

Harnessing technology effectively can improve the supply chain, achieve efficiencies without cutting hours and, most of all, free professionals' time to transform services, says **Liz McGettigan**.



Time to be creative

COMMENT

WHEN WE TALK about delivering a 21st-century service, we hear key terms such as integration, Web 2.0 technologies, electronic gateways and efficiencies. But what do they mean? What does a 21st-century service look like to us and our end users?

As Business Development Manager at Talis, with more than 21 years of experience in libraries, I am passionate about transforming the business of libraries to allow us to be more creative. Technology is an enabler, and a big one at that. It allows library staff to become more customer-focused. It frees staff from administrative duties to do what we do best – reach out, engage and help people in their pursuit of knowledge and learning.

I am not about to delve into the nuts and bolts of technology, it's not my strength. My strengths are like many of yours – knowing what we strategically need from technology and using this to meet the needs of our users.

How we work

Reflecting upon our services, a common theme is the need for change in the way libraries work and the way we organise ourselves. This, coupled with a focus on efficiency through process improvement and aggregation, chimes with many heads of service and chief executives. This takes us into the world of back-office efficiencies.

Government reviews identified the supply chain as a key area where efficiencies could be achieved, as set out in the Better Stock Better Libraries initiative. Leaving aside the scepticism that surrounded BSBL, there is no doubt that both public and academic libraries can benefit from streamlining their supply chains. Libraries' supply processes are being squeezed to deliver more for less. Mathematically, how can we do this? The answer may lie in libraries changing the way in which we operate, reorganising our processes and workflows. It requires a technological solution to streamline manual intervention.

Have a conversation

We know we need efficiency, value for money and great end-user services. But to help heads of service and library staff move forward, it is conversations with others and examples of best practice that can help us.

We seek practical, tangible examples of new technology 'doing its job nicely'. For example, Talis delivers a fully managed electronic supply chain service to public and academic libraries. We work closely with all major book suppliers to provide our integrated



Look for back-office efficiencies and spend more time with users

service, Talis Gateway. One library has stated that process improvements have reduced the cost of putting a book on the shelf from £5.46 to 62p. What this figure doesn't illustrate, however, are the activities that library staff were able to engage in instead, and the subsequent impact on customers.

How our systems work

It is important that these changes are tangible to our end-users, and that they are able to state, 'I can receive my book faster'. When faced with another round of efficiency savings, we consider closing libraries, staff redundancies, book fund reductions, increasing charges or cutting opening hours. But what about our systems already in place and how they work? Are they providing

• **'Process improvements have reduced the cost of putting a book on the shelf from £5.46 to 62p. What this figure doesn't illustrate, however, are the activities that library staff were able to engage in instead, and the subsequent impact on customers.'**

libraries with best value? Asking such questions is becoming ever more important. At Talis, we have worked closely with libraries to transform how their existing systems work, and to realise efficiency savings without having to close libraries or reduce opening hours.

In recent years, Talis has developed Talis Keystone, a system that helps libraries integrate their services with other council or university services. Shaking out inefficiencies and

duplication of effort, many libraries have now seamlessly integrated their library system and services with student portals, council websites, e-payment engines and corporate finance systems such as Agresso or SAP. Existing systems, new and legacy, are now talking to one another. Libraries put data in once, complete one transaction and it is presented in multiple systems across the council or university.

Understand your business

In times of tight budgets and transformation, the sound business principle of understanding the detail of your business, measuring the steps and processes against best practice and challenging why we do what we do, is more important than ever.

A lot of this is common sense. For me, I want to get efficiency savings out of the way and focus far more on being creative. To become more customer-centric and achieve best value, it requires some people to step outside of their comfort zones. Time spent on administrative tasks can now be spent in new, creative ways. Let's think of new ideas for income generation. We could consider charging for packaged learning courses, or provide new services.

Shouldn't we make sure that the library is as customer-focused as possible for our users, the hub of communities, of research, education and learning? I am passionate about working with all libraries to promote best practice and connect professionals to share experiences and new ideas. Let's explore new avenues for efficiency savings and free-up time to be really creative in how we deliver our services. This is where we thrive and this is where we make the real difference.

■ Liz McGettigan is Business Development Manager, Talis.

SHOWCASE PARTICIPANTS

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