

ISSUE EIGHT

UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF TECHNOLOGY.

Technology is changing how people work. It's changing their expectations. It's changing audiences. It's bringing steady but rapid change.

The advent of personal computers and the Internet has been nothing short of revolutionary. Technology has changed learning preferences, organizational operations, communications, and expectations. In parts of the state, access to technology is limited. Its uneven development in heritage work has left many – old and young, rural and urban – feeling disenfranchised.

TECHNOLOGY CHANGES FUNDAMENTALS

Research for the Institute of Museum and Library Services in 2008 estimated that nearly half of museum visits were remote, predominantly via websites. At a conference that year, museum and exhibit planners discussed how some aspects of the museum experience would be delivered entirely in digital format, if only to reach different audiences.

The conference report concluded there is a structural shift where technology “is fundamentally establishing and wiring expectations differently, particularly among younger audiences, this time when it comes to the concept of the narrative.”

Because data storage and distribution costs are low, Google, YouTube and Flickr have emerged as dominant repositories for digital assets and perhaps will redefine the idea of curating content, the report said. With more than 70 percent of adults using the Internet and that percentage rising, these changes might affect nearly everybody, directly or indirectly, including museums and communities.

CHANGE JUST BEGINNING

For many Oregon heritage organizations, the journey into technology is just beginning. Most heritage organizations have adopted or created collections management software, but many do not fully understand or use its capacity. Some have not had the time and money resources to



Warm Springs

“As the internet explodes, and more and more information is readily out there for searching, people are able to do what we professionals have done traditionally. So what is our role in this changing landscape? What is the value that we are adding to the process?”

- Diana Banning, City of Portland Archives

THE DIGITAL ERA

64 percent of the archival organizations responding to the Heritage Assessment Survey said using digital technologies to expand awareness, support and effectiveness would be one of their most important issues during the next 10 years. 50 percent also said keeping current with changing technology would be one of their most important issues.



Benton County Historical Society

transfer written records into the new format, using resources that could be used for other efforts.

“People expect museums to be as technologically proficient as other aspects of their lives, said Allison Weiss of the Southern Oregon Historical Society. “That’s really challenging; we don’t have the staff or the money to put that kind of infrastructure in place but I think it’s an absolute necessity that organizations have their archives available online so that people don’t have to visit their institution in order for them to access the materials. Without access it’s nearly impossible to convey the value of our collections.”

Museums and archives responded in the Heritage Assessment Survey that keeping current with changes in technology is one of their top challenges during the next 10 years.

Not only is technology changing, but so are people’s expectations. More are requesting documents to be available online. Many people expect access to be free. Yet, others live in places where there is insufficient bandwidth to use the sites, or they are unable to afford Internet service, computers or software training. For example, more than 25 percent of the attendees at a Regional Heritage Roundup in April 2010 in LaGrande said they can access the Internet only through dial-up phone connections.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

The people working in Oregon heritage are excited about the marriage of technology and heritage. Historic photographs, databases, newspapers and more electronic records are being created daily. Building, artifact and document preservationists are constantly finding new ways to use software in their work.

At the University of Oregon Libraries, the home of the state’s historic newspaper collections, a grant-supported effort to create searchable, digitized online images of those newspapers is under way. People are now able to sit in their offices or in their pajamas at home and in just minutes conduct research that previously would have taken weeks

The Oregon State University Libraries is testing a new system in which historic photographs from numerous repositories are scanned in a standard format, and then made available on a single coordinated website. The Lincoln County Historical Society in Newport and the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center in The Dalles are among the first participants.

Archaeologists are able to use computerized techniques for evaluating potential heritage sites, as well as for the analysis and identification of artifacts.

No matter the idea, obstacles exist. For technology to benefit an organization or business, it must be thoughtful, planned and tied to an entity's mission, audiences and goals. No matter who uses technology, they need training to be able to maximize its productivity. Slightly more than half of the respondents in the Heritage Solutions Survey said the most effective method in solving technology issues would be by providing technical assistance to create strategic technology plans.

Some questions remain. Even electronic records must be preserved and need storage space. How will these newer preservation needs affect the knowledge and roles of archivists? Will older people, who are often the strongest advocates of heritage issues, take advantage of technological advances? How will those with poor computer and Internet access fare? Oregonians, not technology, will need to answer these questions.

THE VIRTUAL MUSEUMS

Of 50 Oregon county historical societies and other museums surveyed in late 2009, only 78 percent had websites. Of those websites:

- 68 percent had 10 or more pages
- 28 percent provided some kind of access to their collections
- 18 percent had interactive resources
- 24 percent had a history of their respective county
- 24 percent had e-commerce features, including a printable membership form.



Lane County Historical Museum