



Learning From Lean Startups



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We have all heard the mantra “The only constant is change.” That’s great, but how does it work in practice? Most libraries struggle to remain relevant and adapt quickly. Although we recognize the importance of change, our planning efforts can fall into the trap of focusing on the near-term—the things we know for sure we need but have not yet implemented. Examples might include a mobile responsive site, a data management service, or setting up a makerspace. We shuffle the “digital” and “physical” furniture to accommodate near-term priorities. It feels like the library is a train that picks up cars, adding new services but never taking any cars off. Space, staff, and resources become overloaded when we try to be everything to everyone.

All of us can point to a few libraries that are responding creatively to changes. One trailblazing library is the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL), the largest public library in the U.S. In 2010, this library faced serious cuts—30% of staff and hours. Despite this setback, LAPL continued to innovate and transform. On a panel focused on the future of libraries, John Szabo, LAPL’s City Librarian, emphasized the importance of continually re-evaluating community needs. LAPL actively collaborates with community-based organizations to do just that. “We’re a trusted and valued institution and that’s something to be valued,” he said. Furthermore, trust is “something that needs to be leveraged to have impact on some of the biggest issues that we face.” (“Libraries Evolving as Spaces for Developing Community Ideas and Engagement,” Jenna Buehler, Knight Blog, Oct. 3, 2014; knightfoundation.org/blogs/knightblog/2014/10/3/libraries-evolving-spaces-developing-community-ideas-and-engagement).

Just one example of where LAPL has boldly stepped up concerns the path to becoming a U.S. citizen. Recognizing that nearly 20% of the city’s residents are eligible for citizenship but face barriers to starting the process, the library teamed up with nonprofit community groups and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) to help break down the barriers.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

How do we plan effectively for the future in a more nimble fashion? One approach is to look at our organizations from a different perspective. How about viewing libraries through a lean startup lens? The term “startup” is frequently used to describe new technology companies springing up in Silicon Valley. What

sets startup companies apart from other new businesses is their goal. Startups are searching for a repeatable business model that can scale up rapidly. However, startups aren't perfect role models for libraries—they have a high failure rate, which isn't something that we wish to emulate.

But startups are getting smarter and better. Eric Ries, in his 2011 book *The Lean Startup: How Today's Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses* (Crown Business), defined a “lean startup methodology” as supporting rapid product development cycles—iterative releases based on “validated” learning built upon lean principles (a systemic method to eliminate waste). Lean startups test ideas quickly with customers and have an attitude that some describe as “fail fast, fail cheap.” They are not trying to fail but rather to learn what works as quickly and inexpensively as possible.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL STARTUPS

One company, Automic, interviewed 60 startup founders in the U.K., U.S., and Germany to explore what made them successful at innovating so quickly. It discovered that these companies had an appetite for risk, allocated resources to new product development, had a process in place to encourage experimentation and validated learning, and were able to make decisions quickly (offers.automic.com/learning-from-startups).

Successful startups focus on getting the right tools to do the job. Automic found that 75% of all the startups interviewed had their everyday IT needs automated and efficient. Setting up a desktop for a new developer, for example, takes less than an hour. These teams embrace the mantra “Work smarter, not harder” and are always seeking out tools that will make their lives easier.

Think for a moment about your library's development team. Are you maximizing what they can do, or is time wasted on everyday IT tasks that could be automated? How much of their time is spent on maintenance of code, servers, desktops, and public access computers, printers, and proxy servers? When you purchase new library software and server products, do you ensure they are future-friendly, built with semantic markup, and have good APIs? Startups are prepared to change their IT infrastructure rather than deal with legacy systems and papering over gaps.

In the May 2013 *Harvard Business Review* article “Why the Lean Start-Up Changes Everything” (hbr.org/2013/05/why-the-lean-start-up-changes-everything), Steve Blank, a serial entrepreneur, thinker, and writer about entrepreneurship, and associate professor at Stanford University, describes “lean startups” as companies that favor “experimentation over elaborate planning, customer feedback over intuition, and iterative design over traditional ‘big design up front’ development.” Blank adds, “Although the methodology is just a few years old, its concepts—such as ‘minimum viable product’ and ‘pivoting’—have quickly taken root in the start-up world, and business schools have already begun adapting their curricula to teach them.” This is a far cry from the tra-



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ditional business plan that describes the market size for a new venture, the proposed product or service, and a 5-year forecast for income, expenses, profits, and cash flow.

Traditional startups spot a gap created by emerging technologies and a problem they can solve that they think customers will want. They then develop their solution, invest time and money making the product as perfect as possible, and launch—only to find that it's not adopted. Lean startups try to avoid this crystal ball gazing and put an experimental process in place around the development of a product. They build a rudimentary version of the product or service (a minimally viable product, or MVP), take it out to customers or users, measure what they do, and then learn from it. This lets you switch directions or “pivot” if your initial attempts are unsuccessful. The build-measure-learn loop helps to validate ideas quickly.

The culture of a startup is also critical to its success. Recruiting the right people and bringing them into the fold is key. Leadership is important, and leaders must prioritize innovation. Startups and their teams accept failure and learn from it. Brian Chesky, the CEO of Airbnb, told his entire team, “When the culture is strong, you can trust everyone to do the right thing,” minimizing corporate overhead (medium.com/@bchesky/dont-fuck-up-the-culture-597cde9ee9d4).

ACTING AND THINKING LIKE LEAN STARTUPS

Why should libraries act and think like lean startups? It's good to step back and look at the changes libraries are facing in the information ecosystem. Changes affect the community that you serve as well. How is it changing? How has your library responded to these changes? Many mission and vision statements speak in glowing terms about libraries being innovative and creative. These statements, while meant to be inspirational, are also intended to drive action. Does your library walk its talk by encouraging and fostering the development of new ideas and initiatives? Are resources allocated? Does the library have a senior manager who champions innovation and experimentation?



Startups thrive where there is change and disruption. They see possibilities and opportunities. Companies, nonprofits, and city governments have been looking at what lessons can be learned from lean startups to help improve their ability to be innovative.

When it comes to innovative actions, consider how often you and your library take risks, experiment, fail, and learn. Look back just 1 year and count the number of failures. If there aren't very many, then your organization likely has a culture of risk avoidance that is hampering innovation.

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BRINGING THE LEAN STARTUP APPROACH TO YOUR LIBRARY

How do you start to bring lean startup practices into your web development team, department, or library? Here are a few models to consider.

Consider Google's 80/20 Innovation Model. Employees spent 80% of their time on core projects and roughly 20% on company related activities that keenly interest them. This was the source of many new applications in Google Labs when Google Labs still existed. Yale Law Library tried this model in a slightly modified fashion—a 90/10 time division, and optional activities were discussed and reviewed. Although this was a small-scale project, staff members stepped up to work on ideas such as green initiatives, e-repositories, and digitization (aallnet.org/mm/Publications/spectrum/Archives/Vol-15/No-9/Google-Model.pdf).

Another method for accelerating new product development, called Skunk Works, was introduced by Lockheed Aircraft (now Lockheed Martin) in 1943 (lockheedmartin.com/

us/aeronautics/skunkworks/origin/html). A large company takes a small group of people to work on a project to ramp up a new product quickly. The group is free of the usual management constraints and often located off site from the rest of company. Despite some initial successes, the Skunk Works model fell by the wayside due to its cost. This model has re-emerged with some modifications. Today, these initiatives are often called Labs or Labworks, for example Motorola Labs.

A more recent model is holding a hackfest. Hackfests bring people who come from different areas of the library together with developers to work as a team for a day to build a new program, app, or service. Sometimes teams compete against each other with the first place winner receiving ongoing support and/or investment. Library hackfests have been around for a few years and usually cater to the more technical crowd who attend a hackfest before a conference.

Two other ways companies speed innovation is by acquisition—buying out a startup with an innovative group of developers. In the case of academic libraries, a type of acquisition can happen when units are merged together, combining talent pools from, say, distance education or media and web development teams with the library IT team. Another way to "acquire" talent in emerging areas is to hire outside firms to help jump-start innovative development in areas such as mobile or "near to here" technologies.

ENGAGEMENT AND INNOVATION

While all of these models have merit, widespread engagement by library staff units or teams probably works best for a couple of reasons. Innovative ideas come about in many different ways, but direct observation is one of the main ones. Staff on the front line have the best opportunity to directly observe needs and frustrations of library users. Sometimes it's the newest staff member who does not understand why your library is doing a particular process at all.

One way to start is to apply a lean startup approach to pick one model and test it out for your library. Start small with the Google Model and select a few people to form a team to experiment, learn, and validate the process of generating new ideas. Keep in mind that a small team on its own won't go far without some other characteristics of a lean startup. They will need resources and a champion in senior management who fosters innovation and the library culture that accepts risk and failure as a part of learning. Change is happening, but rather than seeing the risks, let's focus on the opportunities. It's time to add in some of the startup drive and passion into our library efforts to serve our communities better.

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