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Liberated from the Circulation Desk – Now What?

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I've been involved in several library remodels and building projects lately for public libraries in the 15,000 to 30,000 square foot range. My job is to help select self-check systems and to implement RFID and automated materials handling technologies for the purposes of optimizing related workflows. However, optimizing materials handling workflows is really about optimizing services to patrons. Selecting technologies and making recommendations about how to optimize their use is the easy part. The harder part is helping libraries transition from their traditional staff-based circulation workflows to self-service workflows which free up staff to focus on other patron needs without the constraints and structure provided by the traditional circulation desk model.

Traditionally, the circulation desk is the first thing you see as you enter the library. The staff members at the circulation desk are not generally librarians although I'm pretty sure the public considers everyone at the library a "librarian." So, when the patron enters the library, what they encounter is someone working hard to get through a big pile of library material. There might even be a long line of people waiting to check-out various materials. Maybe the staff person looks up when the patron enters, maybe not.

In our remodeled library, we've added several self-check-out units and 90% of all check-outs are happening at those units. Instead of dropping material into outside, stand-alone bookdrops (with decidedly un-ergonomic bins inside), we've provided a drive-up return that is part of an automated materials handling (AMH) system that immediately checks-in and rough sorts all returns. In place of the walk-up book

slot, there's another patron return that is connected to the same AMH system.

This means that all returns are immediately checked-in without staff involvement and no one needs to empty any bookdrops – ever.

Patrons use the self-service returns 85% of the time because they love the immediacy of the check-in process, the 24/7 access, and the ability to get a receipt. The returned items that are accepted at these returns are conveyed into the library's workroom where they are automatically sorted (by the AMH system) in such a way as to optimize the return-to-shelf process. The AMH system is also configured with a staff workstation that allows incoming delivery items to be sorted by the system. Items received to fill "holds" are separated out (and the hold slip can be automatically printed out) from the items that are ready to shelve. The rough sorted returns can be emptied from the sorter and organized on book carts for shelving.

Switching from the traditional materials handling environment to this new materials handling environment most definitely affects circulation staff, but it should affect everything. Without the flurry of check-in and check-out activity happening at the circulation desk, we don't need that big desk anymore. So, the question is: what do we want to be the prominent feature at the entrance of the library now that it doesn't need to be a circulation desk?

With check-in and check-out becoming a self-service function, what do we want our circulation staff to do with the 80% of their time that is freed up? Can they provide support to people using the public computers? Can they work on



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programming? Can they do more shelving and roving to assist patrons where they are? Will they need training to do different things?

What do the service points need to look like now that the focus isn't on check-in and check-out? Do we want staff to sit at a counter or stand? Do we want the patrons to be opposite staff or alongside staff? What resources do staff need at each service point to provide the services that will be delivered there (e.g. printers, cash drawer, check-in and check-out capability, access to the patron accounts and reservation systems for public computers or events or meeting rooms).

And those service points... how many do we really need? We probably need one place where people can get help with their accounts and sign up for new library cards. But should people needing help from a librarian be required to come to Reference Desk or is there a better way to make our professional staff available to patrons?

Here's a blasphemous thought: could librarians help with shelving which would ensure they have a good handle on what's in the collection and shelf condition while getting them out into the library where their patrons are and where they would be more readily available? How about just shelving new books since they often want to take a peek through them before they are filed anyway? (I told you it was blasphemous).

A lot of libraries have moved to a single service point and at that service point is a circulation person and a librarian or library assistant. That way people don't have to figure out the difference between one service point and another. They can be sure that their needs will be addressed at that one desk. The drawback is that this can create a log jam because everyone who needs help must stand in the same line to get assistance.

Depending on the library size and layout, it may be best to have a dedicated desk just for accounts and transactions that involve money. This kind of service point is better configured in the traditional manner with a designated staff area behind a desk (with the cash register). But locating staff behind another formidable desk isn't ideal for providing help to people applying for jobs on the public computers, or for someone looking for a title in the stacks, or kids doing homework. These services may be provided more effectively by going to where the patrons are – whether they are at a public computer, working at a table with other students, or trying to look up something in the catalog. I think of this as the restaurant service model where the service provider strives to turn up at the right place and right time but doesn't hover or interrupt unnecessarily.

When considering service and staffing models, it is also important to consider security. Once we move the circulation desk out, who will be responsible for addressing patrons that set off the alarms? Ideally, there would be someone near the exit who can invite the patron back into the library and assist them with check-out using the self-check machine, or maybe even using a handheld device for easy access to the circulation staff module. That same person could also welcome people entering the library, provide directional assistance, help people use the self-check-outs, and maybe even provide professional services, too.

Libraries are not free book stores. Libraries exist to address a wide range of needs for a wide range of people. And these self-service and AMH technologies can help libraries get at those needs. Implementing automated materials handling technologies takes the emphasis off of check-in and check-out and creates an opportunity to change how library spaces are used and what library staff do in those spaces.



Leveraging these technologies requires more than plunking down a self-check machine or sorter. It requires strong leadership, an organizational change process and – quite possibly – new job descriptions for everyone!

