

A rule of thumb in any remodeling or construction project is to preserve sanity by involving all relevant staff and delegating work where applicable. The project manager gets much-needed help, and the staff becomes invested in the project. With active staff input, staff members understand the dynamics and rationale of each stage of the renovation. They then take personal pride in their work and become more comfortable with the changes occurring at the library.

On the other hand, it's more difficult to prepare patrons for the changes accompanying a building project. Customer complaints may be unavoidable.

The San Diego County Public Law Library had to confront both staff and patron frustrations when it remodeled a significant portion of its main

law library in downtown San Diego in 2001 and 2002. The library wanted to provide space and local-area network connections for more patron computers, including a new computer lab. The library also needed expanded staff work space, including private offices for most of the senior managers.

Initial Steps: the Design Phase

The remodeling project began with the head of access services working with the head of reference to redesign their two public services areas. They decided to switch their locations, including service counters and work spaces in the back of the library, to the ground floor of the building. In addition, the two department heads recommended shifting the library's main entrance door farther north along the storefront of the building, which provided some much-needed extra space for the reference department.

This initial project signified the beginning of a good working relationship among all departments. Each department and staff member contributed in various ways to the redesign of considerable portions of staff work spaces and patron areas. For example, the cataloging staff developed three alternative configurations for its new work area. Reference staff suggested placing the online public access catalog terminals across from the reference counter, rather than behind the access services department. The project manager worked with the architect to develop a better configuration for the patron photocopiers.

The architect assured the library that its suggestions were structurally possible. He worked with the staff to design finishing touches, such as lighting fixtures, counter work spaces in the computer lab, and new shelving in the redesigned Federal Reading Room, and determined the infrastructure changes needed to accommodate newly planned interior offices.

Planning Phase: Before the Noise and Dust

When the library remodeling was delayed by 10 months, which cost more money than expected, the library staff found a silver lining: the holdup provided additional time to plan its course of action during the construction phase. The staff considered a host of elements, such as where and how to shift books out of the way and then back again; where and how to move furniture out and back; where to stage new and old modular furniture; how to deconstruct and remove current reference, circulation and OPAC counters; and how and when to toss out old furniture and equipment. The creation of a database of tasks helped immensely during this stage.

The library staff used its time wisely during the year between completion of the



During the remodel, additional patron PCs were installed in the first-floor reading room.

Some Cheese with Your Whine

San Diego Library Keeps Patrons, Staff Happy During Remodeling Closure

by Jean L. Willis and Amy Hale-Janeke



Public PCs in the first-floor reading room offer improved patron access to the Internet, word processing and CD-ROM subscriptions.

design phase and the inception of the construction phase. The majority of employees were involved in such tasks as inventorying, labeling, donating, tossing and shifting computer equipment, furniture and wall hangings; storing packing boxes; packing, labeling and temporarily storing personal desk items; and shifting books to temporary locations and back. All staff members participated, whether they had to move or not — and many employees



Prior to the remodel, the reference department was hindered by its small service counter and tight work space.



Reference librarians gained much-needed elbow room in their work area after the remodel.

the renovation process. Once the construction crew, electricians and painters needed to fan out in the building — a messy and noisy process — the library closed its doors to the public. Twelve staff members from cataloging, reference, circulation and information systems were forced to work together in the library's only

provided excellent suggestions. For example, an acquisitions department technician suggested using spare book stacks for temporary storage of books displaced by the remodel. A technician in access services located much-needed storage space for personal desk items in the library's closed stacks. The head of access services determined items of furniture that could be sent to the county salvage. The human resources manager suggested hiring a moving company to move furniture. Throughout the planning phase, regular e-mail alerts were sent to staff on the progress of the project and thanking them for their help and useful suggestions.

During the 12-month period between the design phase and construction phase, the entire renovation project caused even more work for staff: The remodeling serendipitously coincided with the migration of the library's legacy ILS system to III Millennium. For the library to carry out two large, complex projects, buy-in from staff proved to be critical. Staff input was crucial to successful completion of the remodeling — but patron reactions to the library closure were not as positive.

Construction Phase: Who or What is Whining

The construction phase transpired during August and September 2001, creating significant disruption of services to customers. The library remained open during the first two weeks of construction. But the Upper Reading Room was closed to the public as the construction crew began

conference room. In the small 30-foot-by-60-foot conference room, staff had very little space to spread out the materials they needed to complete their tasks and carry out their duties. In addition, because reference staff was answering telephone reference questions, the noise level increased, further hindering the other staff members working in the conference room.

While the staff worked in its cramped quarters, the library's patrons had a tougher time adjusting to the renovation. Six weeks before the library closed, the staff sent out press releases and posted notices in the library and on its Web site about the library's impending two-week closure. The staff also informed patrons about the library closure over the phone and via e-mail when answering reference questions, along with sending notices to various listservs. The library advertised a number of alternatives to access its information:

- The other three branches of the San Diego County Public Law Library were open during normal business hours.
- Reference librarians were available for phone and e-mail reference.
- Fee-based services were available by phone.

The staff also offered information on other public and law library locations in San Diego and their hours of operation.

Despite these measures, many patrons showed up and were shocked to find the library closed. The library initially left the front door open so that the construction crews could bring in materials. However, after a few desperate folks sneaked in the front door and hid behind stacked furniture to read law books, a staff member was posted at the front door to turn back devious customers. Most of them were attorneys who thought that the "Closed for Remodeling" sign didn't apply to them because they really needed to use the library's materials.

During the library closure, one reference librarian was assigned to phone duty and another to e-mail duty from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. They rotated about every two hours so that everyone got a break. The other reference librarians worked on projects such as updating research guides, writing class curricula and other tasks the library never had time to tackle because other pressing priorities and duties took precedent. Catalog staff cleaned up the bibliographic database. Access services staff completed shelf reading in between handling extended services requests over the phone. The information technology staff upgraded the LAN equipment necessitated by the newly installed LAN drops.

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Two weeks of construction turned into four weeks, and customer and staff frustration rose accordingly. Over the phone, reference staff had to pacify the public while dealing with the stress of working literally cheek by jowl with 12 co-workers in a small room. Even the best working relationships would be strained in these conditions. The fact that everyone survived relatively unscathed is a testament

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to the healing power of short walks around the block, according to many staff members.

The stress of a disrupted workplace was immense, but the information technology staff kept e-mail up and running, which helped everyone stay informed about what construction and remodeling task to expect and when it would occur. When the library finally reopened, both patrons and staff heaved a huge sigh of relief after four weeks of construction. Although some minor construction projects still were not finished, the staff members were ready to reopen the library — they found it much easier to handle the whines of the drills rather than the wails of the public.



The new circulation desk now greets patrons as they enter the main library.

The Silence of the Drills: What We Learned

Good communication is critical to the success of a project like this. The library staff coped with the stress of construction and remodeling because each staff member was an important and contributing part of the entire process. Like any tense situation, each staff member took turns whining to one another when the renovation hindered their ability to carry out their duties. But the staff overcame the stress of the remodeling project because of their active participation.

Communication is also vital when dealing with library users during a library

renovation. The San Diego County Public Law Library alerted its customers to the upcoming library closure. Many patrons appreciated the library informing them about the closure in advance and used the library's suggested alternative methods of accessing information. The staff just accepted that some customers were unhappy with the process.

Despite the nuisance and problems inherent with the library's remodeling project, the staff, most of the library's patrons and the library's board of trustees consider the end result well worth the effort — including enduring the shrill whines of both man and machine.

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