways or even into the classroom, kids will actually approach the librarian and want to engage in a conversation about the cool blue ball zooming around the floor. They're also more likely remember that experience and urge their family to go to the library.

Within the space we also pushed to end the practice of fining children for overdue books. Children do not have jobs, and therefore cannot pay late fees or other fines. In order for them to pay the fine, they need to ask their parents for money; and if the parents get upset this creates a negative association for them with the library, remembering "I checked out a book and mom and dad got mad". We encouraged the staff to interact with children in different ways, asking them "tell me about the book you checked out", or "hey, why don't you show me what you can build with those Legos", or "why don't you create a craft and donate it to the library". Simple things like these are huge to a developing patron, and now their experience is "I checked out a book, and then I showed the librarian..."

After the project was complete, there was an increased flow of new visitors into the library, especially at weekends. The most important piece was those existing patrons became so excited about the newly renovated space, they invited their friends to come to the library to "play." Because of this, we gained new loyal patrons, to whom we then marketed the great programmes and events the library has to offer. The library became a great meeting spot for all children, because it was fun, colourful, and offered a constant assortment of activities and adventures in the library space.