

WLA Fact Sheet:

Information Technology and Libraries [1998]

The recent revolution in information technology -- using computers, CD-ROM, electronic databases, and the Internet to make a greater variety of information more readily available -- has presented libraries with powerful new tools to meet patron information needs, beyond traditional printed materials. Now, even the smallest library can reach beyond its walls to provide its clientele with global information resources once available only from the largest libraries. But not without challenges and costs.

Computer equipment is expensive to install, operate, maintain, and upgrade. CD-ROM products and database licenses must be purchased, and buildings must be adapted to new technologies. Costs for technical staff are high and because of stiff competition with private industry, it is difficult to recruit and retain them. Telecommunications charges to link libraries and provide database and Internet access can be significant, especially for libraries outside major metropolitan areas.

While technology-related expenditures are consuming a growing share of library budgets, traditional library services such as reading, childrens programming, student support and independent research are still very important to library users and continue to be in great demand. The number of books and periodicals published each year continues to increase, as does the cost. And in a new twist on an old role, librarians are now being asked to help people navigate through the electronic information labyrinth. Information technology has added new service requirements with few offsetting savings.

Citizens expect that traditional library services will continue while the latest information technology is added. This stands in stark contrast to other citizen expectations that taxes be limited or reduced. Yet, as technology plays a growing role in accessing information and as that access becomes increasingly commercialized, the role of libraries in making information available to all citizens, regardless of technical skills or financial resources, is more important than ever.

Libraries are attempting to meet their constituents library service needs -- both traditional and technological -- but adequate financial support is essential.

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