

LAUNCHING

LARGE- SCALE LIBRARY INITIATIVES



INNOVATION *and* **COLLABORATION**

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ONE

GOING FAR TOGETHER

WELCOME!

Libraries serve communities and communities change.

—SARAH HASHEMI SCOTT ET AL.

“Libraries are not innovative, and librarians are not willing to change.” These two myths have been bouncing around our profession for a long time, probably since Melvil Dewey’s time. The Stodgy Library Myth is not helpful, and it doesn’t take much to disprove it. Just scratch the surface at any public, academic, or school library and you will find makerspaces, coding classes, video production studios, scholarly publishing, kids’ yoga, resume workshops, and community gardens. Innovative libraries teach skills and enrich lives while checking out human skeletons, network hubs, cake pans, Santa suits, and geological specimens. Creative activities in libraries happen because library staff are changing along with their communities.

Library science is a proud profession with a record of adapting that would compare favorably to any profession. Over the last decades we have learned a lot about innovation, collaboration, and risk-taking. For example, ALA Editions has published more than thirteen books with the word *innovation* in the title, and twice that many with *collaboration*. A search of the library literature finds more than a thousand academic articles on innovation, while collaboration has nearly two thousand entries. The evidence is

clear: librarians are committed to exploring and sharing information about innovation and collaboration. The recent pandemic has forced introspection and change on library staff, but as always, librarians adapt.

What is the place for a book geared toward using innovation and collaboration to manage large-scale library initiatives? Librarians are already innovating within their institutions. What is missing from the literature is a comprehensive examination of how to envision, launch, and manage large-scale, innovative projects across institutions. Working at a large scale adds complexity and specialized knowledge that are not required by librarians who focus on a single institution. If you wish to do something remarkable within our profession, you need to understand what drives transformative and disruptive innovation, and you need to understand how the complexity of large-scale project management requires additional planning, knowledge, and political considerations.

Librarians are innovating within the walls of our institutions, and the skills learned within each institution have great value. There is a growing awareness that to truly keep the profession moving forward in turbulent times, library staff need to work on a bigger playing field. In an age when libraries are once again reinventing themselves, the successful libraries will not be those that turn inward. In explaining his investment strategies, Warren Buffett said that “we simply attempt to be fearful when others are greedy and to be greedy only when others are fearful.” Now when most of us are fearful, it is the time to grab the opportunity to change the status quo by reaching for large, progressive visions of the future.

This book borrows heavily on research and theoretical models developed outside the library field. Libraries are often intimate places, and so the direct experience of working at a large scale across multiple institutions is not widely known within the profession. Theories from researchers like Clayton Christensen, Amy Edmondson, and Everett Rogers and business influencers like Steven Johnson, Bill Gates, and Guy Kawasaki are presented in this book, along with information on how to adapt those constructs to the library environment. This book will guide you through the basics of ideation, project management, political pitfalls, preparing for problems, and concepts you probably haven’t considered before. When you are finished, you will have the tools you need to meet one of the most difficult challenges within the profession today—planning and launching large-scale library initiatives.

TIPPING THE SCALE

Scalar emphasis has become an important question for libraries.

—LORCAN DEMPSEY

What does it mean to work at scale? In general, *at scale* is another term for *scalability*, or the ability to apply additional resources or capacity to a system to handle expanding workload. A well-scaled system is flexible enough to maintain efficient performance as demands on resources increase.

In computer science, *scalability* means to create systems that are capable of massive or rapid growth to encompass increasing demand. Think about the growth required by companies like Zoom which had to manage an avalanche of online meeting requests during the recent pandemic. In an economic context, a scalable business model has the ability to add more resources, such as the ability to add more trucks during an increase in shipping loads. The determination as to whether a new library project or service can be expanded or upgraded to accommodate greater patron demand is an important part of designing new library initiatives. In principle, scalability goes up and down the library spectrum, with some ideas being handled best at the institution level and others through a regional or national approach.

A related concept is “economies of scale.” The concept of economies of scale is used by economists in situations where the average cost of doing business decreases as the output increases. Those who run library couriers know that as more books ship between libraries, the cost of moving a single book decreases. Economy of scale is one of the most important benefits of doing larger projects. In libraries, the classic example of economy of scale is those libraries lucky enough to have negotiated statewide database packages. In the aggregate, those libraries pay much less for the same products than states where each library negotiates its own vendor contracts. For example, Minnesota libraries pay less per database use because their statewide contract includes North and South Dakota’s libraries. Vendors will lower the price per person as headcounts increase, so larger negotiating pools save libraries money.

Working at a large scale provides fertile ground for innovation to develop. Innovation proponents like Steven Johnson and Bill Gates argue that innovation occurs when unexpected connections are made, and surprising ideas can collide together. This innovation crucible is built when people working

toward a common goal bring different approaches to the table in the early ideation stage. Insular libraries do not reap the benefit of connecting staff from different organizations and unique perspectives together.

Another potential advantage of working at scale is resilience, the ability to recover quickly from difficulties. Resilience is becoming an increasingly important concept in the social sciences and business fields. For a system to be able to work across multiple libraries and geographic distances, it needs an established knowledge base, solid leadership, robust procedures, and strong interpersonal relationships. To build a stable foundation for a new project, the participants will have had to develop the tools and agreements necessary to make the collaboration work, and that helps create a resilient system.

Members of library consortia will tell you that one of the major advantages of working collaboratively is getting to know library staff outside their home institutions. The relationships built in cooperative projects improve the skills and knowledge of local staff members, expand opportunities for creative ideas to occur, and demonstrate to funders that the library is a good steward of public funds. There are also opportunities to earn solid publicity from joint projects. For example, look at the spectacular publicity the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) earned during its 2013 launch.

There are also intangible benefits in large-scale collaboration, as illustrated by HathiTrust, a nonprofit group of academic and research libraries which has preserved more than 17 million digitized books and other items. HathiTrust asserts that serving the public good is its mission. Its web page says that the organization is committed to contributing “to research, scholarship, and the common good by collaboratively collecting, organizing, preserving, communicating, and sharing the record of human knowledge.” Preserving the record of human knowledge is no small undertaking. HathiTrust goes a long way to proving that working on large-scale projects can profoundly change the world in ways that librarians back in Melvil Dewey’s time couldn’t have dreamed of.

COMPLEXITY, WE GOT THAT

I think the next century will be the century of complexity.

—STEPHEN HAWKING

There are many advantages to working on the large end of the spectrum, but there are also times when working on large-scale initiatives can multiply problems as well. Big, new projects are going to be complex, and the larger the scale the more complex they will be. Strong leadership is required and is not always available. Library project managers will need to create robust procedures, infrastructure, and resource bases to handle the issues that come up when working with geographically separated institutions that have different norms, operating styles, and achievement needs. The reverse is also true: sometimes projects are scaled too small to be effective. In the example used earlier, given North Dakota's total population of 750,000, the entire state would be unlikely to negotiate as good a price as the Austin Public Library in Texas can achieve on its own.

Working at scale generally requires a large resource base. Those resources include money, facilities, materials, people, time, commitment, and energy. No library has these resources in abundance. Working at scale can allow a more manageable commitment of resources across many libraries. However, large projects can also have budgets that seem to grow with abandon. We have seen many library organizations like the Digital Preservation Network or OCLC's former regional systems close or merge due to a strained resource base. If your library project is aimed at a large regional audience, you will need to know the competing consortia in your area and see if collaboration with your project is possible.

One of the biggest dangers in project management is "scope creep." This is the seemingly inevitable force that pushes any project beyond its original design or goals. Cornelius Fichtner said that "there is no such thing as scope creep, only scope gallop." Any experienced project manager would readily agree with Fichtner. In my experience, library projects produce an endless number of requests for add-ons and changes that bump up costs and bring delays.

Library leadership changes can be another problem area. During an interview for the post of director of the largest academic library in a regional consortium, the question I was asked most often was whether I would keep the library in that local consortium. The interviewers' fear about this was palpable. A major leadership change among the institutions in your cooperative endeavor can be one of the most dangerous moments in a project's life cycle, and one you probably won't have much ability to affect.

Like most things, working at scale has both pros and cons. In general, I haven't included obstacles that you can't control, in order not to worry you. But these obstacles can sometimes have just the opposite effect. It can be liberating to know that there is only so much you can do, and all you need to do is to *stay calm and push on* despite the obstacles you will encounter.

If you want to do something amazing, try to think like Bill Gates, who often tells people not to let complexity stop forward momentum. If your goal is to improve your library's functionality and how it is perceived by your patrons and funders, then working on an innovative, large-scale, collaborative project will get you the best bang for your buck. Regarding his grand challenge to eliminate global poverty and disease, Bill Gates said, "[this is] why I am so passionate about the broader process of innovation. Because we do not always succeed. But when we do, we can exceed even our best-case scenarios." That is a good reason for any librarian to embrace both innovation and collaboration.

RIGHT-SIZED PROJECTS

Libraries face interesting choices about sourcing—local, commercial, collaborative, public—as they look at how to achieve goals, and as shared approaches become more crucial as resources are stretched.

—LORCAN DEMPSEY

Lorcan Dempsey has pondered “scalar emphasis,” or the level at which it make sense to get things done. He sees library initiatives as fitting into one of four levels of scalar emphasis:

- Institutional (individual library)
- Group (regional, consortium)
- Public entity (state, country)
- Web scale (national, international, or commercial network services provided by companies like Amazon and Google)

Dempsey identified a clear trend toward externalization, in which more activities are being done collaboratively or are being outsourced entirely. He also argues that many projects might include several different levels of scalar emphasis. For instance, training may be done in the institution,

software development at the consortium level, and network maintenance outsourced to the Web.

“Right scaling,” according to Dempsey, means choosing the appropriate source for the work that is needed to be done. For patron-focused tasks, the institutional scale is still appropriate, especially in areas of patron services and outreach. Other services, however, are more efficiently done at the regional or consortial level. George Needham believes that there is no longer any excuse for libraries duplicating work *on* anything. Needham argues that anything that can be done by a collective, should be done collectively.

Dempsey points out that we already do many things at “web scale.” We buy our databases, get our network server farms, and access software through the internet. We reap all the advantages of sharing resources across massive user pools. Across the country, resource-sharing pools take advantage of scale at large consortia like Minitex, OhioLINK, and the Massachusetts Library System. There are also a growing number of vendor systems that are designed to share work at the national or international level. OCLC’s WorldShare Management System and ExLibris’s Alma use one segmented catalog for all library collections held across thousands of libraries. HathiTrust and the DPLA are examples of national efforts to share massive amounts of digital content from hundreds or thousands of institutions.

Scalar emphasis is often not specifically identified in many project plans, but it should be, along with cost, staffing resources, impact, facilities, and so on. The right scale for doing the work should be a standard analysis component of any project. By acknowledging that scale is as critical as cost or staff requirements, library managers can add dimension to their planning and potentially expand the options available in their decision-making. This book will focus on regional, mega-regional, and national-scale projects. Large-scale initiatives are always collaborative projects.

GOING FURTHER TOGETHER

Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities.

—R. DAVID LANKES

At the most fundamental level, I believe that libraries are creative, change-oriented organizations. For some library professionals, there are plenty of

opportunities to meet others, go to conferences, give presentations, sit on committees, or simply share coffee with colleagues from neighboring institutions. These opportunities may not be available to some of their colleagues, however. Most library professionals know they must get out into their communities, whether that is a classroom, a faculty meeting, the local service club, or a city council meeting. Libraries are strongest when they push into the community and focus outward rather than only serving those who walk in the door.

In my experience, most people think that the primary value of working collaboratively is saving money. Using resources wisely is a great value, of course, but a 2012 OCLC study of more than 100 library consortium leaders found that the main advantage in belonging to a collaborative was professional networking (30 percent), followed by cost savings (23 percent), access to e-content (12 percent), shared catalogs (12 percent), and resource-sharing (11 percent). If a library staff member is working outside the walls of their institution, that person is being exposed to new ideas, new challenges, and new ways of thinking. The best library employee is the one who has the broadest worldview, and the best way to get that wider worldview is to build structures, like large-scale projects, that enable staff to interact across many diverse organizations.

Research by Stephen Johnson and others has revealed that innovation and creativity are attributes that grow and thrive in stimulating environments. Great ideas are born when different people, ideas, norms, and challenges mix and generate collisions of ideas and concepts. The most creative project I managed involved librarians pushing beyond their natural boundaries. We launched the Minnesota Libraries Publishing Project in 2018, a joint venture of academic libraries, library consortia, and public libraries. We made a high-quality book self-publishing tool available to every resident in Minnesota through their local library. The Minitex consortium managed the infrastructure, the academic libraries paid for the publishing platform, and the public libraries paid for Indie Minnesota, a digital collection of local authors whereby any self-published book could be made available statewide. The public libraries also sponsored self-published book contests. School librarians published their schools' manuals, and cultural heritage organizations supported the publishing of local histories. We can do so much more together.

This project is a perfect example of how innovation, scale, and serendipity can come together to produce amazing results. In times like these, when the value of the library itself is being called into question, we need to show our impact. Innovation and collaboration are tools that help libraries improve services, redesign products, and offer opportunities that can impact, and indeed transform, people's lives and their concept of a library. In a time of crisis like the pandemic, the instinctive reaction is to pull back and focus on the home institution. That is exactly the wrong approach. Now is the perfect time to shake up the status quo and push out. We need to hold fast to the adage: "To go fast, go alone. To go far, go together."

EMBRACING PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Trying to manage a project without project management is like trying to play a football game without a game plan.

—KATHERINE TATE

If you are doing a small project, you probably will not need to use project management tools or processes. A spreadsheet and a word processor will get the job done. But if you are working on a large-scale project, you will have no choice but to adopt project management techniques. The *Encyclopedia of Management* defines "project management" as applying reasoning and tools for planning, controlling, and managing a short-term endeavor.

The experts who study project management have organized its functions into five categories: initiation, planning, execution, monitoring and assessment, and closure. The remaining chapters of this book are organized around those five functions. Librarians new to project management often make the mistake of confusing project management software with project management itself. We'll look at software tools later in the book. For now, you need a grounding in the key concepts of successful project management.

The Initiation or Pre-Planning Stage

Time spent in initiating will pay dividends through the rest of the project.

—CARLY WIGGINS SEARCY

For many, the initiation stage is the fun part of project management. You get to let your imagination run free during the ideation stage while engaging with others and building enthusiasm. All of this can be a joyous ride. This stage is crucial to building the foundations for your grassroots effort, and your goal will be to reach out and connect with as many potential stakeholders and supporters as possible. In the initiation stage you develop your project's scope, justify the need for it, gain tentative approval, and start defining work parameters.

This stage is often referred to as the pre-planning stage, and this is where you begin to identify your goals, build your case, and lay the foundations for later requests for resource allocation. A critical piece of work in the initiation stage is defining the scope of your project, or the parameters of the final product or service you will produce. Controlling scope allows you to manage the project with fewer disruptions and keep the project on a clear trajectory. In this stage, stakeholders make commitments, participants are found, and work responsibilities are starting to be defined. The preliminary analysis you do at this stage on the project's scope, objectives, costs, benefits, time frame, and risks will be fleshed out later during the full planning stage.

One of the common mistakes people make is to not spend enough time on the pre-planning stage. There are a lot of conversations that must happen and concepts that must be explored before committing to launching a large-scale initiative. People also tend to want to get into the details of the project too quickly, without spending time looking at the situation from a 30,000-foot level. The project management expert James P. Lewis argues that the cause of most project failures is laid down during these early definitional stages. You must reach agreement on what your problem is, what you hope to accomplish, and your main strategy to achieve your goals. If you don't have an agreement on those three things, you will meet with endless problems going forward from people working under different assumptions. There is time later to get to the details.

The Planning Stage

One of the major causes of project failures is poor planning.

—JAMES P. LEWIS

In the planning stage, a detailed project plan and a project schedule are created. In this stage details are clarified, research is conducted, costs are identified, and work responsibilities are assigned. In fact, there are myriads of details to address, as outlined later in this book. There are significant issues of maintenance and control that will need to be worked out with many different participants who have various points of view. Communication, always important, becomes critical at this stage. The project manager is constantly struggling to balance on the fine line between releasing too much information and thereby raising unrealistic expectations, and not releasing enough information and thus having the proposal viewed as an information black hole. This is a tough balancing act, but it is a critical one to the project's future success.

Your stakeholders are going to be clamoring to see your work plans, timelines, and budgets. Librarians want details! As the project moves forward, the project schedule you are creating becomes the guidepost that drives the work of the project manager. There are a significant number of tools to help the process like Gantt charts, PERT, CPM, and so on.

Several dangers can occur at this stage. The planning can bog down and drain away enthusiasm. A weak planning document or inadequate communication can drive away stakeholders and potential participants. The new working groups or teams must find a way to become cohesive and productive. As mentioned earlier, inexperienced project managers often try to get by with minimal planning. Excited participants want to jump into the work before the plan is complete, and this can mean that the preparation stage is so poorly executed that your project can start to veer off track as it matures. During the planning stage, the key is to keep things moving while ensuring that the quality of the work remains high and that communication does not falter.

The Execution Stage

Plans are only good intentions unless they immediately degenerate into hard work.

—PETER DRUCKER

Execution is the stage where the work gets done; resources are gathered and expended; contracts are signed; products or services are developed and

tested; and web pages, training, and public relations materials are created. All these steps in the plan are now taking place, and necessary adjustments are being made. This stage is all about managing people and resources while coordinating the plan activities across different working groups and communicating, always communicating. The execution stage often involves internal testing, a pilot project, and a public launch. The project manager needs to make sure that all the teams and subcontractors are performing, and that resources are available to continue the work plan.

This is also the stage where scope creep happens, where changes to the initial project design start adding cost overruns and schedule delays. Things are happening fast and decisions are being made while the critical documentation of decisions gets forgotten, causing problems later. In hindsight, most project managers will say the execution stage is never quite what they anticipated. It can either move shockingly fast or bog down due to unanticipated problems. Reporting out gains more importance as the work progresses.

The execution stage is when the project manager is controlling the multiple functions being carried out by different entities. The project manager, along with a steering committee, has major responsibility for controlling the project's scope, schedule, and budget.

The Monitoring and Assessment Stage

No major project is ever installed on time, within budget, with the same staff that started it.

—JOHN RUSSELL ET AL.

The project is launched, course corrections are being made, and the product is being integrated into existing services. Now you are switching over to monitoring and controlling the project as it moves into stabilization. This is the stage where you assess how different your finished product is from what your plan said it would be, and ask if anything needs to be done to get the project closer to the intended outcome. There are other questions you will need to ask, including:

- Was the work done of high quality and acceptable quantity as compared to your original concept?

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