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M-libraries 4: From Margin to Mainstream – Mobile Technologies Transforming Lives and Libraries

Mohamed Ally and Gill Needham (Eds.)

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Mobile technologies are infiltrating our everyday lives, rapidly changing the ways in which we live and communicate. As these new technologies emerge and percolate into everyday lives, libraries face an awesome task; to adapt their often heavily bureaucratic structures to create and deliver effective mobile services to users whose ownership of smartphones and mobile devices is skyrocketing.

As the options for creating mobile services are vast and potentially have an infinite price tag, it is important that libraries consider the needs of their users, resources available to them, and the innovative new mobile service options in combination to develop a flexible and effective library service. *M-libraries 4* provides an array of case study examples illustrating how mobile library services have been successfully developed and implemented. It serves as an invaluable companion to anyone looking at developing mobile service provision.

Aims

M-libraries 4 is a perfect example of collaboration and sharing of innovation in order to drive forward the mobile libraries agenda. As Booth states in the foreword 'If mobile access, research and reading are to become seamless in libraries, informed design and transparent communication about libraries collective efforts will be key' (p.xx).

By bringing together three distinct sections, aptly and positively named Transformation, Inspiration and Implementation, the text aims to inform, inspire and sow seeds of potential. It achieves these aims comprehensively. An international outlook with global contributions from India to Scotland and Nigeria to Australia, the text is perfect for an international audience and anyone interested in mobile technologies.

M-libraries 4 is based on the proceedings of the Fourth International M-libraries Conference held in Milton Keynes in 2012. It encompasses the energy and possibilities that the conference (held once every two years) holds to spark connections and ideas between innovators in the field.

Structure

The text is split into three sections, allowing for a structured awareness of the key areas, trying to bring order to a diverse array of examples from differing contexts.

Section 1 is aptly named Transformation. It provides a myriad of examples of new mobile initiatives which have been implemented in a range of different contexts. Notable examples include the introduction of a live lab initiative renting out mobile devices to users, and the use of

QR codes and twitter which have been employed as tools to develop and promote library services.

Section 2, Inspiration, could also be named 'Potential of mobile services'. It provides detailed accounts of initiatives implemented in a variety of international settings which demonstrate the potential for mobile services to innovate, energise and invigorate library services. Some of the best demonstrations of such potential are the use of a text reference service, responsive web design on a library website and m-education in India.

Section 3, Implementation, is an array of differing examples of more established mobile services, implemented and reviewed by the authors. An overriding theme in this section is the caution which should be shown when implementing mobile initiatives, as most chapters document challenges faced following implementation. Examples of this can be seen in the chapter on use of iPads by library staff to answer enquiries, and the development and implementation of an institutional mobile app.

Themes

Know what you're working with

On overriding theme in the text is the need, when developing mobile services, to know your users, staff and the technology that you're working with. Expect to have to educate both users and staff in the new technology that you introduce. Knowing your user base is key, and context is vital.

Context is vital

There are a couple of examples of case studies in the text which verge on representing the seeking out of mobile services, not for user needs, but to keep pace with the latest fashionable and gimmick-led mobile technology craze. This misguided motivation leads to the development of services surplus to requirements which take up valuable time and resource. Rather, it is important to tie new services directly to the user's needs, and the context within which the mobile service will be developed.

The potential of mobile services is vast, but demonstrate caution

Another theme which seeps from the text is the vast potential of the mobile services which are rapidly evolving. Such services have the potential to snowball into exciting new areas, pushing boundaries. However, particularly the chapters in section 3, warn of the unforeseen challenges, many of which are an inevitable consequence of new technology in a fresh environment, which occur following the implementation of new initiatives. Key to minimising these risks, the authors conclude, is thorough research into your context prior to implementation.

Limitations

The major shortcoming of the text is its lack of future proof content. It tries, successfully, through a compilation of research examples which avoid sweeping statements, to provide an overview of mobile technology developments in the library sphere. However, its contents, from the proceedings of a conference held in 2012, are, even now, becoming outdated and superseded by newly emerging mobile technologies. The text tries to capture a context which is developing at an almost uncatchable pace.

Conclusion

Despite the obvious limitation discussed, the text is of great value in its ability to inspire and demonstrate successful innovation through a myriad of mobile service initiatives. Overall the text emits a sense of optimism and successfully captures the potential of mobile services in a rapidly evolving technological world.

M-libraries 4's strength lies in its potential to inspire and fuel further mobile service initiatives in libraries across the world, illustrating lessons which can be learnt from developments in the area so far. It sets the stage for the next publication of proceedings from the 5th M-libraries conference to be held in Hong Kong in 2014 and inevitable exciting future developments in the area.

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