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LIS 650: COVID Management Interview

Like numerous organizations across the globe, public libraries were not invulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic. As COVID swiped the country, our towns, communities, and homes, many libraries were forced to close their doors due to safety regulations and concerns. Library management were faced with potentially life-changing decisions to make. The pandemic certainly put management and leadership skills to the test. I had the opportunity to interview Aaron Mason, Library Services Coordinator at the Radford Public Library (RPL) in Radford, Virginia. Aaron provided insight regarding the impact of COVID and library services and our discussion highlighted key leadership skills that helped lead to progression during this time.

Following the lead of Radford City government, RPL closed its doors to the public in March 2019, then immediately began to offer any library services possible without having patrons in the physical building. Initially, these efforts consisted of massively increasing budget allocations to online resources and moving towards curbside pickup service so that patrons could still check out library materials. All in person library programs were suspended to comply with state and local guidelines. In response, RPL created virtual versions of events like story time, cooking programs, and others that could be offered online to patrons. During the height of pandemic lockdowns, RPL experienced a sharp increase in the need for computer and internet access, so the library purchased additional circulating laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots.

Based on various readings in addition to my discussions with Aaron at RPL, I am curious as to the future of public libraries in a post-pandemic world. As society shifts and evolves over time, so do the goals of public libraries and library professionals. Over the last several years, it has been disheartening to read about libraries temporarily closing and even shutting down. This affected library staff, community members, and homeless populations who had no safe place to rest or take shelter. Libraries are more than just a place to find books. Ashworth (2020) explains that libraries also serve low-income families and loan out items like baking materials, power tools, and general supplies: things that people who can afford may take for granted. Libraries provide social resources and internet access in rural communities or for those who can't access or afford it. But to safely remain open and operational after several waves of COVID, libraries have had to drastically modify protocols and services. Students have also turned to libraries as schools have explored hybrid learning opportunities. Shumaker (2021) explained that in the academic and school libraries, the digital divide will affect students at all levels. Even as schools reopen, hybrid learning is likely to continue, leading to a “homework gap” for students who lack at-home access to computers and networks. Efforts to overcome unequal access to information and technology will continue to be a top priority for librarians.

There has been a lot of trial and error as libraries learned to navigate new ways of operating and meeting the needs of patrons in the wake of COVID. Specifically at RPL, patrons seemed very understanding and grateful throughout the changes that were implemented. While there was some negative feedback (e.g. patrons expressing frustrations at lack of computer access) library staff used these instances as learning opportunities and guides for offering services that were most in demand. Aaron mentioned that library staff even received several thank you letters and notes of encouragement in the book drop from patrons who thanked them for the services being

offered. This was a huge morale boost to staff who were missing those direct, face-to-face interactions with their favorite library patrons.

The American Library Association (2011) also lists several skills that library managers need to know, which were especially useful during the pandemic. Several were as follows:

- Desire to meet and serve the library's user community
- Ability to think analytically and to develop new or revised systems, procedures, and work flow
- Ability to exercise initiative and independent judgment
- Creativity to develop and implement library programs and services
- Ability to communicate both orally and in writing
- Knowledge of computers, the internet, and commercially available library software

While these recommended skills are not related to the pandemic, they have certainly been relevant in the post COVID library world.

Management skills that were most needed during COVID:

Critical thinking: In times of crisis, library managers must think critically to assess the situation and evaluate potential solutions to problems. They must constantly evaluate how effectively they are meeting the needs of their patrons and the community. They need to know the right questions to ask, and to think critically about how to answer them. If we have to close our doors to the public, which programs can we transition online? When we reopen, what safety protocols need to be implemented so patrons can remain safe within library walls? What in the budget needs to be shifted to support the increased demand for digital devices? And the efforts that librarians are putting into COVID management: are they working?

Adaptability: The pandemic came with unpredictable changes to the library environment. Librarians learned to adapt to new ways of operating in order to continue meeting the needs of their patrons. Libraries who responded to these changing needs were most successful. You have to be willing and open to change because it is inevitable.

Tech knowledge: Many library services have shifted to online environments. These days, library professionals need to have more than just basic computer knowledge. They should know how to troubleshoot various devices, how to operate computer software and hardware, how to answer technology-related questions from patrons, etc. With the offer of various technologies like laptops, Wi-Fi hot spots, and tablets comes with certain challenges like resource management and an increased need for technology-related assistance.

Communication: It is important to know how to communicate with the public, library staff, but managers should also know how to address library stakeholders to demonstrate how they are serving the public during the pandemic. Conflict-resolution and mediation are also important when times are stressful or overwhelming for staff.

Policies and planning: Certainly not everyone had a COVID-19 protocol in place but knowing your policies and having the ability to plan efficiently are both incredibly beneficial for library professionals. Know your organization's policies as well as those of any parent organization.

Coordinating/staffing/budgeting: Librarians need to know how to allocate and shift budgets based on societal goals and trends. During COVID, management had to work with staff who were sick or had to take care of sick family members.

Lockdowns during the pandemic forced libraries to adapt quickly to changes. They had to find new ways to convey accurate information to the public. RPL communicated with their

patrons through channels like electronic newsletters, social media posts, and newspaper announcements. With this experience and infrastructure in place, they were well prepared and able to quickly respond to patron inquiries and communicate about events and changes. Lockdowns also gave RPL staff the chance to evaluate and update their library collection with time to perform weeding and inventory projects, which resulted in a more updated collection that reflected what library users want and need from their library. This also helped management realize that a more diverse collection was needed. Aaron explained that RPL continues to be extremely fortunate in that they have a very responsive library director, as well as a very understanding city manager, who all work together to better the community. These factors played a huge part in allowing the library to provide a wide array of services safely and responsibly, even during the height of the pandemic.

References

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