Benchmarking It’s one of those words that can elicit and spark a lot of interest, but it can also make you groan. There’s a natural curiosity among most of us to see how we measure up to the competition, even if the competition is just a set of norms. But when you find yourself off the mark, it’s never easy to acknowledge and complete the amount of work that it may take to get you up to the standard. Technology benchmarks for libraries have a similar edge that can be heightened even more by swiftly changing standards. What’s considered the norm today can quickly fade tomorrow into obsolete technology offerings for you and your customers.

But the core problem that libraries have with technology support and evaluation isn’t really one of quickly changing standards. The larger issue for libraries, especially public libraries, is budgetary. Demonstrating community value to your funders can be difficult (especially in this tight economy) while also keeping technology and your library services current. This is where the new Edge Initiative technology benchmark framework, recently announced at the Public Library Association’s PLA 2012 Conference, can assist. By providing a foundation to measure your public access technology offerings, you can not only satisfy your natural curiosity to see how your library compares, but you can also determine where your organization may fall short in providing standard services and offerings for the public.
The level of success for each benchmark is determined by a subset of indicators that measure a library’s progress toward meeting the benchmark. Most benchmarks have two or more indicators, but a few are so narrow in definition that only one indicator is critical.

**Determining Community Value**

In the Edge framework, six benchmarks are grouped together under Community Value with the purpose of recognizing that through staffing, support, and technology, libraries provide customers with digital opportunities and access to critical, life-enriching services. There are a total of 12 indicators (two for each benchmark) within the framework that can assist in measuring community value. The first benchmark helps libraries measure their value relative to technology assistance and training. In reviewing the list of items below each indicator, you can easily see how the framework can be used as a checklist to measure your library.

**Benchmark 1: Library staff and volunteers provide assistance and training with the goal of increasing the level of digital literacy in the community**

**Indicator 1.1:** The library provides monthly structured and scheduled digital literacy training located in at least half of its outlets in at least two of the following topics:

- Basic computer skills
- Office productivity software
- Internet searching
- Privacy & security
- Library resources
- Social media
- Patron-owned devices (e.g., e-readers, iPods, smartphones)
- Provides technology classes in languages other than English
- Provides technology classes in languages other than English
- Curated online training content
- One-on-one help by appointment with library staff or volunteers for at least 30 minute sessions
- One-on-one help available on-demand for at least 10 minute sessions
- One-on-one help from staff on digital storage or online account creation available at all times
- One-on-one help with patron-owned devices (e.g., e-readers, iPods, smartphones)

**Community Engagement Is Key**

Not only is it important that your technology services provide recognizable value to your community and its members, it’s also critically important that your library is partnered and aligned with other key community decision makers to ensure that it has the edge and is seen as a valuable part of the community fabric. The three benchmarks that address this pivotal element are grouped together under the category Engaging the Community & Decision Makers. They are as follows:

- Libraries have leaders and staff who actively engage in high-level community planning and digital inclusion efforts to amplify their value in the community

The other five benchmarks within the Community Value group, the largest of the three categories, focus on measuring the value of technology services for job seekers and entrepreneurs, students and educational support, patrons seeking health and wellness information, content creators, and those seeking legal and government services/assistance.
• Libraries build strategic relationships with community partners to maximize public access technology resources and services provided to the community

• Libraries support continuous improvement in public access technology services by sharing expertise and best practices with other providers locally, regionally, and nationally

A focus on the benchmarks and related indicators in this category helps build and maintain a positive perception of the library as a key team player in supporting innovation, growth, and prosperity in the community.

Organizational Management Best Practices

Demonstrating community value through your technology offerings and engaging with community decision makers is all fine and dandy, but if your library doesn’t employ some sound technology management practices for keeping the investment that you already made healthy, then you might as well throw the other benchmarks to the wind. Although it’s advisable that the benchmark framework is best when viewed (and used) as a comprehensive evaluation tool, there may be some merit to reviewing the benchmark categories separately with staff members who support public services offerings, community advocacy, and IT resources management (relative to the category).

The benchmarks grouped around Organizational Management focus on measuring indicators that help library staff effectively manage their technology environment to ensure that the community has equitable access to resources and services. Consisting of 13 indicators spread across five benchmarks, this category covers everything from IT policy best practices to providing access to technologies for people with special needs. High-level benchmarks include the following:

• Libraries integrate public access technology into planning and policies

• Libraries have sufficient staff with technology expertise to help patrons achieve their goals

• Libraries have sufficient devices and bandwidth to accommodate user demand

• Libraries manage their technology resources to maximize quality

• Libraries ensure participation in digital technology for people with unique needs, including those with disabilities

Overall, the indicators in this group target the support and availability of technology for public access use and even include a bandwidth planner/calculator that helps libraries determine whether or not they have sufficient bandwidth to meet public demand.

Why Benchmark?

So, why should libraries consider adopting the benchmarks, especially if it’s a voluntary program? Because the Edge Initiative is more than just a comparison exercise, it’s a tool that can be used for building community support and addressing sustainability as the library continues to move forward in this digital age. Launched with funds provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Edge Initiative is backed by a coalition of 13 leading library, government, and educational partners, including the American Library Association’s Office for Information Technology Policy, PLA, Urban Libraries Council, and the University of Washington Information School. With such wide support and the comprehensive nature of the framework, it’s easy to understand the benchmark’s benefits. The website for the project provides a wealth of information, and it identifies four key benefits and reasons why libraries should choose to participate in the voluntary program:

• Assess where the library stands in terms of public access technology

• Pinpoint specific areas for improvement and investment

• Increase understanding of how public access technology supports community goals

• Generate data useful for advocacy and fundraising

So whether your library is just mildly curious to learn how it stacks up (I’ll admit this was my first reason for looking into the framework) or is in desperate need of improved community funding, the benchmark framework is definitely a tool that can assess where your library currently stands as well as provide a future edge for it. Check out the benchmarks at www.libraryedge.org.

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