



Changing lives in the libraries

Measuring impact of online public access to information

Overview

This review is based on “Impact planning and assessment (IPA) of the Global Libraries initiative (GL) of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation” (Editorial), “Impact planning and assessment – making it happen”, and “Impact planning and assessment of public libraries: a country level perspective”, all by David Streatfield, Independent Impact Consultant to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Global Libraries initiative.

At a time when only 35 per cent of the world’s population is connected to the Internet and people in rural and poor communities are deprived of the economic, educational, health, and social opportunities which a digital world offers, the work of the Global Libraries initiative is making a worldwide impact on addressing this imbalance of opportunity.

Following pioneering work to provide free access to technology in public libraries in the US, the Global Libraries initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, now has success globally and includes Indonesia, Vietnam, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Botswana, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Moldova and Colombia.

But how can that success be measured? How can the impact be assessed? Impact Planning and Assessment (the preferred term to describe performance measurement and impact evaluation) specialists involved in the first five years of GL have collaborated to reflect on experiences and outline progress in eight of those countries (the first eight in the above list).

Through the IPAs, these countries are learning a great deal about the results of introducing public access to information through computers in public libraries into an enormously varied range of settings. They have also learnt what is important when seeking to evaluate the work at a national level – and, not surprisingly, there are substantial differences across such diverse settings. However, some consistent patterns have emerged in how individuals, communities and their libraries respond to enhanced public access and how this information affects people’s lives.

Gradual evolution of country-by-country evaluation

This work shows the commitment of the IPA specialists to communicating what they are learning to public library evaluation specialists and to library service managers in other countries contemplating any kind of service innovation.

Since two earlier public access initiatives in Chile and Mexico which paved the way for GL, evaluation of the various country programs has evolved gradually. The rationale behind the current approach to IPA, as exemplified in the GL “IPA Roadmap”, is that public libraries in most countries are familiar and generally comfortable with collecting basic service performance information and that public library evaluators at national level in most countries are thoroughly familiar with the types of performance metrics that are collected in common by all of the countries involved in GL (such as the number of public library service points providing public access computing, workstation use rate, or number of library workers trained), all of which are within the range of data types that all country evaluations of Public Access ICT installation and support programs will want to collect.

Going beyond assessing public access to ICT

Moving beyond basic performance monitoring to engage with evaluating the impact of PACs on users can be more challenging. Focusing on changes that access to information via the Internet can bring in communities where little or no free Internet access is available, presents a host of challenges. The IPA specialists in the countries which were engaged in the GL initiative in the first few years (Latvia, Lithuania and Botswana) responded by trying to identify and share key learning at each stage in the IPA process and this evolved into the four-stage IPA Roadmap: 1) Pre-planning/learning, 2) IPA planning, 3) IPA implementation, and 4) Applying the findings and embedding IPA.

Most countries have relevant data on their public libraries that can be of use in the planning stage, but the needs analysis work will need to be more than checking whether public libraries are already providing public access to ICT. Stakeholder consultation and especially user consultation should be a minimum starting point in building IPA momentum. Deep discussion with stakeholders may be the lever with which to move the evaluation towards assessing impact rather than just service monitoring, because it may show areas where public access ICT can make a real difference to users.

Comment

As more countries have joined the Global Libraries initiative, the articles offer insight into how public access to computing leads to changes in users and their lives in different countries. Evaluation in the various countries has seen a gradual shift towards more innovative evidence-collection methods, e.g. use of pop-up surveys (Romania), computer-assisted telephone interviews (Poland) and contingent valuation to explore the perceived economic value of public libraries (Latvia). In addition, some countries are progressively targeting the aspects of their services, seen as important for further evaluation (e.g. Latvia's adoption of additional outcomes).

References

Streatfield, D. (2012), "Impact planning and assessment – making it happen". *Performance Measurement and Metrics*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 15-16. ISSN: 1467-8047.

Streatfield, D. (2012), "Impact planning and assessment (IPA) of the Global Libraries initiative (GL) of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation", *Performance Measurement and Metrics*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 5-7. ISSN: 1467-8047.

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Potential quotations

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Keywords: Global Libraries initiative, Library management, Measurement, Performance measurement (quality), Public libraries, Research methods, Strategic planning