Technology Volunteers at Hamilton City Libraries

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Abstract
This article describes a program at the Hamilton City Libraries that uses volunteer computer technology experts to assist patrons with personal and library devices. The program arose as an alternative to traditional classroom learning environments. Many patrons continue to use the service, and both staff and the public report success.

Keywords: technology; volunteering; needs assessment

Background
Hamilton City Council is a public entity with a broad range of services and responsibilities to serve the residents of Hamilton and the greater Waikato area. Hamilton itself has a population of approximately 150,000 with around 250,000 people in the greater Waikato area. The fourth largest city economy in New Zealand, it is the second fastest growing city in New Zealand (Statistics 2010). Hamilton City Libraries are a group of six libraries owned and governed by Hamilton City Council and are the only publicly funded libraries in Hamilton.

Introduction
The Public Libraries Association of New Zealand Strategic Framework, 2012-2017 states that “access to the internet is no longer nice to have but is an essential part of our life and work. Services are moving online and people now go online to do their grocery shopping, pay their bills, interact with government departments to pay their taxes...Yet not everyone has access to the internet from home or work.”

Many people come to the library to access computers. New Zealand’s public libraries fortunately have computers and Wi-Fi provided and maintained by the Department of Internal Affairs (Aotearoa People’s Network Kaharoa). This allows everyone, irrespective of age, location, or financial circumstances, to access the internet. Of course, computer access doesn’t ensure that people possess the skills to perform the tasks they need to do. Library staff spend a lot of time helping these customers. The type of help varies but commonly includes setting up an email account, job searching online, applying for a job, preparing a Curriculum Vitae, assisting with iPads and other devices, downloading eBooks, and navigating websites.

In the past, Hamilton City Libraries have run workshops on topics such as preparing CVs and using iPads. Whilst they have been attended, they have not attracted
significant numbers. Additionally, they failed to attract the type of customer identified by staff as being the ones most in need. Many customers report that traditional low-cost computer and community education courses are still too expensive to attend. Further, some customers have learning and memory difficulties, dyslexia or other conditions that prevent them from succeeding in a class environment.

Hamilton City Libraries felt that one-on-one service received by customers was not always optimized when delivered ad-hoc by staff in the course of their daily work. Library staff do not always have the time to devote to these people as one-on-one interactions can last up to an hour or even longer. Many customers were requesting help then and there and were not willing to wait until staff were available.

There appeared, then, to be an identified community need that was not being met by other organizations (especially for free services). Many of the customers did not fit the criteria to receive help from organizations such as Work and Income New Zealand (the government run help center for job search and unemployment benefits) and Senior Net. Library staff were providing computer help when they could, but it was not cost or time effective.

We discovered that Hutt City Libraries were using technology volunteers to help their customers, so we chose to adapt their model to Hamilton City Libraries.

**Process**

Under the premise of “just do it”, we trialled the service. We approached a community development team member at Hamilton City Council to see if she would assist customers for two hours per week at the community library of the greatest need. We chose this community development team member since her role is to work collaboratively to achieve joint social-wellbeing development outcomes for our communities. This project was considered a good fit for her to probe demand.

She started in September 2013 with no marketing or information to the public and approached people in the library to see if they needed technology help. Staff also directed all technology queries that they expected would take longer than 10-15 minutes to her. This trial ran once a week for a month and received positive customer and staff feedback. We decided that our customers welcomed this intervention, so we moved onto the next phase.

We subscribed to an organization that maintains a database of willing volunteers. Volunteering Waikato matches volunteers with a position that suits their interests and experience. We placed an advertisement detailing our needs in terms of experience, skills, and commitment. Once a volunteer makes contact we interview them extensively to assess their suitability, inquiring into qualities such as technical expertise and customer service skills. We conduct a role play with a mock-up CV that we ask them to help us fix. We specifically look at how the potential mentor makes us feel, how they encourage us to try and learn, and how they explain complex information easily and with empathy. If they satisfy all of our requirements,
we send copies of their passport and driver’s license to the Department of Internal affairs to conduct a background check. Experience has shown us that we need to select computer mentors carefully so as to ensure a good fit with our ethos of providing free and friendly technology advice. We encourage a hands-off the keyboard approach to support our customers’ learning process. Once the mentors start, we show them around and induct them into the organization, as we would any other library personnel. We use Google Drive to allow computer mentors to track their customer interactions, what type of help they give and how many people they help in any session. Google sheets has templates and guides that mentors can print out for their customers. We provide these for free, though we charge for the printing of CVs and other materials. This helps us keep track of how successful the service is statistically. A notes column in the interactions sheet enables the mentors to record any positive comments made to them by the customers, or any suggestions for improving the service. Library staff run a booking sheet on our networked computers to book out a mentor’s time in one hour slots. Each customer can book multiple slots. As each customer learns at a different rate, no judgment is given on how long it takes a customer to complete the task they wish to learn.

**Current service**

Setting up the required documentation and processes for the project took a great deal of time. One staff member was working on it for the majority of her time. The service was set up in two libraries initially, one small community library and one central city library. Now, the service has been running successfully for two years. Currently four community libraries and one central library participate in the service. Each service is run slightly differently due to the respective needs of the local community. Some libraries have walk-in customers, although most use a booking system.
Presently we have 17 volunteer computer mentors working in 5 of our 6 libraries across Hamilton. The majority of these are based in the central library, as this is the largest of the 6 libraries. We initially had all of our libraries offering the service, however one library withdrew early (this community library is the closest library geographically to our university and did not appear to require our service). Each mentor volunteers for a two-hour session. The central library has 11 sessions a week and up to 3, two-hour sessions a day. All the sessions are within the normal working hours, as demand is not high for weekend or after hours sessions.

Two years on, the service continues to grow, and in the last month (August 2015) we helped 90 people. In the financial year to June 2015, 885 people had used the service over 693 sessions. Only one mentor works at any given time in any given library so we have a meeting once a month to encourage the mentors to feel connected as a team, get to know each other, and discuss relevant process queries.

We now advertise our service on the library webpage, Twitter feed, and Facebook page. We have distributed posters around the community and display them in all our libraries. The staff promote the service actively in their daily role of service delivery in the library. Customers will come up and ask for help and the staff member will determine whether they can help. If the request is either time consuming or technically too challenging, they will make a booking (as outlined below) and contact a computer mentor. The computer mentors are also available to answer questions directly from customers if they do not have booked sessions. On occasion the mentor will approach customers who may not have heard of the service to offer help if they appear in difficulty.

Figure 2: Volunteer computer mentor, Mudit (right) working with a customer
**Benefits**

There has been no shortage of willing volunteers. Many of the volunteers are migrants, but equally we have a large number of New Zealand born volunteers. The volunteers have ranged from our youngest at 17 to our oldest in her late 60’s. All are exceptional in their customer service ethics and ability to deliver and communicate complex technology support to people with a wide range of abilities. Three of our computer mentors have obtained outside employment due to the commitment they have given the service; employers told us they valued the ethics of volunteering and the skills the computer mentors honed when working for us. All the volunteers report feelings of satisfaction and genuinely enjoy the role. The volunteers feel like they can contribute to their community and gain valuable skills working with people of all abilities and nationalities. This is especially beneficial for the migrants who haven’t lived in New Zealand very long.

The majority of the sessions people have requested have been on CV and job searching assistance (25%). The basics of Word and other Office products have been popular (20%), as well as learning how to use different devices (20%). 10% of people need help with basic computer skills, such as keyboard and touch screen use, mouse use, and printing. We have had many positive comments and outcomes since this service began. The customers now have free support tailored to their needs. Many go out of their way to thank the mentors and library staff for providing the service. They tell us they are no longer afraid of computers, that they now can confidently apply for work, and that they can use their devices competently.

One case manager from Work and Income visited one of our community libraries to say their client was raving about the help she had received from a computer mentor. Since the client had been coming to the library her computer skills had improved dramatically and she blossomed. The case manager said that with some more skills acquisition the client could make a great case manager herself one day.

Should a library wish to start this service, we can tell you that setup and maintenance are challenging but the benefits are immense. As libraries increasingly become community hubs, providing a service such as this – the only service of its kind in our city – will benefit all involved.

**Author Information**

Lisa Pritchard has worked in libraries for 13 years. Her role as Lifelong Learning Librarian at Hamilton City Libraries is to plan and guide the development of services and programs to fulfill the library’s commitment to addressing the lifelong learning needs of the community. Lisa is passionate about quality customer service and learning in all forms, and loves to instill that passion in others.

**References**
