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Libraries as Start-ups

Across the world, libraries are redefining themselves in their communities. Libraries are re-branding themselves as more than a place of books. They want to attract more patrons into their library. Increasingly, they are accomplishing this by allowing more usability within the library; whether through a complete redesign of the building or re-arranging internal layouts, the goals are typically same. Libraries are trying to build places for people to make things; helping patrons innovate and collaborate through “maker spaces” or “fab labs”. Traditionally, Maker Spaces are places where people with common interests group together to create and explore.

What are some types of maker spaces and fab labs? Some libraries take a route of using 3D Printers, allowing patrons of all ages to print out 3D objects that they create on computers using various software platforms. Other libraries build amazing multimedia centers to allow patrons to record and edit music, make videos with a use of a green screen, or explore graphic design. Some libraries are able to soundproof their rooms and include all the musical equipment; from drums to guitars to keyboards to synthesizers. Some put together computer labs and training centers where patrons can learn how to code and build things from websites to actual programs and mobile applications. Libraries without expansion or remodeling budgets create open areas for people to simply group together and work on projects, build ideas, and share stories.

Why should libraries do this? A lot of people are very interested in creating “things”; music, video, and art. Unfortunately the average person cannot afford to buy the equipment and often doesn't have the needed expertise or training. Libraries have resources and connections where they can train their staff to use those types of equipment, and in turn teach their patrons how to use it.

What would really be remarkable is if libraries took another step forward and actively fostered a start-up culture. As a community anchor, the library has a lot of resources (digital or physical), spaces (maker spaces, fab labs, or open space) and most importantly, connections. The library is staffed with a variety of people, all with unique skills and passions. That same library also has a community of patrons with different backgrounds and skills. If libraries simply poll their staff and patrons and identify “community experts”, libraries can make a dramatic shift towards helping people create new ideas, new solutions, and new products.

Think of it this way: in the past, before content was available at our fingertips through the internet, one of the few trusted sources of information and knowledge was the library. The library had well trained staff to help find and research that information. Today, many people are able to source that information through the World Wide Web, however they lose that core human interaction that helps spark new ideas and concepts.

Libraries can rebuild that collaboration. After they identify the community experts, they can encourage brain-storming sessions and utilize the maker space rooms to help people build upon those ideas. Libraries have the ability to help patrons build a website, create logos, write business plans, do product research, copyright/patent checks. Libraries should be about making connections within its community to that patron along with utilizing the libraries online databases/physical collection.

From here, if a library can help just one patron completely build a start-up company and help them find funding through grants, crowd-source funding, or investment; they have not only helped that patron succeed in achieving something remarkable, but have served the community as a whole. They've also made a useful alliance, strengthening ties that could prove beneficial in the future.

To recap, libraries are about engagement and collaboration. By utilizing their maker spaces and fab labs, they can help people work together to innovate. Wouldn't it be great if the next great idea or new development in the way we use technology comes from a library patron?

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