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WiLS, a membership organization of over 600 libraries of all types in Wisconsin and beyond, has developed a model to help its member libraries turn their good ideas into innovative services and projects. This paper details what it means to innovate in the current library climate and describes the model, its critical facets, how it promotes innovation, how WiLS has implemented it internally, and ways WiLS has worked to broaden the impact of the model.

Keywords

WiLS; Wisconsin Library System; library innovation; Projects; Lean start-up

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WiLS, a membership organization of over 600 libraries of all types in Wisconsin and beyond, has developed a model to help its member libraries turn their good ideas into innovative services and projects. This paper details what it means to innovate in the current library climate and describes the model, its critical facets, how it promotes innovation, how WiLS has implemented it internally, and ways WiLS has worked to broaden the impact of the model.

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Introduction

Libraries operate in an environment of increased and changing demands combined with reduced or stagnant funding, and they have done so for years. Traditional methods of developing new or improved library services are no longer adequate to respond to often rapid shifts in community needs, patron expectations, and technology. Libraries must be innovative and experiment with new services, programs, methods to meet the demands placed on them. And they are keenly aware of this; being the experts that they are, they have a wealth of knowledge and great ideas on how to solve community problems and meet community needs, but struggle with launching those ideas on scarce staff and financial resources. This leaves the library with their good ideas, but without the ability to try them out, to find out what works and what doesn't, and to refine those ideas to cultivate effective and useful projects.

WiLS, a membership organization of more than 600 libraries of all types in Wisconsin and beyond, has developed a model to help libraries launch these ideas, with four crucial components:

1. Clear articulation of desired outcome;
2. Incorporation of Lean Startup principles;
3. Involvement from strategic collaborators;
4. Constant cycle of improvement.

With limited initial investment, library projects are allowed to mature and improve with input and support from strategic partners and from those that benefit from the project itself. By using the model, libraries can turn their good ideas into good services, and help cultivate transformative projects and processes to share and push the field of librarianship forward. WiLS also uses this model internally to develop and refine its own services and encourages broader use of the model to its members and partners to drive innovation.

What Do We Mean When We Talk about Innovation?

Everyone wants to be part of something that is new and exciting because, by their very nature, these projects are new and exciting. It's easy for



libraries to get caught into the hype cycle for a particular technology or service, especially when libraries around them are having success with these services.

Once caught by the hype, a library may decide to move forward as quickly as possible with this new project, imitating the library whose project caught their eye. They find out what's been done before and implement the same approach in their library as quickly as possible.

While the project or service may be innovative, it may also be a poor fit for the community. This "innovation for innovation's sake" is relatively easy and may sometimes produce positive results.

A more thoughtful approach to new projects, however, can increase the chance for success and lead to more sustainable and lasting progress for the library and the community it serves. This is what we consider truly "innovative." Truly innovative projects have the following attributes:

- **They are based on a need.** The projects should fill a need, improve an existing service, or otherwise provide value to the community served. The consideration of project's impact should be the first step.
- **They have clear measures of success.** An understanding of what constitutes success should be established before a project is implemented. Success may be measured through quantitative data (in which case pre-data may need to be collected) or it may be measured by anecdotal evidence. Regardless of how it is measured, it should be clear what success looks like before the project begins.
- **They give consideration to conventions and norms.** Libraries often have a long history with established conventions

and norms. A project is not developed in a vacuum, and it's important to consider the established ways of doing things when considering something new. Without recognition of these "sacred cows," library staff might maintain conventions that are barriers to success or forget about the need for change management when the project challenges conventions that are important to staff or the community.

- **They are iterative.** Once a project has been established, it should be evaluated against the pre-determined measures of success. If the project is not succeeding, it is an opportunity to consider feedback that has been received about the project and to adjust. While abandoning the project may be the best course of action in some cases, tweaking the project and giving it the opportunity to succeed protects the investment already made and recognizes that there is a need that the project can fill.
- **They provide a basis for organizational growth and progress through learning.** It's likely that some aspects of a project will be successful and others will not. Taking the time to reflect on what didn't work and why can lead to insights about organizational structure, staff, and partnerships that allow an organization to grow and to avoid the same failures in the future. Going beyond reflection is key to innovation: once the insights have been discovered, take the next step to make changes for improvement.

The Model

How can WiLS help libraries develop projects that are truly innovative and do not get caught in the significant conceptual and procedural gap



between the identification of a need and the implementation of a plan to fill that need? WiLS has developed a model to help bridge the chasm, and promote experimentation and innovation in libraries. This model has four key elements:

- 1) Clear articulation of desired outcome;
- 2) Incorporation of Lean Startup principles;
- 3) Involvement from strategic collaborators;
- 4) Constant cycle of improvement.

It's difficult to conceptualize a model in the abstract, so let's follow a hypothetical example to illustrate the elements of the model.

CASE STUDY

The Springville Public Library that serves a population of 25,000 would like to improve services to the growing number of patrons with diabetes in order to both decrease the prevalence of the disease and reduce the number of unnecessary complications resulting from the disease. Springville decides to host a single-night event at the library with two volunteer speakers (one from a local hospital and another from the public health clinic) and a small special collection drawn from materials they already have or can get for free on diabetes and its treatment. The project is deployed with the hope that it will be scaled up to become a regular program, to create a larger collection of resources for families of diabetics, and to include guest speakers and nutrition clinics. Springville reaches out to the local public health service and a local hospital or clinic to find a dietician and a physician or assistant to help the group understand the disease, as well as its management and treatment options. The library also reaches out to the hospital or clinic information services to obtain pamphlets or other reading material that

can be distributed to attendees. They market the event through traditional avenues, and use their connections at the public health service, hospital, and/or clinic as avenues of promotion. During the event, librarians are present to listen to what needs are being expressed by the attendees that could be integrated into future events and collection purchases. They distribute a survey to attendees and partners to respond to and they spend time to understand the feedback they gather. They plan their next session and invest collections money using that feedback. They build more and deeper partnerships with community organizations and stakeholders whom they learn about from attendee input as well as their existing hospital and clinic partnerships. Springville continues to ask for evaluation surveys from attendees and partners at each program held that are analyzed for information to improve the next event.

Using the above hypothetical program, let's identify, and examine the role of, the model's elements.

1) **Clear articulation of desired outcome:**

"...to decrease the prevalence of the disease and reduce the number of unnecessary complications resulting from the disease."

In this example, Springville is trying to address a widely-understood public health issue through programming and collection development. They have a clear goal—a change they wish to affect, and plenty of local and national research to prove need for such a program.

Doing a project just because you can isn't a good reason to do a project. Hosting a program isn't a great use of resources if no one attends or needs the information presented there. Using this model, libraries are encouraged to clearly articulate what change needs to occur or what outcome indicates success before they begin to plan. Having a single goal and being clear to tie all planning, production, and refinements back to

that goal will help libraries remain focused on their outcomes, make smart decisions to affect the change they want to make. It will also help them with all the other aspects of the model to identify effective partners and ask smart questions during evaluation.

2) Incorporation of Lean Startup principles:

“...a single-night event at the library with two volunteer speakers...and a small special collection drawn from materials they already have or can get for free on diabetes and its treatment.”

Springville is not spending a great deal of resources on its first attempt to address this problem and help the community become healthier. A single night event, with two free speakers, would cost staff time in planning, promotion, and execution and perhaps the price of food and beverages if they cannot find sponsorship. By starting small, they can grow the program meaningfully.

This foundation for our model is derived from entrepreneurship – the Lean Startup Movement pioneered by Eric Ries. In short, the Lean Startup model encourages innovators to develop a “minimally viable product” to deploy quickly and with little initial investment. From there, they gather feedback from those that benefit from the product to improve and tweak it before it is scaled to a larger audience. In the information gathered, they learn how the product is inadequate, what its greatest assets are, how to market it, and to whom. Using Lean Startup principles to plan and launch a library initiative encourages libraries to identify an outcome and start small, reducing risk and allowing new programs or services to scale up organically with input from partner and beneficiary feedback.

3) Involvement from strategic collaborators:

“...two volunteer speakers (one from a local hospital and another from the public health clinic)... hospital / clinic information services....”

The library begins its partnerships with the local hospitals and clinics, drawing on their expertise and existing rapport within the community. As the project grows, the library is open to expanding its partnerships to other local agencies involved in public and consumer health care.

This model draws on targeted collaboration through community partnerships. While libraries are resourceful organizations staffed by talented and bright people, they often lack the specific expertise required – in public health, or homelessness, or workforce development, or elder care, to name only a few – to maximally implement an idea. This model asks libraries to identify the strategic partners needed to implement the idea effectively, to involve those partners early and often, and to be receptive to suggestions from them. The library benefits not only from the subject expertise of the partners, but also from their connections, tapping a new network of people who may or may not be typical library users.

4) Constant cycle of improvement:

“...listen to what needs are being expressed by the attendees...distribute a survey to attendees and partners to respond to...continues to ask for evaluation surveys from attendees and partners at each program held, which are analyzed for information which can improve the next event.”

Springville gathers input from everyone involved in the event – both the participants and the project partners that help produce the program. And it is not enough for Springville to gather feedback after the first run of the event; they continue to gather feedback from all parties



as the program increases in size or popularity or regularity.

The evaluation and improvement component of this model does a number of things to help libraries innovate.

- Feedback informs how the project should change or grow by reflecting the expressed desires from those that benefit from it.
- Constant evaluation keeps library initiatives dynamic and flexible, preventing them from becoming irrelevant or stagnating.
- Gathering input demonstrates to all involved that the library is a receptive and approachable organization, committed to improving what it offers to its community.
- Feedback encourages libraries to adjust, not to abandon, the new things they are trying.
- The process teaches the library very valuable things about their community and about their partners that will help inform other initiatives and projects in the future.

By bringing together a clear goal, Lean Startup practices, relevant community partners, and ongoing evaluation and improvement, this model provides a guide for library initiative planning that minimizes risk, maximizes impact, and drives innovative practices in the larger library sphere.

How Do We Use This Model at WiLS?

In 2013, WiLS underwent a complete reorganization to gain flexibility, create more stable finances for the organization, and provide more relevant services to our members.

The reorganization was not done in a vacuum, but done in conjunction with our community. WiLS' board undertook a process to examine WiLS services and business models. Through a series of focus groups and surveys, we asked our members about their needs and goals. The focus was not on WiLS but on how we could provide the best possible service for members' communities. Armed with that information, we then determined how WiLS could help meet the identified needs. We developed new service directions, a new membership model, a new organizational chart, new position descriptions, and hired staff.

Throughout the reorganization, communication to the members emphasized some philosophies for the process and new business model: simplicity, transparency, providing clear value to the members, being part of the community, emphasizing public purpose, future-orientation, and flexibility.

These philosophies did not go away after the reorganization was completed. Instead, many of those concepts became the basis for our new organizational values listed at the bottom of this article. These values, combined with our mission statement, provide us with a clear understanding of what we are trying to accomplish and for whom. Having this solid foundation gives us the flexibility to experiment and innovate while feeling confident that we are providing services in a way that reflects who we are as an organization.

Along with the organizational values, using the model for innovation gives us a clear path for moving forward with projects. The reorganization has required us to experiment and innovate with both internal processes and services we provide to members. What follows is an explanation of how our work with two projects reflects the model outlined above.

Experts Connection: A Service for Members

The focus groups and surveys conducted during our reorganization revealed that our members wanted access to expertise in everything from technical services to web design to programming to marketing and more. We knew that, no matter how large a staff we had, we could never meet all those needs. We also knew that much of this expertise already existed within our library community. We decided the best way to meet those needs was by brokering relationships between members needing the expertise and those who could provide it. This is our “clear articulation of the desired outcome.”

We had no model for this type of service, so we decided to start small and undertake a few small experiments as the opportunities presented themselves. As libraries contacted us looking for help, or we heard of needs in the community, we tested some different models for providing the service:

- We provided names of experts to those looking for services.
- We made calls to experts to gauge their interest in the project, and, once the two parties were connected, we left the conversation.
- We created Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) between the parties and provided additional services along with what the experts provided.

We didn't invest a lot of time or planning up front to identify the processes. Instead, applying Lean Startup practices, we tried some experiments and now have enough information to begin involving strategic collaborators in a more formal way. We have formed a workgroup, including some of those providing expertise and those who have used the service, to look at the results of our experiments and help us determine a more formal plan and business model.

Once a model is in place, this same workgroup, along with input from experts and expert-seekers on their experiences with the service, will regularly help us assess the service and improve on the model.

WiLS Staff Meetings: A Work in Process

Not all endeavors work out so neatly as Experts Connection. Just as we had to revamp our services to members, the reorganization forced us to recreate many of our organizational processes and norms. It has been particularly challenging for us to find the ideal format for our staff meetings. As a virtual organization, we meet as a staff only once a week. Because we have limited time together, these meetings serve as the opportunity to discuss issues, get questions answered, and enjoy each other's company within a reasonable period of time. The goals are pretty clearly defined. We did apply Lean Startup principles: we discussed a format for the meetings, standing agenda items, and began meeting without spending a lot of time in development. We agreed to revisit the format of the meetings as needed. Since that time, we have revamped how we do meetings seven times. We meet as a staff (our “strategic collaborators” for internal projects), identify concerns about how things are working, and address those concerns in a way that still meets our goals. We intend to continue this cycle of improvement, giving ourselves the flexibility to address concerns of staff and alter how we do things to meet the needs of the organization at any given time.

Broadening the Impact of the Model

In addition to both conceptualizing this model of innovation and deploying it in our own initiatives, WiLS works to bring the model to our members and partners to help them launch their ideas.

For the last twenty years, WiLS has hosted WiLSWorld, an annual library technology conference for WiLS members and others interested



in the library world in Wisconsin. In 2014, we decided to broaden the scope of the conference to include not just technology, but also innovation in general, with the hope of encouraging members to experiment with their services, programs, outreach, and administration. We even coordinated a panel of community experts for a “New Project Workshop,” bringing together a grants librarian to talk about funding, a director of a large public library to talk about collaboration, and a ventures advisor to speak about Lean Startup principles. This panel incorporated many aspects of our model to help attendees launch their ideas off the ground.

In the next year, WiLS will also begin a “By the End of the Day” series of workshops, single- or half-day inexpensive events designed with a one clear and tangible outcome for participants and in partnership with community members with expertise in those areas. For instance, by the end of the day, attendees would leave with a functional ContentDM portal, or an infographic of data from their library’s usage statistics. These sessions encourage libraries to take the first steps in doing something new or different with minimal investment and a clear outcome. (Of course, WiLS will grow and refine those events using the cycle of constant evaluation, analysis, and improvement!)

In the consulting we do with our members, we encourage them to use appropriate elements of the model as well. We work with them to develop clear goals of the projects they are undertaking, we encourage them to begin projects and planning by gathering input from the community and partners and by defining clear measures of success.

As much as possible, we also broaden the applicability of the work that we have done with and for our members, either in events or consulting, so other libraries not directly involved can make use of what we have created and learned. This might involve creating a template

for a process, for instance, or writing and publishing a report about what we did and what we learned from it. A condition of our MOUs is that any work we do must be shareable with the community.

Additionally, WiLS is planning a grant proposal seeking funds to formally test and improve the model with a partner library beginning a new initiative. We hope to more formally apply this model to a member project, get feedback and make adjustments, and refine it to accommodate the broadest possible range of initiatives. Following this test phase, we will create a kit of process templates and guiding documents and conduct a series of workshops to both spread the model as an option on the road to innovation and continue to gather feedback on it, refine and improve it as a useful tool.

Conclusion

Innovation is rarely fully borne in a lightbulb moment. Innovative services require time and effort and thought to plan, launch, and refine until they become truly responsive and effective. And even once a project has reached that point, it still needs ongoing adjustment to respond to shifts in needs and means. That is, innovative ideas require at least a little trial – and error. Error is scary to publicly-supported institutions like libraries because it suggests the possibility of wasted resources. We believe this model helps reduce that risk, fosters experimentation in library endeavors, and encourages those experiments to grow into useful and effective services with meaningful and lasting effects on the community.



WiLS Organizational Values

We always work in the best interest of our members.

We take their missions very seriously, and we only do work that supports them.

We are optimistic about the future of our members.

Our members have always overcome challenges, and they will continue to do so in the future. We encourage problem-solving through engagement and creativity among our community.

We are sincere.

We are genuinely honest with ourselves and others. We are reflective about who we are as an organization and how we can improve service to our members.

We promote innovation.

We guide the efforts and broadcast the outcomes of members' experimental endeavors, and we model innovation through our own organizational practices.

We respect and value our members' time as we do our own.

We strive to find ways to work smarter and more efficiently for our members.

We believe that we're all in this together.

We are a part of the ecosystem that supports the community of our members. We benefit from the community and the community benefits from us. We believe that we succeed together.