



Meal Plan 1

Focusing on Your Ingredients for Success



If you're like most people working in a rural library, you understand your community and work to create services and provide resources that will meet community members' needs. You probably know most of your patrons by name. If asked, however, to describe your library's technology resources, can you easily describe what you have?

This section digs deeper into the steps that rural libraries should take to assess current public computing status and needs. It also discusses key factors to consider in creating a more efficient and effective public computing environment. In addition, this meal plan provides you with some examples of tools and techniques that can help you move from feeling uncertain about where you are right now, to feeling confident about the direction in which you are going.

TOPICS COVERED:

- What's On Your Library Resource Plate?
- TechAtlas: Technology Planning Options for Libraries
- Space Requirement Guidelines
- What to Do with Leftovers—Upgrade and Computer Replacement
- Fast Food—Meal Plan 1 Summary



What's On Your Library Resource Plate?

In many libraries, the technology feels like an amorphous and slightly out-of-control thing. In order to create a successful public computer environment, it is absolutely essential that you get a handle on your existing technology needs. To do this, you need to:

- Know your current situation,
- Figure out where you want to be, **and**
- Develop an action plan.

KNOW YOUR CURRENT SITUATION

Successful public computing starts with a clear assessment of your current status. This includes conducting an inventory of the library's hardware and software, and assessing the skill levels of your staff members. It is also important to be aware of your user needs and whether or not they are being properly met.

- How are people using the library's public computers?
- How many people use the computers each day?
- Are some of these users visitors to the community?
- How long does the average user stay on a computer?
- Which software programs are most frequently used?
- How many pages does the average user print?

Gathering this sort of data over time can provide meaningful insights into public computing in the library.

As you carry out your assessment, try to flesh out the statistical information with stories and examples.

- Consider conducting interviews with users of the library's public computers.
- Encourage people to talk about the ways in which they use the computers.
- Ask questions to help determine the needs that are being met.

This kind of qualitative information gathering helps reveal the real heart of computers in libraries. Ask permission to use the stories in marketing and promotional materials. While numbers are always impressive to people, stories can be an inspiration.

If while assessing the current status of your library's public computer environment, you discover areas in which you are doing really well, or there are groups that are particularly well-served by your library's technology, be sure to celebrate those successes!

*For more specific details on the different steps you can take to assess your current situation, see *First Course: Determine Your Library and Patrons' Needs and Plan Accordingly*, on page 27 of this Cookbook.*



FIGURE OUT WHERE YOU WANT TO BE

Once you have a clear picture of your current situation, you can begin to think about any areas of improvement and/or specific needs that are not being met. How can you create a technology environment that is even more effective and valuable to your community? Technology decisions should never be made for technology's sake.

A thoughtful approach to technology involves looking at people's needs and then using technology to meet those needs as appropriate. The possibilities are endless. Deciding where to focus attention, however, can be a challenge. To help narrow your focus, look to your overall vision, mission, and goals for the library. In what areas is technology a key component?

As a next step, evaluate the groups not being properly served by your library's public computing. Consider targeting specific groups and developing services and resources to meet their needs. These groups might include:

- Teens
- Parents of young children
- Homeschoolers
- Retired individuals
- Persons with disabilities
- New Americans
- Job seekers
- Genealogists
- Small business owners

For example, if one of your library's goals for the current year is to reach out to people who are retired, how might technology help in the attainment of that goal? Is there equipment currently available that might help? What about software or hardware? Classes or training? Are there organizations in the community with whom the library could partner to help reach that group? A certain amount of planning must always focus on the needs of the general population. Devoting time and resources to targeted needs, however, can take the library's services to a higher level.



DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

How do you move from where you are at right now to where you want to be? Setting realistic goals is important. What can be reasonably accomplished in the next year? In the next two years? Technology changes quickly, and while it may be impossible to determine specifics for the years ahead, overall technology goals and ambitions can be established and pursued.

In goal-setting and action-planning, it's important to share responsibility with others. Even in the smallest libraries (including those with only one staff person), it's necessary to develop a team approach to technology planning and implementation. Board members, community members, and other libraries are all places where you can look for possible assistance.



TechAtlas: Technology Planning Options for Libraries

It's impossible to predict the future, especially when dealing with technology. Having a good technology plan, however, will serve as a map for your journey. TechAtlas (<http://webjunction.techatlas.org>) is a free online tool for library technology assessment and planning. It includes many features from which a library can pick and choose. Potential uses include the following:

- **Track hardware and software with the automated inventory.** If you use TechAtlas for only one thing, or if you are looking for a first step in using this powerful resource, then consider running the inventory tool. An automated script will run and gather detailed information about each computer, compiling that information in a web-based inventory that you can access from any computer. **This means the information can be shared with anyone who helps you with your computer.** It is a simple and fast process that provides you with an up-to-date inventory of the hardware and software in your library, allowing you to feel much more on top of the technology in the building. Knowing what you have now will help you feel prepared for planning and budgeting for tomorrow.
- **Survey your staff's technology skills.** How do you know if there are technology skills you should have or may benefit from having? The number of skills you can learn is large, so how do you pick and choose where to focus your energy and brainpower? The tools in TechAtlas can help you track staff skills and can also compare your library to other libraries. The staff skill section of TechAtlas is customizable, so you can add skills that are specific to your library.
- **Create a technology plan.** Does your library have a technology plan? If so, is it a meaningful document, or was it simply created to fulfill a requirement for a grant application? A well-done technology plan requires time and energy, but the end result is well worth it. Setting your goals and priorities and then reviewing them on an ongoing basis will mean the difference between feeling overwhelmed by technology and feeling like your community needs are being well-served. TechAtlas can help in this area. After answering questions and inputting the necessary data, you are able to print out a technology plan.
- **Track computer problems and Issues.** Event Tracker is a component of TechAtlas that can be used to log problems and other information about your library technology. In a library where multiple people are responsible for technology troubleshooting, Event Tracker can be a way to share information with one another about the computers in the library. It can also be useful in smaller libraries, where there is only one person responsible for fixing computers and solving technology problems. Looking back at logs over time can help you pinpoint problems. It can also serve as a reminder of previous fixes that worked. In addition, if there is staff turnover at the library, Event Tracker can help new staff people quickly review past technology problems and solutions.

If your library receives e-rate funds, then you know that it's necessary to have a current technology plan for your library. The plan you create in TechAtlas can be used to fulfill that requirement.



Space Requirement Guidelines

People begin library careers for many reasons. They love books. They enjoy working with people. They want to make a difference in their community. Some of the tasks and projects that arise in the course of working at the library, however, require skills and knowledge that you might not have expected. Being involved in the design of a new library building, for example, will require a librarian to learn about facility planning. Even if you are not designing a new building, but are simply working with an existing space, technology planning requires space planning.

TECHNOLOGY AND SPACE PLANNING

There are several things to consider when thinking about the placement of the public computers in the library:

- **Traffic flow:** Can people easily access each of the library's public computers? Where is the printer? Is it within "earshot" so people know they have started to print after they have clicked on the print button? Is there a sign-in sheet and a policy that needs to be read? If so, is it clear to a new visitor how the process flows?
- **Adequate space:** Is there room for each person to work comfortably on a computer, and if needed, have a bit of workspace? For example, if the computer user needs to write on a piece of paper while working on the computer, is there enough desk space for that?
- **Privacy:** People use a library's public computers for many important tasks. Imagine you were using one of the public computers to write a personal e-mail or to take a test for an online course. Are the computers positioned in a way that is conducive to both concentration and privacy?
- **Fixing what can be fixed:** If you have been providing public computers for some time now, you may be aware of problems with the current computer placement. Is the current setup too crowded? Are there recurrent frustrating and challenging situations? Talk to the people who frequently use the computers, as well as to the staff members who regularly monitor or assist people with the computers. Sometimes there are small, simple fixes that can make a big difference.

NEW LIBRARY BUILDINGS AND PLANNING FOR PUBLIC COMPUTING

Being involved in the building of a new library is one of the most exciting and most exhausting projects to be encountered while working in a library. It's necessary to not only think about the library you want now, but to also try to anticipate the needs in years to come. Technology needs are especially difficult to anticipate. Wiring, workspaces, and printers are only a few of the many details that need to be considered.



What to Do with Leftovers— Upgrade Schedules and Computer Replacement

COMPUTER PURCHASES

Here are some tips and general guidelines that can help you make informed computer purchase decisions:

- **Do some research.** Before you buy a new computer, be sure to read the consumer reviews and look at price comparisons. CNET <http://www.cnet.com/> is one place to find reviews. Consumer Reports magazine is another place to look. MySimon <http://www.mysimon.com> is a great place to do price comparisons.
- **Know the basics.** A grasp of computer hardware and software fundamentals can help you make informed decisions. If thinking about hardware specifications is new to you, then you might begin by focusing on three essential things:
 - **Processor speed.** The faster the processor, the more quickly it can process computations.
 - **RAM (Random Access Memory).** More memory lets you run more applications at the same time without slowing down your computer.
 - **Size of hard drive.** The larger the hard disk, the more data you can store.

The *How Stuff Works* web site has easy-to-understand explanations <http://computer.howstuffworks.com/>.

- **Make your computer purchase decisions make sense for your public computing environment.** You should ask yourself: How will the library's computer be used? How much software will be loaded on it? What sorts of applications will run on it?
- **Be sure to get any possible discounts.** You may be able to get a lower price by purchasing your computers as part of a group or through an existing county or statewide contract. For software purchases, be sure to take advantage of donated and discounted software available to public libraries through TechSoup Stock (www.techsoup.org/stock/libraries)

COMPUTER REPLACEMENT

How long will a computer last until it needs to be replaced? Many schools and businesses operate on a four-year computer hardware replacement cycle. They use a rotation system so that they will not be replacing all computers within the same year, but will instead be staggering purchases, as some computers hit their four-year lifespan.

The Gates Foundation recommends that you replace public computers (as well as other computers) every four years.

In the past, many libraries did not have a replacement plan, but just tried to use computers until they would no longer work. Recently, however, more and more of these libraries have tried to establish a four year replacement cycle, too. They've found that computers that are kept too long can result in more headaches than it is worth.



Here are three signs that it's probably time to replace a computer:

- **A computer has turned into one that patrons avoid.** If the computer is sick, then fix it. If, however, it is simply slower and less robust than the other computers because it is older, then be kind and retire it.
- **The computer operating systems is outdated/no longer supported.** If your computer runs a Windows operating system that is no longer supported by Microsoft, it may be time to change how that computer gets used in the library. If you are running Windows computers, you should be doing regular Windows updates for security purposes (as discussed in the next section). Windows only creates updates for the more current operating systems. For example, if a computer is running the Windows 98 operating system, that system is no longer being supported by Microsoft. No Windows updates are available. Either upgrade the computer to a newer operating system or use the computer in a different capacity (e.g., use it to run computer games for children or for word processing purposes).
- **Your computer is more like a “headache” machine.** All computers will freeze up or have other minor problems now and then. If an older computer is regularly having problems and in need of finessing, then it may be a sign that it is time to retire that machine.

Computer replacement will be an ongoing cost in libraries. If you realize that a computer's lifespan is approximately four years, you will be able to plan ahead and budget accordingly.

REFURBISHED COMPUTERS

Warrantied refurbished computers are a reasonable low-cost alternative to buying new ones. For libraries that use public computers primarily for web access and occasional word processing, a refurbished computer with a newly installed operating system may be worth considering. Warrantied refurbished PCs have a “fail and repair” rate equivalent to that of new computers, and they can cost half as much.

GETTING RID OF LIBRARY COMPUTERS

The disposing of a computer is not quite as simple as you think. You can't just take it out to the trash for the garbage collector to pick up. Some states have established regulations about the disposal of computer equipment. Monitors, in particular, can be an environmental hazard and need to be disposed of properly. In some places, you may need to pay a recycling fee. If the area in which you live does not have a recycling facility, there are national facilities to which you can send a computer for recycling. In addition to paying the recycling fee, you will also need to pay to ship the computer to the facility location. Some computer stores and manufacturers offer trade-in programs, where they will dispose of an old machine for you when you buy a new one from them. Here are some other things to consider when retiring a computer:

- **Be sure to clear all information off the hard drive.** Files and software programs should be removed. To find out how to do this, go to the "How to Clear Your Hard Drive" link in the "Other Tasty Recipes" section of this Meal Plan.



- **If you decide to give the computer to an individual or organization, consider asking them to sign some sort of waiver of responsibility.** This will ensure that you have made it clear that you are no longer responsible for the maintenance of the machine.
- **Don't be tempted to keep old computers around for spare parts or to use as a back-up.** While this seems logical, most organizations find that these computers never really get used. They instead, simply take up space.

USING OLDER COMPUTERS

If your library needs to keep these older computers and use them as long as possible, here are few points to keep in mind:

- **Computer upgrading:** Ideally, all your computers will be able to run the same version of a currently supported operating system. This makes it easier to maintain the computers and use the latest features. To do this, you'll need to upgrade your computer operating system and software. However, very old computers may not be upgradeable to the current version of Windows.
- **Compatibility issues:** Moreover, after you upgrade, you may find that the other software applications and utilities that you installed previously may not be so completely compatible with the new version of Windows. To avoid this unfortunate outcome, you may want to consider leaving these computers as they are, and limiting their purpose to specific tasks. For example, one library we spoke to designated their older computers – Gates-granted computers which ran Windows NT – for use by children to play educational games. These computers were taken offline so that the children were not able to access the Internet.
- **Computer donations:** Donated computers should be evaluated for their potential usefulness before accepting them; some older computers may be more trouble than they're worth. It's a good idea to have a policy in place that states that you will only accept computers capable of running the same software as the other computers in the library (e.g., Pentium IV processor, 512 GB RAM, 20 GB hard drive). That way, you can gracefully decline donations that won't be useful.
- **Linux Considerations** – A few rural libraries have also made the foray into Linux, a free, open source operating system. Some flavors of the Linux-based operating system are "lighter" and geared to run on fewer computing resources than Windows. This reduces the costs of buying operating system upgrades. So, this might be another way to extend the life of your computers.



The Linux Advantage

"When Microsoft abandoned support of Windows 98, we faced a major challenge! All of our staff and public computers are running on Windows 98. Most of our machines are Pentium II or less. These machines are not really compatible with Windows XP and certainly not compatible with Windows Vista.

We are changing our operating system to Linux. It is open source and comes in many flavors. The one I chose is Ubuntu. It is free. I can have one installation CD and install it on as many machines as I want. I have chosen Red Hat Linux Enterprise Edition Basic to run my server and will pay an annual fee for professional support and upgrades. This is very affordable at \$349 per year".

*Marian Wynn
Geneva Public Library, AL*



OTHER TASTY RECIPES

Technology Planning

- TechAtlas for Libraries
Technology planning tool
<http://webjunction.techatlas.org>
- Library Technology Planning (from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction)
<http://dpi.wi.gov/pld/planout.html>
- TechSoup
Technology planning tools and resources
<http://www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/techplan/index.cfm>
- WebJunction
Technology planning tools and resources
<http://www.webjunction.org>
- New Pathways to Planning
An online guide to all aspects of planning for small libraries
<http://skyways.lib.ks.us/pathway/#overview>



Purchasing, Reviews, and Donations

- TechSoup Stock
Discount and donated software available to libraries from Microsoft and other companies
www.techsoup.org/stock/libraries
- CNET
Hardware and software reviews and purchasing information
<http://www.cnet.com>
- MySimon
Hardware and software reviews and purchasing information
<http://www.mysimon.com>

Hardware and Software General Information

- HowStuffWorks
Easy-to-understand explanations of how computers work
<http://computer.howstuffworks.com>
- Planning for Replacement and Upgrades
http://infopeople.org/training/past/2006/managing/ex4_planning_for_replacements_upgrades.doc
- Upgrading and Maintaining Computers
<http://webjunction.org/do/DisplayContent?id=13463>
- How to Clear Your Hard Drive
A techsoup "how to" article with links to free software
<http://www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/software/page5726.cfm>
- US EPA's EPEAT program to help purchasers in the public and private sectors evaluate, compare, and select desktop computers, notebooks and monitors based on their environmental attributes.
<http://www.epeat.net/>
- TechSoup.org on extending the usable life of a computer
<http://www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/hardware/page4790.cfm>
- Electronics Environmental Benefits Calculator shows environmental savings for extending the life of computers
<http://www.federalelectronicchallenge.net/resources/bencalc.htm>

Computer Recyclers

- Zip code searchable directory of places to donate hardware
<http://www.techsoup.org/recycle/donate>
- Computer Takeback Campaign's list of responsible recyclers.
http://www.computertakeback.com/the_solutions/recyclers_map.cfm

Where to Find Refurbished Computers

- Zip code searchable listing of Microsoft Authorized Refurbishers
<http://www.techsoup.org/mar/marList.aspx>



- Dell refurbished: www.dell.com/outlet/ **or** <http://www.dell.com/content/segmenter.aspx?s=dfo>



Fast Food—Meal Plan 1 Summary

- To create a successful public computer environment, you need to
 - Know your current situation,
 - Figure out where you want to be, **and**
 - Develop an action plan
- To better understand your current status, conduct an inventory of your library's hardware and software, assess your staff skill level, and find out if your user needs are being properly met.
- To figure out where you want to be, evaluate the groups or user needs not being properly served by your library's public computing. Consider targeting specific groups (e.g., teens, parents of young children, retirees, etc.) and developing services and resources to meet their needs.
- In goal-setting and action-planning, share responsibility with others. Develop a team approach to technology planning and implementation. Board members, community members, and other libraries are all places where you can look for possible assistance.



MENU 1 CHECKLIST

- Use TechAtlas (<http://webjunction.techatlas.org>) to:
 - Track hardware and software.
 - Survey your staff's technology skills.
 - Create a technology plan.
 - Track computer problems and issues.
 - Compare your library's technology to technology in other libraries.
- Consider the following when placing public computers in your library:
 - Traffic flow
 - Adequate space
 - Privacy
 - Fixing what can be fixed
- To make informed computer purchase decisions:
 - Do some research.
 - Know the basics.
 - Make your computer purchase decisions based on the expected uses of the computer.
 - Be sure to get any possible discounts.
- Try to establish a four-year computer hardware replacement cycle.
- When retiring a computer:
 - Be sure to clear all information off the hard drive.
 - If you decide to give the computer to an individual or organization, consider asking them to sign a waiver of responsibility.
 - Don't be tempted to keep old computers around for spare parts or to use as a back-up.