



Job-seeking in U.S. Public Libraries

Job Seekers Go Online

In the first decade of the 21st Century, classified job ads have gone the way of the mimeograph—nearly obsolete. Nearly three-quarters of job seekers now use the Internet to seek employment,¹ in part because this is the only way to apply for many job opportunities. There are nearly 4 million vacancies listed online.² Less than 44% of the top 100 U.S. retailers accept in-store paper applications anymore.³

With jobless rates up in 49 states and the District of Columbia,⁴ the need for access to computers and the Internet is more critical than ever. One essential community institution is positioned to meet this growing need – your local public library.

“When we started out, the idea of filling out an online job application just was not on anybody’s radar. Now. . . my daughter did her entire job search, her entire apartment search, online—there was not a written piece of paper involved. More is expected to be done online.”

Pennsylvania librarian

Public Libraries Are Community Technology Hubs

Over the past decade, America’s 16,543 public libraries have made substantial investments in technology resources. Today virtually every public library provides computers and Internet access free of charge to the public. The number of computers available has

1 Katherine Hansen Ph. D., “Web 2.0 Dominates Trends in Internet Job-Hunting.” 2008. http://www.quintcareers.com/Internet_job-hunting_report.html

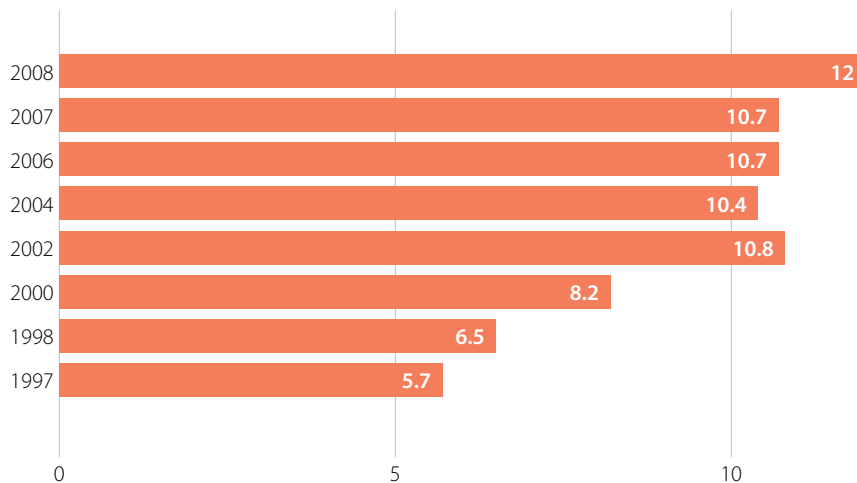
2 Conference Board. “Help-Wanted Online Data Series.” January 7, 2009 <http://www.conference-board.org/economics/helpwantedOnline.cfm>

3 Taleo Reseach, “Trends in Hourly Job Application Methods.” 2006

4 Bureau of Labor Statistics. “Regional and State Employment and Unemployment: November 2008.” December 19, 2008. www.bls.gov

doubled in the last decade; Internet connections have become faster; and Wi-Fi has become commonplace in many libraries.⁵ In only four years, the number of public libraries offering free wireless access has jumped to 65.9% from 17%.⁶

Average Number of Workstations per Public Library



In most communities, libraries are the *only* provider of free access. According to the 2007-08 Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study, nearly 73% of libraries are their communities' sole provider of free Internet access—which rises to 82% in rural areas.⁷

"I need this library. I need this computer," said single mother Janessa James, who lost her full-time job in mid-November, and visits the Rockford Public Library daily, as quoted in the 1-3-09 Rockford Register Star.

As part of site visits to public libraries in nine states, the study research team has found greatly increased use of library technology for job-seeking and e-government. In every state visited, library staff and users report library computers and Internet access are used to search for employment, prepare resumes and file for unemployment benefits. Aiding job seekers was increasingly viewed as a critical role for public libraries, with 62.2% of libraries reporting this service is critical to the library's mission, up from 44% one year earlier.

5 *Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2007-2008*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2008. <http://www.ala.org/plinternetfunding>

6 *Ibid.*, p. 36

7 *Ibid.*, p. 37

Library Staffs Provide Needed Assistance

Many of those seeking assistance are first-time computer users. At the library, they learn how to use a mouse, how to open an email account and how to do an online job search. Many library staff report they are scheduling one-hour sessions with patrons to orient them to the broad range of skills to do research, find jobs, or apply for government assistance. Many librarians report that applying for jobs and government assistance are among the most staff-intensive patron Internet needs.

When Wynn Las Vegas began hiring staff for a new casino, the North Las Vegas Library District in Nevada found itself in the eye of a storm. There was only one way to get housekeeping, cashier, or any other job in the new casino – through an online job application form.

Library staff learned that the casino had referred applicants to the public library, and that many of these people had no prior experience with a computer or the Internet. As a result, the line of people waiting to use library computers stretched outside the doors during peak periods. To help patrons establish their first email accounts and navigate through the online form, library staff dedicated many hours to one-on-one assistance.

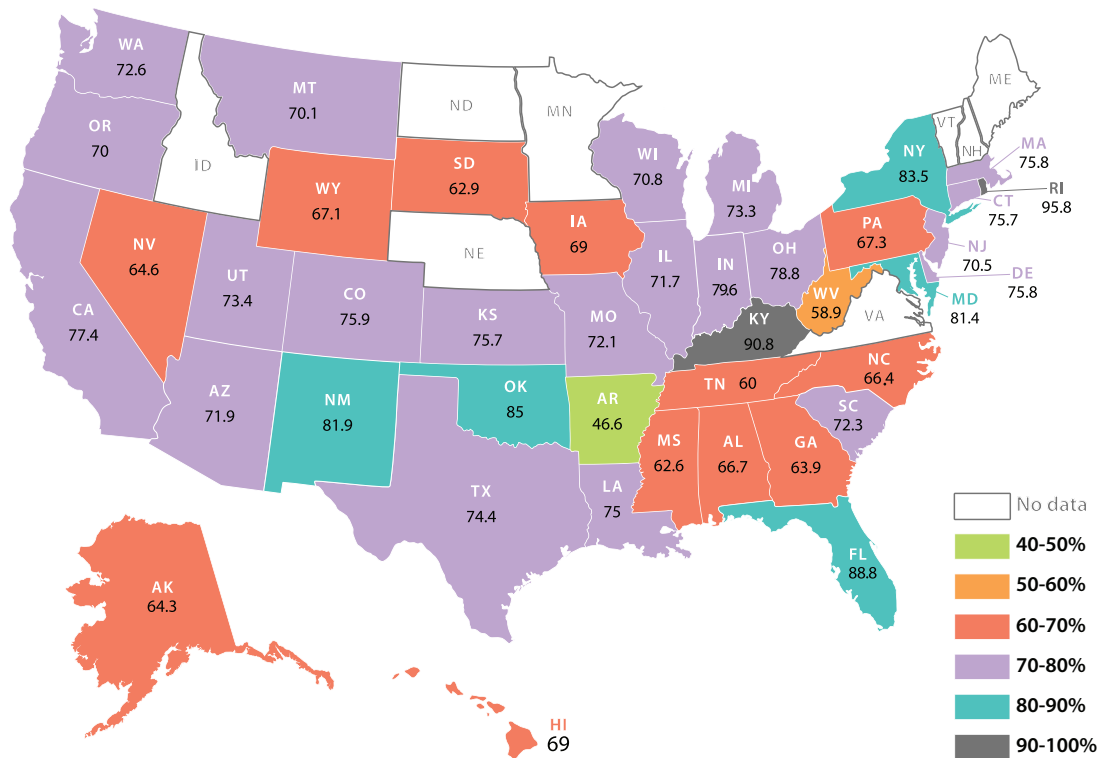
“This is all hard to do in one hour, and people had to keep coming back to check their email,” said North Las Vegas Library Director Kathy Pennell. The library provided 11 public computers with one-hour time limits and three “express” computers with 15-minute time limits. Those 14 computers served a population upwards of 200,000 until a grant allowed the library to purchase an additional 15.

In addition to low technology skills, many patrons also had low literacy rates and/or spoke English as a second language, increasing the amount of staff help needed. The main branch serves a population about 80 percent Hispanic, and averaged about 19,000 visits each month in 2007.

Almost three-quarters of libraries report offering information technology training for library patrons. Classes include Computer 101, introduction to the Internet, Email 101, resume help, and introductory classes in office software products, including Word and Excel. The Flint Public Library created a section called COPE (Career Opportunities and Planning for Employment) that combines print, audio, and visual resources to support job-seekers and development.⁸

8 Mlive.com. “Libraries Offer Low-cost Resume Help.” August 18, 2008.
http://www.mlive.com/flintjournal/business/index.ssf/2008/08/libraries_offer_lowcost_resume.html

Percent of Public Library Outlets Offering Information Technology Training to Patrons



Demand for E-Government Services Grows

Job losses also have meant steep climbs in unemployment claims causing, for instance, the Employment Security Commission of North Carolina Web site to crash twice in one week under a rush of claims,⁹ and Indiana, Michigan and South Carolina to seek federal loans to shore up unemployment compensation trust funds.

Public library staff report that library computers increasingly are being used to access e-government resources, including unemployment benefits, making appointments with immigration officials, filing court petitions and taking driver's tests. Librarians in Virginia reported the state's department of employment services, for instance, had closed several of its satellite offices with computers and posted notices on the door directing people to their local libraries to fill out forms. Virginia also has stopped printing tax forms, and is one of many states that require applicants for state jobs to apply online.

9 Associated Press. "North Carolina unemployment claims crash website," USA Today. January 6, 2009. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-01-06-ncarolina-unemployment_N.htm?csp=34



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"People come in every day to apply for unemployment. They could also go to the unemployment office, but the lines are long there, and there is no one to help them navigate. The library's hours also are more conducive since they can look for work all day, then come to the library at night," Indiana library director.

Staff in almost three-quarters of all public libraries provide as-needed assistance to patrons for understanding and using e-government resources, and more than half provide direct assistance to patrons using these services.

I don't know anywhere else you can go to get on the Internet for free," explained Don, an unemployed forklift operator waiting for the Elkhart Public Library in Indiana to open to apply for unemployment benefits, as quoted in the 12-18-08 Elkhart Truth.

In some cases, public libraries have partnered with civic offices to better serve their communities. The Pueblo City-County Library District in Colorado combined forces with the Pueblo Workforce Center to bring Workforce Center kiosks to the library's computer labs to increase access to job-seeking resources.¹⁰ The Springfield-Green County Library in Missouri has worked with the Missouri Career Center to offer a JobView kiosk in its Midtown Carnegie Branch Library. Because libraries have longer hours and are open on weekends, the information and services are able to reach more people than may be possible through other government agencies.

Online Collections Expand

While the image of libraries is still closely linked with shelves and stacks of books, library staffs are also building rich collections of electronic materials online – including databases, e-books and downloadable audiobooks – many of which are available 24/7.

Nearly 88% of all libraries – and 98% of urban libraries – provide free access to databases that support business, education, and training. Many of these collections include the Learning Express Library, which offers more than 770 online, interactive practice examinations for the Civil Service, EMS, Border Patrol, Police, and Nursing, as well as Business Writing Success Skills.

Many state libraries have invested in these subscription databases to ensure equitable access for all state residents, as well as providing significant savings over the cost of individual subscriptions. The Alabama Virtual Library, for example, estimates a saving of \$12 million.¹¹ More than 77% of state libraries report funding licensed resources on behalf of public libraries in their states.¹²

10 Angie Evans. "Local Libraries Adding Jobs Info." April 24, 2008. <http://www.chieftain.com/print.php?article=/business/1209016800/2>

11 Alabama Virtual Library. <http://www.virtual.lib.al.us/publications/index.html>

12 *Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2006-2007*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2007. <http://www.ala.org/plinternetfunding>

Demand Outpacing Library Resources

Web access at public libraries is about much more than research and exploring the digital world. Increasingly, it has become more than just searching for employment; it is about preparing oneself for new expectations of employers and the almost exclusively web-based process of application. This increased activity has repercussions and costs. Despite ongoing improvement in the number of Internet computers available to the public, eight out of 10 public libraries report they do not have enough computers to meet demand all or some part of the day. More than 90% of libraries limit the time patrons can use computers in order to accommodate the most number of patrons possible. The most common reasons libraries are unable to expand computer access are space (77.7%) and cost (75.9%).¹³ A majority of U.S. public library buildings are between 25 to 50 years old, and 40 percent are estimated to be in fair or poor condition.¹⁴

Trends in the application process combined with greater information and heavy multimedia use on potential employers sites—recruitment video, podcasts, flash animation—also put a strain on available bandwidth. While 64.6% of public libraries report offering Internet access speeds of 1.5Mbps (T1) or greater, 57.5% say the connection speed is insufficient to meet patron needs some or all the time. Cost is the most significant barrier to increasing bandwidth.

“Even with two T1 lines, the more people we bring in, the slower the speed. The computers are so popular,” North Carolina public library trustee.

At the same time public libraries are expanding technology services, and library visits average about 175 million each month¹⁵, overall budgets have remained level for most libraries. Funding data indicate volatility in how libraries support their public technology access. Even libraries with historically stable funding have reacted to flat funding by shifting to soft funding sources (fees/fines, donations and grants) as a way to support public computing services. Local government revenue and “other” (soft funding) account for nearly 90 percent of overall public library funding.¹⁶

13 *Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2006-2007*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2007. <http://www.ala.org/plinternet/funding>

14 Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA), Legislative Committee, National Construction Survey. Prepared by the New Jersey State Library for COSLA.

15 Institute of Museum and Library Services. *Public Libraries in the United States: Fiscal Year 2006*. <http://harvester.census.gov/imls/pubs/Publications/PLS2006.pdf>

16 Institute of Museum and Library Services. *Public Libraries in the United States: Fiscal Year 2006*. <http://harvester.census.gov/imls/pubs/Publications/PLS2006.pdf>

Conclusion

Libraries are part of the solution when a community is struggling economically. From free access to books and online resources to library business centers that help support entrepreneurship and retraining, libraries support lifelong learning.

A 2008 Harris Poll found that the number of adults with public library cards has reached an historic high at 68 percent.¹⁷ Seventy-six percent of Americans visited their local public library in the past year, compared with 65.7 percent two years ago. Online visits to libraries are up even more substantially – with 41 percent of library card holders visiting their library Web sites in the past year, compared with 23.6 percent in 2006. Even those with computers at home turn to libraries. Libraries offer faster connections, a community of users, and guidance not found on home computers. A Nevada mother goes to the library at least twice a week with her teenage sons because she “can do twice as much in an hour” than she can on her home computer.¹⁸

With adequate public support and funding, public libraries are uniquely positioned to play a central role in local economic development efforts by providing physical meeting and training space, information professionals, and free access to computers, office software, specialized databases and the Internet.

“This library is the only place in many miles where people have access to computers and the Internet. It’s vital. At first I didn’t think so, but if you can’t apply for a job stocking shelves at Food Lion without a computer, it’s vital,” North Carolina public library director.

17 American Library Association. “New National Poll Shows Library Card Registration Reaches Historic High.” <http://www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/news/pressreleases2008/September2008/ORSarris.cfm>

18 *Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2006-2007*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2007. <http://www.ala.org/plinternetfunding>



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ALA Office for Research & Statistics, 800-545-2433



The Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study is the largest and longest running study of its kind. Additional information is available online at www.ala.org/plinternetfunding.