

Medical libraries continue to change with the times

By Daniel Casciato

In a recent blog posting, bestselling author Seth Godin asked about the future of the library: What should libraries do to become relevant in the digital age?

Krista Ford, manager of the resource center at Development Dimensions International, Inc. (DDI) in Bridgeville, thinks libraries have remained relevant. DDI's resource center has moved to a digital platform in response to the push for a greener environment and the need to be global. It also allows any associate instant access to articles in any office DDI has around the world.

"We've had to eliminate print resources, but we've rolled that revenue into purchasing more online tools and reports for our associates," she said. "DDI's digital collection within EBSCO (the leading search platform for full-text online research databases in institutions worldwide) contains thousands more journals and reports than we previously had access to and is much more cost effective."

Ford thinks eventually their stacks will become a thing of the past and their physical library will become more of a corporate center where someone comes to use the computer and have some quiet time. As a result, librarians will be called upon more and more to be analysts and not merely hunters and gatherers.

Ford is asked to do more analysis work now that associates are able to pull their own articles. "Personally, I find the analysis work to be much more interesting and challenging than just pulling articles for someone."

This is also happening at medical libraries. West Penn Forbes Regional Campus no longer has a

physical library space. Everything is managed through the medical library at the Western Pennsylvania Hospital. Forbes' employees now access journals and eBooks through the library's home page from the Forbes Intranet site.

Heidi Patterson, M.L.I.S., medical librarian for the Richard M. Johnston Health Sciences Library at The Western Pennsylvania Hospital, would agree that librarians still have a relevant role today. For instance, it's her job to look for the best resources for her patrons and then to promote and show them how to use what the library has to enhance their work experience.

"Librarians are always looking at ways to make information more accessible to our patrons," she said. "It's part of a hospital librarian's job to find and evaluate health information for the patron. I know most of my patrons don't have hours to spend in the library doing research looking through paper journals so having electronic resources is a great help to them."

The library remains a physical valuable resource for West Penn Hospital health care professionals, students and patients. Up to 100 patrons use the library daily during the week, mainly for studying and for research. West Penn's library contains approximately 500 print books and 300 paper journal titles, as well as 600 eBooks and more than 1,000 online journal titles. For employees who don't have access to a computer in their area, they can check their e-mail on one of the library's 20 computers, perform required continuing education online, or check information on the hospital Intranet site.

According to Patterson, electronic information

has helped more than affected the library.

"It also helps when I'm working on gathering articles for patrons and with a few clicks of the mouse I can get an article rather than trying to find it in the stacks and photocopying it," she said. "I've found that patrons prefer PDF copies, especially if an article contains a number of photos; photos don't copy well and if I can just go to the journal Web site and get a PDF they get a really nice color copy of the photos."

Although Forbes eliminated the library space completely and is doing everything via electronic access, no positions were lost. Since the paper resources were combined with those at West Penn, Patterson eliminated any duplicate paper journal holdings as well as eliminated journals it can receive electronically.

"I hope to actually add resources next year to create a better electronic collection at both campuses," she said.

In the future, Patterson notes that hospital libraries will exist but maybe not in the traditional sense that we think of a library. More electronic resources are becoming available and eliminating paper books and journals helps save space that hospitals always seem to be short on.

"I like to think that in the next decade or so, more of the books and journals I have in paper will be replaced by computers with access to databases and eBooks and eJournals," she said. "I also like to think that the library will become more of a study area for nursing students, med students and residents. I would like to see also a virtual reference service that a lot of the public libraries and university libraries do." †

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