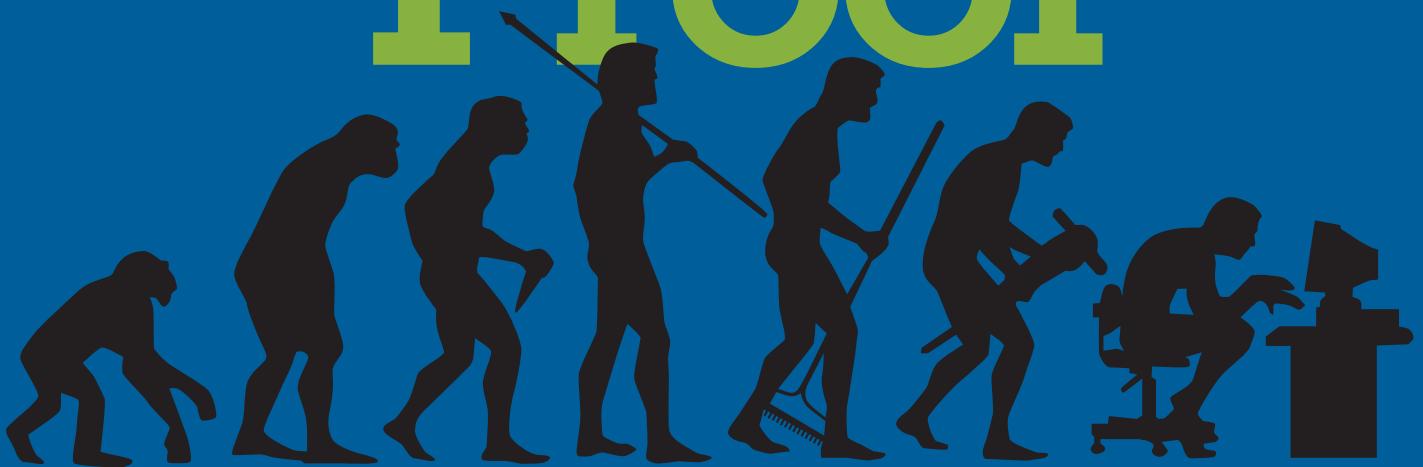


It's survival of the fittest in Libraryland these days. How does your library shape up?

by Steven Bell

Fit Libraries Are Future- Proof



The year 2009 marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, as well as the 150th anniversary of the publication of his most famous book, *The Origin of Species*. Darwin's work is memorable for its theories about the survival of the fittest, and by fittest he meant those species best able to adapt to change, not necessarily the biggest or strongest.

The year 2009 was also marked by turmoil and great upheaval in multiple industries, most famously in banking and automobiles. It was a year when many once thought to be among the biggest and the strongest failed to survive or were greatly weakened. Even though libraries have survived for thousands of years in one form or another, the past year has demonstrated that none of us should take the future for granted.

I've come to think that managing our uncertain future is about achieving fitness: adapting to change, staying relevant. Personally, we know the importance of

individual fitness for staying healthy and preventing the onset of disease. Fitness is the state of persisting; the absence of fitness invites decline and decay. Maintaining fitness, we can avoid serious health problems and increase our lifespan. Fit libraries increase their longevity while avoiding the failures that lead to irrelevancy.

While we may know well what personal fitness means, the concept of a fit library is ambiguous. Is it simply a matter of paying attention to the numbers, not unlike observing metrics such as the Body Mass Index? Does an increase in circulation or the delivery of more instruction sessions point to a fit library? Achieving library fitness is a combination of strategies that, like personal fitness, involve consistent behaviors, discipline, commitment to change, and having fun while shaping up. What follows are a dozen actions librarians can take that can lead to fitter, future-proofed libraries.

Twelve steps to library fitness

Listen/observe: Library users are always sending us ideas through their demonstrated uses of our resources and services, as well as their casual observations and outright complaints. For example, a user stops by the reference desk and asks the librarian why it's not possible to text some catalog information to his or her smartphone. That's an opportunity to create positive change. But if we fail to have our antennae up so we can pick up these signals or if we assume we know more about a great library experience than the users do, some great possibilities will be missed.

Ask the water-line question: Even the best fitness routines require occasional change and some innovation. But innovation often involves risk taking. Excessive risk taking can be dangerous to your personal fitness but catastrophic for organizational fitness. One way to think about mitigating risk is to ask the water-line question. Think of a ship on the open water. The captain wants to take a risk, but is it an above- or below-the-water-line risk? If the risk blows a hole above the water line, the ship can make the repair, survive, and continue. But if it's below the water line, well, it may be the end of the ship. Whether it involves money, personnel, or other resources, think about where a failure may hit your organization—above or below the water line.

Go local: Libraries of all types are in tune with their local community. Academic librarians and school media specialists know their faculty and students and the work they do. Public librarians know what's happening in their communities. Rather than worrying quite so much about competing with search engines and whatever technologies follow them, we may be better off concentrating our energies on knowing and serving our local communities. By focusing on them we can meet their needs far more powerfully than with services that try to be everything to everyone.

Engage the user: It's important to understand our users, be aware of their expectations, and keep their needs in mind when designing services. But we can do more by connecting with our users in places and spaces we may have ignored in the past. More librarians are roaming the stacks to help confused patrons. Staff are going out to offices and public and private places where community members gather. We learn more about our users when we engage them, and that helps us better understand their expectations, what they want that we have yet to offer, and how we can keep them coming back for more.

Fix what's broken: A favorite video presentation is Seth Godin's "Seven Reasons Why Things Are Broken." He explains why we tolerate broken services and processes in our organizations. If we can't identify and remedy what's broken in our libraries we may not deserve to have a future. The challenge is finding out what's broken. Day-to-day we may be unable to spot the things that fail our patrons. To future-proof, we need to make finding and fixing what's broken part of our routine operations. That involves efforts to see things from the outsider's perspective. Would you patronize a retail operation where many things failed on a regular basis? Why should we expect library users to act any differently?

Master adaptability: Leslie Crutchfield, coauthor of *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*, encouraged librarians at an OCLC Forum held in 2008 to master the art of adaptation. Crutchfield emphasized the importance of knowing the library's mission and doing whatever it takes to accomplish it, but mostly she encouraged librarians to commit to change and try new things, even those not considered mainstream. Libraries that can achieve flexibility will be better adapted for the future.

Keep up: Whether you call it environmental scanning, trend watching, or simply staying up-to-date, library fitness depends on knowing what's happening in the library community and beyond its borders. Just like personal fitness, keeping up requires discipline and the development of a regimen of activity. It works best when you commit to devoting a specific amount of time each day to covering a specific number of resources. There are multiple technologies that help support keeping up, be it RSS feeds or web-page change-detection services, and it doesn't matter much what you use to keep up—as long as you're committed. The best regimen will include resources from outside of librarianship, but the most important thing is establishing a keeping-up habit and sticking to it.

Create passionate users: A few years back, a blog called *Creating Passionate Users* preached the benefits of stimulating a customer's passion for products or services. Passionate users are loyal users. Passionate users try to convert their friends. Library resources sometimes involve complexity. Making things simpler would help, but library

users are capable of not only learning to use, appreciate, and even thrive on a complex research database, but can actually develop a passion for it. To create passionate users we must first gain their trust so they are willing to invest their time in learning how to use the resources. That means establishing relationships and taking time to educate users. The reward is a network of users who will stand by and

but three points seem most relevant to organizations that want to future-proof: 1) be paranoid, 2) look at the metrics, and 3) steady as she goes. He claims a bit of healthy paranoia keeps organizations on their toes and less likely to rest on their achievements; an occasional look over the shoulder may prevent being run over by the latest disruptive technology. Just as we keep fit by regularly monitoring

Fit libraries need to collect and analyze operational data.

support the library in good times and bad, no matter what the future brings.

Be a problem-finder: It's all too easy to ignore problems or to come up with uncertain, inadequate solutions to them. Future-proofed library organizations have the capacity to solve their problems the way that designers solve them. That means first understanding how a problem affects the users and then applying that knowledge to improve services. It also means asking questions and not accepting that everything is all right. Everyone wants to be a problem-solver, but the key to a future-proofed library is having a team of good problem-finders.

Build relationships: In the short term, giving people stuff—whether it's some type of consumer good or boatloads of digital content—may work in quickly building a following. But eventually, a library user will likely find a more convenient source for the same stuff. To build a truly loyal following takes something more substantial, something that delivers intrinsic meaning to people. That's what building relationships is all about. It is through relationships with librarians that community members establish a lasting connection with the library. One piece of advice we hear again and again is that good relationships are essential for our mental and physical well-being. Fit libraries need to build good relationships too.

Internalize core values: Physical fitness trainers will readily tell you that the most essential part of being in shape is having a strong core; everything else is attached to it. Without a strong core, other body parts—the back, chest, or neck—are more susceptible to injury or weakness. Organizations are no different. Each library benefits when all staff members internalize an agreed-upon set of core values. These values establish what we believe in and how we will behave. Our core values define us as an organization and guide how we conduct ourselves and respond in challenging situations. Some might even say that it is with the core values that all library fitness begins.

Think like Collins: In his latest book, *How the Mighty Fall*, Jim Collins explores how corporations go from fit to flabby. In doing so they fall through the five stages of decline toward obsolescence. Collins offers quite a bit of advice,

our weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, and other vital signs, fit libraries need to collect and analyze operational data as well as assess services and programs, such as the information literacy initiative, to make sure progress is being made and strategic objectives are accomplished. And while change is good, too much constant, spontaneous, and radical change all have the potential to drive an organization into the ground. At the height of its success, Rubbermaid committed to creating a new product every day of the year, and efforts to constantly introduce something new ultimately weakened the entire company. Motorola, a successful cell phone provider, thought the next big thing was satellite communications and started its own network called Iridium. This change cost billions, distracted Motorola from its core business, and eventually cost the company its industry dominance. We need to change when appropriate, and for the right reasons at the right time.

Fitness makes the difference

Collins's book is full of similar stories of firms that, for one reason or another, squandered their fitness. They went from being much admired to barely desired. So it's easy to see that no organization, not even a library—especially in our challenging mobile, electronic world—can afford to stop paying attention to its fitness regimen. None of us can predict the future, just as none of us has any sense of whether our good health will hold up. But as Collins also says, barring any unexpected and unusual catastrophic event, establishing a fitness program is about as close as any of us can come to future-proofing ourselves and our organizations—and it can work. The hardest part is taking the first step. But now you have 12 different actions to start with, and any one of them will move you closer to library fitness. The rest is up to you. ■



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