



Sustaining the Digital Initiative

Grace Agnew

Written September 7, 2006

Last Updated September 7, 2006

Now that your project is complete, the digital collection is showcased on the web, and the feedback you are receiving from users is positive, where do you go from here?

Most organizations are stretched thin in terms of time, staffing and resources. How can you integrate a complex undertaking such as a digital library initiative into your already crowded schedule of tasks and services?

If you have followed the recommendations in the previous sections, you already have some tools and strategies to help you integrate your digital library initiative into your library's service repertoire. Some of the major sustainability issues, and ways to address them, are listed below:

● **Determining relative value**

The digital project evaluation that you implement for your first project should be designed not only to demonstrate that your digital collection or service has value to your users, but also to help you determine the *relative* value of digital collection building with respect to other services and collections offered by the library. Particularly if implementing a digital collection building initiative might stretch your staff and resources too thinly, do not be afraid to ask users about the importance they place on other services, in relation to digital collection building. Be aware that users tend to value the familiar, with which they have had good experiences, more than the new, so any result should be analyzed with that caveat. If digital collections do not rate as highly at the moment with your users, you may plan to take a low-key approach, perhaps devoting a small percentage of ongoing available time to this new service.

Once you have begun digital collection building, unless your efforts have been so unsuccessful that you feel the need to regroup, you will want to continue the effort. This does not mean it needs to absorb the lion's share of your organizational effort. You should integrate digital collection building into your other activities in a thoughtful and strategic manner so that the level of effort you put into digital collection building reflects the current impact of digital collections on your users, based on your evaluation. It is important to evaluate impact at least annually, even if this evaluation depends largely on usage statistics. The impact of digital collections will generally continue to grow, and the level of effort for the organization will increase correspondingly.

It can be very useful to do a workflow analysis of existing activities, looking for new efficiencies, economies of scale and other ways to accommodate a new service without sacrificing too much from other services.

Staff Development

The most significant sustainability efforts will be in the area of staff development. One important reason that a digital collection building effort is difficult to integrate smoothly into the organization's workflow is that staff view the process as something difficult and strange—the lion in the room that might bite you unless you approach it very cautiously with a chair. It involves unfamiliar processes, expensive and unfamiliar equipment, and reliance on technical experts that use intimidating jargon. Once staff reach a level of comfort and proficiency with the tools and processes of digital collection building, they will discover many similarities with existing tasks for curating and acquiring collections, preserving collections, photocopying, cataloging, developing exhibits and marketing to users.

Librarians, archivists and curators are used to providing a great deal of service in a small number of hours with very little staff. They have highly developed skills for organizing complex tasks, developing workarounds and eliminating workflow bottlenecks. Once they are comfortable with the technologies and practices of digital collection building that professional ingenuity will be applied to digital collection tasks, and one day you will walk into the library on a slow night and find the library page smoothly digitizing a photograph or preparing a metadata record as he waits for a patron to approach with a checkout.

In the initial years of a digital library initiative, the time spent in training opportunities, conference attendance (particularly

presentations on your own projects), field trips to peer institutions, and other staff development activities will pay off tremendously when the comfort level and technical proficiency of staff rises, each year, to the level that the digital library initiative becomes unremarkable and “something we have always done.”

Collaboration

Unlike other library and museum activities, the digital library initiative is still an emerging service. Many of the standards and technologies are still in development. Many tools are either open source, requiring a lot of work to install and customize, or must be developed in house, requiring expensive programming effort. Organizations should take full advantage of any opportunities to collaborate in digital collection building, to share the technical, policy and procedure development with others and take advantage of collaborative tools that are available and maintained by others, such as the New Jersey Digital Highway's Workflow Management System, a digital object ingest and metadata creation tool, and the NJDH Fedora repository, for archiving digital objects and making them available to users.

Outsourcing

One way to minimize disruptions to staff workflow is to outsource parts of the collection building. This can include digitizing resources, preparing the metadata cataloging, doing the project evaluation, designing and creating the project website and building tools, such as the metadata database with catalog records and the search engine to find and retrieve metadata records. Outsourcing is also useful to digitize multimedia, particularly audio and video, which can be quite expensive to digitize and generally represents a small part of the organization's collection. Outsourcing can be a very practical strategy for sustaining a digital library initiative, but there are some important caveats:

- You must be technically proficient enough to provide good specifications to the vendor and to sample and evaluate the vendor's work. Just as standards and practices are emerging for cultural heritage organizations, the same is true for the commercial vendors that provide digital library services.
- There will be considerable work involved in providing specifications, monitoring vendor performance and negotiating work that needs to be redone. Be sure to budget the time and effort for vendor management into the outsourcing effort.

- The higher the standards and the stricter the requirements, the more expensive the vendor-supplied service will be. Outsourcing, if it is done correctly, is seldom inexpensive.
- If you outsource programming, such as database or website development, be sure to include technical documentation, training and troubleshooting in the specifications. Often bugs will not emerge for several months after the work is completed, when the staff or your users begin to utilize the product heavily. Ask the vendor about his testing and quality assurance practices, as part of the specifications and selection process. Ask to see sample documentation from previous projects.

You may want to consider outsourcing some established workflows to “make room” for the digital library initiative. For example, there are many vendors who provide shelf-ready services—book cataloging and processing—that could free up staff to participate more actively in the digital collection building initiative.

Funding

A primary concern for any digital library initiative is how to fund it. There are many funding strategies, including, but not limited to:

- **The organization’s working budget.** Equipment that produces digital images to standards has come down significantly in cost. Doing a workflow analysis for current services may identify some efficiencies that will allow the organization to incorporate digital collection building into its ongoing workflow.

A thorough, nuanced evaluation strategy that demonstrates real benefit to the organization’s users may also be used to justify an increase to the working budget to accommodate digital collection building.

- **Donations.** A digital collection is very visible and can thus appeal to donors, whether the organization’s friends group, that might donate the proceeds from its annual book sale, to community volunteers, who might provide some of the staffing. Local foundations often like to give locally, and a digital collection that prominently displays local artifacts might be very attractive to them. Local genealogy clubs and organizations are

potentially a “natural fit” for digitizing materials that can directly benefit their genealogy research, such as birth, death and immigration records.

- **Grants.** Many national, state and local agencies provide grants for libraries, museums and archives to create digital collections. Grants should be used primarily for discrete projects that can be easily maintained by the organization once the grant is complete, since most granting agencies require some level of sustainability for their funded projects. Grants are also an effective way to fund expensive equipment. Be careful about using a grant to develop an ongoing initiative unless you are certain that you can continue to fund and sustain it since follow on grants, unless they add innovative new components to the project, are very difficult to obtain.
- **User funding.** Some digital collection building may be funded by the users for whom it is intended. This is particularly true for academic libraries, that can provide the digital infrastructure needed for maintaining the digital products of a research grant, such as the dataset, laboratory notebooks and still images that result from a seed propagation study in the Agriculture Department. Organizations that are part of local governments might offer archiving for government documents, that can also become a public digital collection for users. Another avenue to explore is whether state or local education funding is available for creating collections of use to educators.