Benchmarks: Building Library Management and Leadership Strength

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Abstract:

Over the last two decades, U.S. public libraries have integrated public computers as a key resource for the public's use. Today, virtually all U.S. public libraries have computers available for patrons, along with Internet connectivity. While providing this essential service, libraries are challenged to ensure that the technology is adequate to meet the needs of residents and to represent the value of computers and connectivity to community leaders. To meet this challenge, a national coalition of leading library, university and local government organizations(1), funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and led by the Urban Libraries Council, came together to create Edge.

Edge was created with the vision that all people should have opportunities to enrich and improve their lives through open access to information, communication, and technology services provided by public libraries. Edge is the first national benchmarking assessment for libraries that serves as both a management and leadership tool, helping libraries create a path for the continuous growth and development of their public technology services.

The Edge suite of tools is based on three benchmark groupings that evaluate the libraries' public technology along with related programs, services and practices. The Edge tools support libraries in making strategic decisions and identifying areas for improvement. It gives libraries local data, from operations to partnerships and programming, to assess how their community is using the technology and how best practices can be put into place to align future growth and services with community priorities. It also provides useful resources to package and showcase the data to key community leaders.

Launched in late January 2014, Edge is being successfully used by over 2,000 public libraries – urban, suburban and rural, serving all population levels – with results that are immediately valuable for Edge-users.

Keywords: Edge, technology, benchmarks, toolkit, community outcomes

Where People Connect, Communities Achieve

After centuries of books being the primary resource, in the past 20 years libraries have gone through a monumental shift by quickly and successfully making public computers and on-line resources available to meet the real needs of the public. As the last century came to an end, it was evident that to productively participate in the 21st century knowledge economy, people would need to be digitally fluent and have ready access to the Internet. Digital literacy and access could no longer be considered nice to have but a necessity for the economic success of individuals as well as for the community.

A groundbreaking study conducted by the University of Washington in 2010, described how people in the United States were using public computers to accomplish tasks that were key to their individual and family well-being, for: education; employment and entrepreneurship; health and wellness; E-government and legal services; civic engagement; household finances; and communication. Further, roughly one-third of Americans over 14 years old had used a public library computer or the library's wireless network to access the Internet(2).

As a profession, libraries have shown themselves as technology leaders. While the introduction and deployment of technology through libraries has not been without its challenges, residents can reliably go to their library to meet their connectivity needs. Libraries have successfully navigated this enormous digital transition and been leaders in their communities, yet they face the same challenge that all professions and industries have while adapting within the digital era, that is – how to know that they have the right technology in place to meet the needs of their patrons or customers.

Further, because a library's image is so tightly tied to books, libraries are challenged to ensure that leaders, particularly those that are making budget decisions, understand the value of the new range of public computer-related programs and services that are now a critical part of the library's mission so that technology upgrades and expansion are adequately resourced.

The Edge benchmarks are designed to be a tool for public libraries to help them assess and set goals for:
- The quality of public access technology;
- Sufficient levels of service;
- Management and sustainability practices; and
- The use of technology to drive positive outcomes for individuals and communities.

The Edge Benchmarks

Edge has 11 benchmarks that libraries can use to evaluate their public technology services.

The Edge Benchmarks are divided into three strategic areas:

Community Value	Benchmarks 1 - 3 Libraries provide programs and services that enable people to get value from their use of technology.
Engaging the Community & Decision Makers	Benchmarks 4 - 6 Libraries are a valuable community resource and a strategic partner in helping people and communities improve their quality of life.
Organizational Management	Benchmarks 7 - 11 Libraries manage resources so that members of the community who need or want access can get it regardless of ability, skill, personal technology, or available time.

The Community Value benchmarks enable the library to evaluate its external facing programs and services that support digital literacy, on-line content creation, and support of critical activities with high value for the community including workforce development, education and learning, health and wellness, and E-government connectivity.

The Engaging Community and Decision Makers benchmarks relate to the library's ability to develop relationships and partnerships with key community partners to deliver the right technology services needed by the community.

And, the Organizational Management benchmarks enable the library to evaluate their current practices and policies, as well as the technology infrastructure to support public access technology.

Each benchmark has a set of indicators that provides information that relates to the library's ability to achieve the benchmark. Because technology demands and challenges are different for each library, just as each community has unique needs and demographics, there are no set levels of achievement. Instead, by working through the assessment, a library sees an overview of its current programs, where services are effective, and where improvements can be made.

Through completing the benchmark assessment, libraries have a snapshot or report of their current services, their strengths and opportunities for improvement. With the assessment report as the foundation, Edge provides libraries with a suite of tools as well as training to put the knowledge gained from the assessment report into strategies and action.

The Edge Toolkit: Putting the Assessment to Work

As the benchmarks provide a methodology for the library staff to assess their public technology, the Edge toolkit provides components that enable the library to identify areas where technology infrastructure and management practices can be enhanced, resources for strengthening policies and practices and presentation tools for sharing the strategic results of the assessment with key decision-makers and community leaders.

The toolkit includes:

Strategic Resources and Case Studies – Documentation of public libraries doing leading work in each benchmark area is provided so that participating libraries can adapt or use the successful approaches implemented by their colleagues.

Peer Comparison Reports – Analytic reports that enable libraries to compare their Edge assessment results with those of peer libraries. Like all professional organizations, libraries value benchmarking themselves with comparable organizations within their field. The peer comparison tools are developed for individual libraries and it is anticipated that as more libraries use Edge, state-wide and national comparison reports will be developed.

Training – A training curriculum aimed at assisting librarians to meet planning, management and outreach goals identified through the assessment process. The components of the training include technology management, community assessment, leadership and communication skills, and partnership and communication engagement development.

Reporting and Presentation – A set of communication templates designed to support the library staff as they use each element of the toolkit. The presentation tools help library leaders tell the story of how the library and its public computers support the local economy, workforce, lifelong learning and a strong community.

A key goal of Edge is to enable library leaders to leverage their use of the benchmarks for meaningful conversations with their decision-makers and partners that lead to stronger collaborations that advance community goals.

2014 Edge Results

Today, Edge is being used by over 2,000 libraries serving communities from 800 to over 1 million people across 30 states. Use exceeds the most ambitious projections for its inaugural year. And the value of utilizing Edge is best represented by the libraries that have implemented it this year.

From Cynthia O, Director, Guthrie Public Library in Oklahoma – Edge gave us a snapshot of where our library stood. We were able to see our strengths and weaknesses on the framework of a national benchmarking standard. It was very encouraging to see that we were on the right track in many areas. And Edge is such a thorough tool; it really opens your eyes to the possibilities and potential of your library.

From Gretchen Pruett, Library Director, New Braunfels Public Library in Texas – We used the Edge results to shine a spotlight on the library, which has led to a transformation of services the library provides and an improvement of public access technology for all library users and especially those with disabilities. Further, Pruett credits the Edge data with enabling the library to quantify their need for enhanced broadband to the City's information and technology department resulting in long-needed increased bandwidth.

From Theresa McMahan, Director, Sullivan County Public Library in Tennessee – We are focused on staying ahead of current technology and Edge helps us in our strategic technology planning. In addition, the benchmarking process helped the library think of its work in relation to the greater Sullivan County community. The library has now reached out to other organizations with a technology focus to better leverage the library's resources to meet the needs of residents of this rural community.

From Molly Kinney, Executive Director, Mifflin County Library in Pennsylvania – In January 2013, the library had no broadband, a 14-year old integrated library system (ILS), an out-of-date technology plan and old computers. Technology was the key to the making rapid progress for the library and Edge enabled the library to justify the changes that were needed as well as serving as a tool to educate the library board and the staff about the importance of technology.

And, from a leading City Manager, Rashad Young, in Alexandria, VA – From the city manager's seat, we constantly speak with our elected officials about assessing, improving and demonstrating value. Edge speaks directly to gaining an understanding of the library's work and how it supports and enhances the strategic goals for the City.

Edge Going Forward

Edge is proving itself an invaluable tool for public libraries and the communities they serve. It is recognized as a national leadership and management tool that enables libraries to assess and improve public access technology. Edge's value in the field and to individual libraries will grow as the community of users grows.

Edge will illuminate the work of libraries and their partners at all levels, and demonstrate the contribution of public libraries for meeting local, state and national outcomes.

References
   (1) The national coalition, led by the Urban Libraries Council, includes the American Library Association's Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP), the Public Library Association, the state library agencies of California, Oklahoma and Texas, LYRASIS, OCLC's WebJunction, TechSoup Global, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), the University of Washington, and the University of Maryland.

   (2) This study was conducted by the University of Washington and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.