

## Two-way Communication

*How a librarian created a user-centered, social library*



As Information Technology Manager of the [Missouri River Regional Library](#) in Jefferson City, Missouri, Robin Hastings relies on the human factor and various forms of communication to connect with patrons and colleagues alike.

A medium-sized library, the Missouri River Regional Library serves approximately 80,000 people. As of January 2008, the main branch had 30 public access computers with Internet access, as well as six additional computers for the children's area that have games but no Internet access. [Osage County Library](#), a second branch in Linn, Missouri has six public computers, including one computer for gaming.

Robin has worked at the library for more than ten years, although she spent her first nine years at the branch as a web designer. She accepted her current position in August 2007 when the previous network administrator left. As Information Technology Manager, Robin is responsible for all of the public access computers, the staff computers in the circulation area, and the associated technology. Her team includes one full-time staff member who works primarily at the help desk, and two part-time staff members who focus on the public computer center.

### Staying Healthy

To protect its public computers, IT staff uses Softpedia's [Trend Micro OfficeScan](#), a virus scanner, and Centurion Technologies' [CenturionGuard](#), which allows patrons to do most anything to public computers, including adding files to the desktop, installing software, and changing settings. A simple reboot of the computer restores it back to the IT staff's defined configuration without the risk of harm from the user's session. Robin says that although they allow patrons to bring in their own disks and flash drives, she is proud of the fact that the library's public computer center has not had a virus outbreak in about two years.

## Technology and Replacement Plans

Staff are required to submit a technology plan to the state library every five years. The latest technology plan was completed in the summer of 2007, before Robin took the IT manager position. The previous IT manager met with each of the library's managers to determine their department's upcoming technological needs. The library's blog, which asks questions to solicit feedback and discussions, and a patron survey help inform updates to the existing plan and will help in the creation of the next technology plan.

The computers in the library are replaced every four years, with the exception of the Online Public Access Catalog computers (OPACs), which Robin says, "tend to be hand-me-downs." As the new equipment is brought in, the older models are reassigned as OPAC computers. In a previous round, they replaced all of the public use computers and a couple of the older staff machines. Robin plans to replace the staff machines in batches - approximately half of the inventory each year.

During the last roll-out of the computers, the previous IT staff person used [Norton Ghost](#), a disc-cloning software, to create a single image of the desired set-up, which he copied to the other computers through a network. IT has three main images: one for the public computer center, a second for the staff desk machines, and a third for the personal machines. They use [SpiceWorks](#), a free IT management software, to track when computers need to be replaced.

The library has had public computer sales to get rid of older computers that were no longer under warranty and could no longer be used. Robin says that they usually "wipe the hard drive clean" and sell the monitor, tower, mouse and keyboard without an operating system for approximately 50 dollars.

## The Human Factor

The library uses [EnvisionWare's PC Reservation System](#) to manage public use of the computers, which includes time management and reservations. This year, Robin plans to add the print management component to their public computer network. Robin says that one of the staff's biggest challenges is to limit patrons' time on the computers. She shares, "Our biggest challenge is [making sure that] people use the computer center within the rules and regulations that we've set up." She explains that despite the fact that the library has "a fairly generous two-hour time limit per day per patron," some patrons will try to find ways to beat the system, including using other patrons' card numbers. Patrons found in violation of the system get a warning and each subsequent infraction can result in being banned from the library for one month, six months, and a year. Robin explains that they are using "the human factor" to deal with

computer monitoring, which means that staff keep a “close eye” on patrons to make sure that they are not using the public-use computers longer than two hours.

The human factor is also a big consideration when choosing a vendor. Robin says that “price is a big consideration, but it’s not the only one.” For example, the responsiveness of local technicians played a big part in her recent selection of Dell as a vendor. She shares that Dell has more than one technician in their area, which satisfies an important criteria “for how well [the company is] going to take care of us after we buy.”

### **Communicating with Staff**

Robin and her staff have been working together for about ten years and she describes their group as “very close-knit.” She shares, “It’s a great place to work and people don’t leave very often, so I’ve known a lot of these people for many years and that really affects the way we do our jobs as well. These are our friends - not only coworkers - but people we hang out with.”

Robin’s calm demeanor and patience seem to play a part in this camaraderie. She shares that after working in IT for many years, “a lot of times we forget how confusing this stuff can be.” For example, when issues arise with the public computers, staff use the [Eventum](#) trouble ticket software provided by [MySQL](#), an open source database. A form on the staff web allows for anonymous reporting of problems, and Robin and her assistant subsequently log in to investigate the problem and determine who will fix the issue. She shares that when she first trained a new staff person, Robin worked with her on every trouble ticket and discussed the issues together afterward. She advised her coworker, “We need to be sure to understand that these people have jobs that are different. They don’t do what we do all day.” Robin’s compassion and focus on making technical concepts more clear has no doubt led to a well-run operation at her library.

### **Sharing Information**

Robin is dedicated to staff training. She maintains a Google calendar of free information; the calendar has a RSS feed and is also embedded on the staff web site. She provides links to the registration page, which she says “makes it easy on [staff] and easy on me” to sign up for classes.

When buying products, one consideration is whether or not the company provides free training. For example, a database representative offered a training on WebEx. Robin shares, “So instead of having one person learn how to do it and then offer that training to the rest of the staff, we got the training directly from the database vendor itself, and I think that went over pretty well.” The library’s state Internet service provider also offers

free training on a regular basis.

She explains that they hold staff training modules once or twice a quarter. The courses are sometimes offered three times a day so that coworkers can choose the most convenient time. In one such training, IT staff taught colleagues how a self check-out machine would affect the circulation staff.

By mid-afternoon each day, Robin says that approximately 80 percent of the library's public use computers are pointed toward MySpace. To be able to answer questions about such websites, staff completed a year-long training she describes as a variation and expansion of the [Charlotte and Mecklenburg Public Library Web 2.0](#) or [Library Learning 2.0](#) program. The course covered social networking sites, wikis, and blogs.

The library also maintains group profiles on MySpace, FriendFeed, and Facebook, and various blogs, including [The Reader's Eye](#), an online meeting place for the members of various film and book discussion groups held at the library, and the [Library Learning 2.1](#) blog, which provides information and promotes discussion with questions. For example, one posting in October 2008 asked people four questions about their training: 1) What was the most useful thing you learned? 2) What was the most fun? 3) What would you like to learn more about? and 4) Which do you think will have the most impact on libraries?

Robin says that she "Web 2.0'ified" the library's home page by including links to snippets from the blog, their [Twitter web stream](#), and their [Flickr photo stream](#). The library has a [Flickr](#) badge on their web site, and smartly sports an individual badge for their branch's web page using tags to showcase the library. For the past six years, Robin has maintained a personal blog called "[A Passion for 'Puters: The Intersection of Libraries, Computers, and Web Trivialities](#)." She is so dedicated to and knowledgeable about blogging, that as of November 2008, she had signed a contract to write a book on microblogging and lifestreaming, and how libraries can use these social phenomena to connect with their patrons.

### **Keeping Current**

In early 2008, the library's ISP contacted IT staff to let them know that the library was getting near to the bandwidth ceiling and [MOREnet](#) would provide a free upgrade that would double what they currently had. Robin describes MOREnet as a state ISP agency associated with the University of Missouri that does "a really good job of keeping an eye on their customer's usage."

According to the library's blog, it has been increasingly difficult to keep the latest versions of Flash, Adobe Reader and other popular software up to date and make sure that all of their patrons' favorite sites are available

to them. To fix this situation, they close the public computer center for three hours every two months to maintain and update the computers. The blog explains that “the fact that the computers will be up to date and working reliably will offset the inconvenience of being closed.”

### **Future Plans**

The library is planning and preparing for a new building, which will include expanding the public computer center and adding more computers. Robin shares that the library had five computers when she started working there, and although they had 30 computers as of January 2008, they still had a wait list at times. She would like to get print management hardware that would allow patrons to manage and pay for their own print jobs, and free up the time that staff at the public computer center spend on dealing with print-outs to help address trouble tickets.

Robin is not afraid of tackling new adventures and territory. Given this intrepidity and her prowess in various forms of communication, this new venture is bound to go well.