



Library Hi Tech News

Broadband, digital literacy and public libraries: the Mill Park story
Greg Rolan Tom Denison Christine Mackenzie

Article information:

To cite this document:

Greg Rolan Tom Denison Christine Mackenzie , (2015), "Broadband, digital literacy and public libraries: the Mill Park story", Library Hi Tech News, Vol. 32 Iss 6 pp. 15 - 18

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/LHTN-03-2015-0020>

Downloaded on: 10 November 2016, At: 21:28 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 12 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 278 times since 2015*

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(2015), "Personal Digital Archiving Conference, New York University, April 24-26, 2015", Library Hi Tech News, Vol. 32 Iss 6 pp. 19-21 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/LHTN-04-2015-0034>

(2015), "WeChat in the library: promoting a new virtual reference service using a mobile app", Library Hi Tech News, Vol. 32 Iss 6 pp. 9-11 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/LHTN-03-2015-0017>

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:563821 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

Broadband, digital literacy and public libraries: the Mill Park story

Greg Rolan, Tom Denison and Christine Mackenzie

Introduction

A Digital Hub program was established by the Australian Government's Department of Communications (2013) to provide training in digital literacy skills to support a nation-wide roll-out of advanced broadband infrastructure. The program, which ran between 2011 and 2014, funded 40 Digital Hubs for two years each, establishing them as fully equipped Internet training centres in communities where high-speed broadband had recently been implemented. Half of these were established in public libraries, with the remainder based in a mix of civic centres, community centres, neighbourhood houses and community colleges. The intention was to ensure greater participation in the online, digital economy, with its promise of improved access to business and job opportunities, health, education and government services. The program was considered an important social inclusion measure, for retired people, low-income earners, Indigenous Australians and those living in remote areas.

Situated in the north-east of Melbourne, Yarra Plenty Regional Library (YPRL), with its partner organisations the City of Whittlesea, Whittlesea University of the Third Age (U3A), and La Trobe University, received funding for a Digital Hub at its Mill Park Branch Library to serve local residents, community organisations and small businesses. This paper presents the results of a research project designed to explore the impact of the Mill Park Digital Hub in 2013/2014. It focuses on the role of public libraries in both engaging and educating local communities and exploring issues related to the provision of training through public libraries, benefits or problems in doing so and the

relationship to new and existing services. It also examines the impacts on perceptions of the role of the public library and implications for the future.

The Mill Park Digital Hub

YPRL serves a population of approximately 350,000. Including Mill Park, there are eight branch libraries and two mobile libraries. In 2013/2014, the Mill Park Library had over 27,500 members, issued almost 595,000 loans and welcomed more than 213,000 visitors, 32,000 of whom took part in scheduled activities.

With a mission of *Informed, Connected, Inclusive Communities*, YPRL has a number of long-standing professional and community networks in the South Morang area. YPRL is widely regarded as an innovative library service with a reputation for successfully engaging not only the local community but also the profession in the development of new services. At the Mill Park branch, a pre-existing program provides basic training in information and communication technology (ICT) use, including regular "Get Connected" computer classes, supported by a range of information technology equipment and a dedicated training room.

The funding provided for the Digital Hub enabled the employment of a full-time trainer and a significant expansion of equipment and facilities, including three banquettes designed for small group training, video conferencing facilities, a laptop bar, a collaborative area, extra screens and a controller and a surround sound chair.

These were initially set up in an open corner of the main library area so as to be continuously accessible.

The two-year training program was divided into four six-month blocks, one for each of the Department's nominated areas of education, home, business and

health. Dividing the project into four six-month modules was intended to help in focusing marketing efforts, to retain freshness and interest in the program for both the community and the staff delivering the programs and to provide opportunities for repeat visits for the different modules.

Overall, the Mill Park Digital Hub Activity Plan provided for:

- *One-on-one training*: 15- × 30-minute slots per week (375 hours per annum).
- *Group training*: Five groups of four people per week 1-hour sessions (800 person hours; 200 sessions per annum).
- *Video conferencing*: Two weekly sessions demonstrating capabilities (100 sessions per annum).
- *Downloadable media*: One weekly session on e-readers, downloadable media (50 hours per annum).
- *Demonstrations*: One weekly session provided by mix of internal and external providers (50 hours per annum).
- *Broadband content*: Introduction and benefits: one weekly session plus incorporated into all other sessions (50 hours per annum).

A detailed marketing strategy was developed to promote the Digital Hub and its services, the primary target groups being senior citizens, people with disability, low-income earners, families and local small and micro businesses. Secondary targets included the City of Whittlesea, local schools and universities and a range of not-for-profit organisations. Customised promotional material was developed based on the Department's Toolkit, including posters, brochures and program schedules. Some activities were advertised on a monthly basis (including newsletters, community group presentations, advertisements in

the local press and radio community service announcements) and some on a quarterly basis.

Data collection and discussion

Data collection involved interviews with staff and volunteers of the Mill Park Digital Hub as well as some users, local champions and community groups involved in the program. Most interviews were conducted in late 2013. Observation of some training sessions was also undertaken, as were interviews with managers of three other Digital Hubs. The Training Officer was interviewed a second time in December 2014 during the final month of funding, as was the new Branch Manager, who commenced early 2014.

Although the Digital Hub was officially launched in May 2013, it had been providing training since the start of the year. Throughout 2014, 5,232 people took part in some form of training.

The program was particularly successful in reaching seniors, for example, through a local Seniors Virtual Village online hub. Seniors were introduced to technology and a range of applications, including games such as Minecraft. In addition to the direct benefits of being online, many reported greater connection with families, with some commenting that they felt “relevant in their families lives again”. This program has proved to be about social interaction and gaining confidence as a result of digital literacy skills and the use of technologies beyond broadband access. Similarly, demonstrations of virtual worlds and augmented reality applications to students from a local primary school were so successful during the first year that a much expanded program for schools was subsequently developed in the second year. Class visits were used not just to introduce students to technologies such as augmented reality and three-dimensional (3D) printers but also to the library, with students being given promotional materials and granted membership when they attended.

Of the four mandated thematic areas, *Education* and *Home* proved the most straightforward to deliver. The *Business* series proved more difficult as

Mill Park Library serves a primarily residential area. It focussed less on business applications and more on generic topics such as using Windows 8 and Internet Security; providing an overlap for a more general audience. However, one successful partnership was established with the local branch of a chain hardware store, with a number of staff returning outside of the group for other classes. For the *Health* series, it was decided to address mental and emotional health in addition to physical health; however, it was not practicable to engage practitioners or demonstrate consultations. Partnerships were formed with groups such as Beyond Blue, Men’s Health, Cancer Council of Victoria, Diabetes Association of Victoria and the National Stroke Foundation. These groups provided speakers for live events within the library, at which the broadband-enabled facilities were discussed. These events proved to be very popular, successfully introducing new patrons to the library.

All Digital Hubs were expected to provide a range of training session types. Some Digital Hubs based in non-library institutions eschewed one-on-one sessions for safety reasons; however, at Mill Park, one-on-one sessions proved very popular, so much so that in the second year of operation, the number of such sessions increased by 50 per cent and more informal sessions such as tech-help drop-ins were designed as a compromise between individual and group training.

A Digital Hub at the library

Australian Governments frequently make use of libraries and non-profit organisations to roll out training programs because those types of organisations are likely to be embedded in their communities and therefore more likely to be aware of local needs and capable of connecting with the local populace. For example, the VICNET CALD Senior Surfers program was funded to work with community groups in delivering Internet training to seniors in their own language (MyLanguage, 2013).

This approach is based on theories such as the diffusion of innovation, which suggests that the successful diffusion of an innovation is dependent

on five attributes: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability (Rogers, 2003). It is also based on concepts such as brokerage networks and cohesion networks, developed within the field of social network analysis. Brokerage networks, comprised of weak ties between groups, facilitate access to opportunities, innovation, strategic advice, new skills and support. Cohesion networks are based on strong ties, such as those that exist within communities, and facilitate the exploitation of new information and resources (Burt, 2000). Both types of network are required for the successful diffusion and exploitation of resources (Kadushin, 2002; Denison, 2006). Local change agents or champions are important in this context because it is through such change agents that many of the five attributes of innovation are realised (Rogers, 1995).

In this case, it can be seen that the Mill Park library, an organisation embedded in its community, brokered community access to government resources and then acted as a cohesion network, linking external expertise and resources and local need. The effectiveness of this approach was demonstrated on a number of occasions, for example, by recruiting Whittlesea U3A, with its members as active partners in delivering training and positioning the library as a cultural hub “where I can go to do smarter things” and by developing a “Faces of the Digital Hub” program, through which locals volunteered to share their experience and to assist others. By tapping into community networks and the volunteer base, the Digital Hub program appears to have built on and extended existing social capital. Similar strategies were employed at other Digital Hubs, all of which reported engaging a wide range of community groups.

Specific equipment and activities were also designed to take advantage of and to further develop such connections. These included partnering with the Whittlesea council for a number of community-based initiatives and working with La Trobe University to establish a “Maker Space”, comprising a 3D-printing facility, robotics construction kits and

Arduino-based[1] open hardware development tools. Other programs, such as “iTots” (iPad-based early learning sessions for toddlers), have proved very popular and drawn interest from other libraries keen to collaborate on similar programs.

Another advantage of locating a Digital Hub within a library is that libraries are generally seen as “safe” places to which all people have the right of access (State Library of NSW, 2000). They are regularly used by much of the demographic targeted by the Digital Hub program, including seniors, the unemployed, families and low-income users. In comparison to other types of training venues, which may be more isolated in the sense of having less passing traffic, have more restricted opening hours or a narrower range of activities, public libraries also provide enhanced opportunities for social mingling.

Established in an open area of the library, the space where the Digital Hub is physically located and where training takes place within the Mill Park library was deliberately designed to avoid the sense of it being a classroom, thus avoiding the negative associations of more formal situations (e.g. a fear of having to “keep up” with a class or of demonstrating ignorance by having to ask questions). Staff reported that participants found it low-key, accessible and non-threatening. The design of both the space and the training reinforced the integration of existing resources and services; for example, the e-book collection and readers, not only serves to promoting those resources but also demonstrating the relevance of broadband connectivity and applications for information access, the training being provided and the fact that this is a natural role for the library and librarians. This last point supports previously reported findings that making ICTs available to all members of the community helps to broaden the role of libraries and librarians to that of learning facilitators (Pang *et al.*, 2008).

As noted, the Digital Hub facilities such as the laptop bar and banquettes were set up in an open area of the library which would previously have been considered a “quiet” study area. Despite initial misgivings on the part of

some staff, this proved to be extremely popular with library patrons, with staff reporting an increased “vibrancy and energy” in the library in general. This mixing of functional spaces was further extended in the Digital Hub’s second year, with equipment being re-located more evenly throughout the library’s open areas, to encourage additional use. A four-unit iPad bar was established. Other equipment, including a Beamz laser music system, two additional 3D printers and a drone robot for children, were acquired.

One of the challenges in establishing an effective Digital Hub program was the need to change the skill set and the role of library staff, even those not playing a lead role in the Hub. A dedicated trainer was employed, but that did not alter the fact that other staff needed to play a role, especially if this was to be seen as a natural purpose for the library. The skills required range widely from support for specific applications to specific device support (for example, WiFi gear, iPads, eBook readers) and it was initially difficult to ensure sufficient support across all shifts. Although some staff initially considered that technical services were being provided at the expense of more traditional library activities, most staff rose to the challenge and routinely take part in drop-in tech-help sessions and occasionally more structured activities. Thus, a major outcome of the program is that patrons now expect an increased level of technical expertise of library staff.

When Commonwealth Government funding ceased at the start of 2015, the most immediate impact was that the library could no longer afford a dedicated trainer. Although most classes have continued, the popular one-on-one sessions have not. The staff have had to take on additional responsibilities in equipment support and maintenance provision. Although updating the technology is manageable, managing staff time has proved more difficult.

Overall, the staff believe that the program has highlighted the role of libraries as innovators that can meet community needs and provide different types of learning, with participants having come to think of the library as “more than just a training space”. As a

result, usage statistics have either held steady against downward trends or increased across the board (Yarra Plenty Regional Library, 2014).

Conclusion

There is strong evidence that the Mill Park Digital Hub has successfully met, if not exceeded, the goals of promoting broadband services, upskilling the community and promoting digital readiness. Both directly and through partnerships, it appears to have been not only successful in addressing the needs of seniors and school-aged children but also in engaging them more fully with the library’s other services. Despite this, the staff have reported a strong unmet need, particularly with regard to seniors. The one problem identified is that the library can no longer afford to hire a full-time trainer. While this means a reduction in one-on-one training, it remains the case that the program has resulted in a sustainable expansion of the services offered at Mill Park Library.

Overall, the Mill Park Digital Hub successfully built on the existing strengths of the library service, in particular the fact that it is well-integrated to its local community. It not only achieved the government’s immediate aims with regard to digital literacy but also reinforced the position of the library service within the community, while adding to local social capital. The Digital Hub program has demonstrated that public libraries are seen as essential community institutions which enjoy enormous community support and can provide a natural partner for this type of program. The program has provided strong evidence that scenarios involving new learning spaces and digital engagement, as described in a number of recent reports on the future of the profession (Shared Leadership Program for Victorian Public Libraries, 2012; ALIA, 2013) are realistic and achievable.

A broader study would be needed to determine whether libraries are more effective than the other types of venues chosen to host Digital Hubs. This case study has shown that, at least in the case of the Mill Park Digital Hub, the

decision to situate it within an open space in that library has not only had significant advantages in terms of the aims of the Digital Hub program but has also resulted in a number of positive spin-offs in terms of community engagement and reinforcing perceptions of the role of the public library within the community.

NOTE

Arduino is an open-source platform used for building electronics projects.

REFERENCES

ALIA (2013), "Library and information services: the future of the profession: themes and scenarios 2025", Australian Library and Information Association, available at: <http://aliafutures.wikispaces.com/>

Australian Government Department of Communications (2013), "Digital economy", available at: www.communications.gov.au/digital_economy (accessed 16 December 2013).

Burt, R. (2000), "The network structure of social capital", *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, Vol. 22, pp. 345-423.

Denison, T. (2006), "The diffusion and sustainability of technology within community sector organizations", *The International Journal of Knowledge, Culture & Change Management*, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 19-28.

Kadushin, C. (2002), "The motivational foundation of social networks", *Social Networks*, Vol. 24, pp. 77-91.

MyLanguage (2013), "CALD senior surfers", available at: www.mylanguage.gov.au/resources-and-ideas/case-studies/item/cald-senior-surfers.html

Pang, L.N., Denison, T.F., Williamson, C.M.C., Johanson, G. and Schauder, D.E. (2008), "Augmenting communities with knowledge resources: the case of the knowledge commons in public libraries", in Aurigi, A. and De Cindio, F. (Eds), *Augmented Urban Spaces: Articulating the Physical and Electronic City*, Ashgate, Aldershot, pp. 185-199.

Rogers, E. (1995), *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th ed., The Free Press, New York, NY.

Rogers, E. (2003), *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th ed., The Free Press, New York, NY.

Shared Leadership Program for Victorian Public Library Staff (2012), "The national broadband network and public libraries: the necessity of future proofing our services as high speed broadband changes our society", available at: www.libraries.vic.gov.au/downloads/Shared_Leadership_Presentations_2012/nbn_and_libraries.pdf

State Library of NSW (2000), "A safe place to go: libraries and social capital", available at: www.sl.nsw.gov.au/services/public_libraries/docs/safe_place.pdf

Yarra Plenty Regional Library (2014), "Annual report 2013-2014".

Greg Rolan is PhD Candidate and **Tom Denison** (tom.denison@monash.edu) is Lecturer, both at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

Christine Mackenzie is based at Yarra Plenty Regional Library, Bundoora, Australia.