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Straight from the Source | Innovation

by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

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FROM PROPOSAL TO PROGRAM (l.-r.) Kids of all ages are enthusiastic participants in activities sourced, developed, and led by staff at Salt Lake County Library’s Magna branch; one of the winners of NYPL’s Innovation Projects, “Dimensions,” proposed by staff at the Andrew Heiskell Braille and Talking Book Library in collaboration with digital team members, explored the use of a Braille embosser and 3-D printer to produce accessible graphics that can be explored by touch; a digital department project leader offers a hands-on tour of an accessible 3-D printer; Heiskell assistive technology coordinator and 2017 *LJ* Mover & Shaker Chancey Fleet (standing) helps a user explore TactileView software to create a graphic that will be turned into raised dots

Photos by Jill Rothstein

How libraries tap their in-house experts from the front lines for innovations that work

LIBRARIES POSSESS a not-so-secret weapon when it comes to assessing the needs of their patrons—the frontline staff who engage with their communities every day. How can library leaders best tap staff members’ expertise, make staff at all levels feel safe and welcome to contribute, and harness that information to develop programs and policies that meet real-world needs? *LJ* has spoken with library professionals who are taking decisive steps to crowdsource transformative ideas from their staff and put them into effective action.

FOSTERING INNOVATION

The Brooklyn Public Library’s (BPL) BKLYN Incubator project has connected library staff with opportunities for skills development, including training sessions, mentoring, and an official pathway for proposing new funded programs. Staffers and library leaders have used BKLYN Incubator to fill programming gaps in the library’s 60 diverse branches, as observed by the employees who work there.

Staff members at the branches naturally absorb vital information such as patron routines and preferences and the identities of important local organizations. According to Brynna Tucker, BKLYN Incubator manager, one key goal of the Incubator is to ensure that staff realize the amount of valuable knowledge that they already possess and to empower them to tap into and act on their ideas. “We offer a process to take that ethnographic research and analyze it in some way,” she says. Public service staff in particular have taken advantage of the BKLYN Incubator’s offerings, such as full-day workshops, programs on community and opportunity mapping, mentorships, and an organized process for pitching program ideas to be considered for funding. So far, the BKLYN Incubator has funded a total of 21 projects. At press time, a fourth round of proposed projects was open for public comment.

Projects proposed by branch staff and created since the 2016 start of the funding rounds include “BookMatch Teen,” for teen patrons to recommend books to their peers, and “We Hold These Truths,” which the library describes as a “documentary-style theater performance—based on the writings of adult literacy students—designed to raise awareness of the adult basic education program and give voice to our student population and the issues that matter most to them.”

Since 2014, the New York Public Library (NYPL) has also sponsored an Innovation Project that provides support and funding for staff looking to develop their ideas for programming and for driving change at the local level. Over the past three years, the Innovation Project has funded 89 programs, with most ideas coming from branch libraries and the public service librarians who work there. Children’s and young adult librarians, as well as NYPL’s Education Department, are particularly well represented in the program.

As with the BKLYN Incubator, leaders for the Innovation Project have noted the value of mentorship and of providing instruction on how to develop fleshed-out project proposals. According to Kasia Kowalska, associate director, service innovation and impact, people may have ideas “but it’s just a few sentences, or a paragraph. We work with people to make those sentences into an actual proposal, what is it that you want to do, what changes will this result in, how much will it cost.” A group of 12 to 15 staff members at NYPL—primarily people who previously received program funding—will take new participants “under their wings” and “help them through the process of writing proposals,” she explains.

SUPPORT AT SCALE

As with any ambitious library project, staff sourcing presents its own challenges and learning curves. For example, the logistics of planning a new project can prove intimidating to staff members who may not have previously worked on such a scale. In NYPL’s Innovation Project, according to Kowalska, budgeting can present a challenge when staff incorrectly assume that some resources necessary for their project will be cheap or quick and easy to find. In addition,

many “don’t realize, even a great idea has to be vetted. That creates a bit of tension: we want to try new things but can’t afford to do things that will result in a potential injury or legal liability and so on.”

While BKLYN Incubator prioritizes support for staff members who take the initiative to dive into its workshops, one thing the library cannot provide, says Tucker, is “a 25th hour in the day.” It can be challenging for staffers to attend trainings and put their energy into developing project ideas in a way that extends beyond their usual work duties and hours. In addition, participants may feel uncomfortable having their ideas assessed and judged.

An overarching theme of the Incubator is the goal of supporting staff and demystifying the process of turning their knowledge into action. As Tucker explains it, “I have yet to find someone who really loves change,” and a program that seems targeted at shaking things up can prove intimidating. Ensuring that program participants have a positive experience is key to ensuring future buy-in from their colleagues. One crucial message is that “this isn’t about ‘innovation’ or change, this is about them. Innovation and change are just the outcome,” Tucker says.

SHARING PLATFORMS

While NYPL and BPL have set up formalized processes for developing ideas and encouraging staff to take the reins of new projects, other large public library systems have introduced more informal brainstorming platforms. The District of Columbia Public Library system (DCPL), for example, uses two online programs to gather staff ideas: Vocoli, a platform for sharing and commenting on ideas, and an online “water cooler” in which staff can chat and ask questions of one another and of library leadership.

On Vocoli, used primarily by public service staff from the system’s 25 branches, staff are prompted to propose ideas and to fill in details about the benefits of the idea, whether it would be best suited to a particular library location, and whether they would like to assist with putting it into action. Users can also comment on idea posts that they find intriguing.

George Williams, media relations manager for DCPL, emphasizes that because Vocoli users must post under their real names, it “creates an environment where people feel comfortable sharing their ideas and believe that their ideas are valued.” While anonymous sharing online can often lead to a lack of courtesy, the openness of Vocoli “allows us to share ideas where we are talking to each other as professionals,” Williams says. It shows that “anyone can submit an idea, and everyone’s ideas matter.”

The enthusiastic adoption of the Vocoli and water cooler platforms among DCPL staff is owing, in part, to the system’s executive director Gary Romero, who introduced a “50x15” initiative to develop 50 new ideas in 2015, inspired by staff ideas. According to Williams, Romero was “proactive about talking about the environment he wanted to create, the ideas that he was seeing

that were intriguing, and getting people to see that the ideas they voice are not just going into a vacuum.” Staffers have learned about the online staff sourcing platforms through an internal library communications campaign, as well as internal emails and staff meetings.

The Salt Lake County Library (SLCL) in Utah also works with online platform “What if We” for staff to submit their ideas to the library management team. Like the DCPL program, the platform prompts users to elaborate on how an idea aligns with system goals, identify stakeholders, summarize the estimated fiscal and staff impact, and note potential downsides. Staff are also welcome to share ideas in any other way that they are comfortable, including through the use of employee surveys. A library management team reviews all submitted ideas, with an eye to budget considerations and other priorities, and will make the call on whether to move forward. For ideas that go to the next step, the management team will connect the staff member with other offices that can make the idea a reality.

The library has funded a variety of programs, ranging from direct patron-centered programming to behind the scenes changes that improve staff members’ day-to-day work. Examples of successfully proposed and funded projects have included a local summer reading program, for which the library provided additional personnel and funds to create reading trackers and prizes, as well as an “outreach box” program so that branch staff could store and transport outreach materials such as tablecloths and promotional items.

According to SLCL director Jim Cooper, “We love ideas from all levels of the organization because ideas are a critical part of learning and progress. In addition, the work of staff members is often directly affected by various policies, practices, and procedures, and therefore it is important to gather suggestions from all levels of the organization.” The openness of “What if We” is meant to ensure staff members know their ideas and feedback are being heard. Seeing the ideas that have been suggested by others elsewhere in the library, Cooper explains, can help “empower staff and provides the opportunity to develop a broader view of the organization.”

OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

One exciting thing about the NYPL Innovation Project, according to Kowalska, is that it is “refreshing to see how it encourages staff to come up with ideas and empowers staff and gives them a sense of co-ownership of their workspace, leading to deeper engagement. For the most part, people feel they are rewarded, they feel appreciated.” She also emphasized the significance of projects that start out as “pilots” in one library location and expand to a broader adoption throughout the system.

The value of this kind of scaling up is also linked to the importance of keeping track of new programs even after the pitch development process is done. When it comes to staff-sourced projects, it is valuable to “make sure that we are capable of tracking what’s going on with these

projects...to have evidence afterward to show that they worked. Not just program attendance but also what difference does it make?" Kowalska notes that it is "very easy to get excited about the award stage, but it's also very important to learn from the experience."

In the case of DCPL, Williams notes that the open lines of communication between local staff and library leaders will help the library assess how it is meeting its long-term goals of serving local communities. These communications go a long way toward "knowing what is happening in our neighborhoods and tailoring our services to the communities," he says. "These platforms allow us to capture and curate information that will help us get to that. This allows us to say, as we move forward, here are things that we are seeing that are resonating in this neighborhood or which will help us get to our goals. It's an exciting way to track our work as we move forward."

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staff sourcing
