

LibraryCrunch

Bringing You A Library 2.0 Perspective, by Michael Casey

« "...using L20 to enhance membership in ALA" | [Main](#) | [Schneider on Sucky OPACs](#) »

Constant change -- Evolutionary, Not Revolutionary

Every once in a while a book comes along that makes me wonder why it even had to be written – why don't people already realize what the author has so painstakingly laid out. Pip Coburn's book, [The Change Function](#), makes me wonder just that.

Coburn was one of the key players in the first Internet technology boom of the 1990s, and he's a player in the new Web 2.0 surge as well. His company, [Coburn Ventures](#), employs theories of change to target and invest in new technology companies. His book, *The Change Function*, argues that for technology ventures to succeed the level of change that is placed upon end users should be incremental or evolutionary, and not revolutionary. Technologies that rely upon the "build it and they will come" theory are bound to fail. Users, Coburn argues, are resistant to major change, and people are only willing to change when "the pain in moving to a new technology is lower than the pain of staying in the status quo". In other words, if it's easy enough to use and does something pretty valuable then it will succeed, no matter its price. Take the iPod for example, or Amazon.com.

Successful companies must look to their users and find out what **they** want. But the current technology industry, Coburn argues, is supplier-centric. They don't look to their users and try to find incremental improvements that users are willing to adopt on a large scale. Instead, most technology companies look for the big kill, the huge product that will "revolutionize" they way people do something. Unfortunately, as Coburn points out, users don't always want a revolutionary new do-everything satellite-enabled-PDA-talking-phone, sometimes they just want an easier to use mobile phone.

There are good counter arguments that can be made about Coburn's theory. Sometimes radical change is very quickly embraced, as was the case with the emergence of the web and the now ubiquitous home computer. But I want to take this discussion to libraries, and here is where I really get that "why did it have to be written" feeling.

Coburn's argument parallels what many proponents of library change, including [myself](#), have been saying all along – for change to be successful it must be continuous, regular, and almost imperceptible. Successful change is not the old school variety of change that comes every few years and is accompanied by massive upheavals, frightened staff, and upset customers. Successful change is constant change, and constant change cannot be discontinuous or fractured. Constant change is fluid; it's evolutionary, not revolutionary.

Note: Eric Schnell at [The Medium is the Message](#) has an excellent post on Thomas Kuhn and paradigm shifts. Take a look.

[library 2.0](#)

Posted by Michael on May 21, 2006 10:42 PM | [Permalink](#)

➔ TrackBack

TrackBack URL for this entry:
<http://www.librarycrunch.com/mt/mt-tb.cgi/163>

Listed below are links to weblogs that reference [Constant change -- Evolutionary, Not Revolutionary](#):

» [Constant change v. Revolutionary change](#) from Crossed Wires
I already reflected upon how purchasers help create the glut of technology that is not user centered. Michael also raises good points about the culture of change in general. Michal is reflecting on Pip Coburn's book, The Change Functi... [\[Read More\]](#)

Tracked on [May 27, 2006 12:21 PM](#)

» [New tech must consider tolerance for change](#) from Crossed Wires
Michael is posting his reactions to Pip Coburn's book, The Change Function on LibraryCrunch. He

posts that: Successful companies must look to their users and find out what they want. But the current technology industry, Coburn argues, is supplie... [\[Read More\]](#)

Tracked on [May 27, 2006 12:21 PM](#)

→ Comments

Interesting and useful perspective--and, unless I'm misreading terribly, a break from the idea that "Library 2.0" is all about "disruptive technology" or "disruptive change."

Since that's one of the aspects of the [bandwagon|meme|movement] that I find most in need of critical discussion, your take here is...well, definitely something I'll think about. I don't believe people do well with disruptive change, for the most part [and right at the moment I'm particularly aware of that], but continuing change is part of what makes us people and people-based institutions.

Posted by: [walt crawford](#) | [May 23, 2006 11:11 AM](#)

Walt, thanks for commenting! This has always been an intellectually difficult question for me because it's always been my belief that constant, non-threatening change is the most productive type of change for both staff and customers. Unfortunately, in my opinion, it's probably one of the most difficult types of change to build into an organization. I still think disruptive change happens and most of the time for the good. One of my favorite examples is the placement of computers in libraries which I don't think anyone can say was not disruptive. Also, I'm not sure that we can reply upon change to simply naturally happen, I think it needs to be structured into the organization's operating plan.

I do agree that most people do not do well with disruptive change (otherwise we probably wouldn't call it disruptive!). But to borrow from Eric Schnell's recent post, I think that gradual and constant change will often result in a major disruptive paradigm shift – not always, certainly, but sometimes.

Finally, I really hope you don't think I'm trying to force anything upon libraries or librarians. If I thought that this was in any way exclusionary I would have stopped writing long ago. If Library 2.0 stands for anything it must stand for open and honest dialogue.

[Richard MacManus](#) over at Read/WriteWeb has a great post today that I think we can take some pointers from. Web 2.0 (like Library 2.0) has become a "catch-phrase that people identify with". He goes on to say:

And now Gartner and IBM 'get it'. Get what? Web 2.0 of course. But what does it mean? Everything and anything you want. You mean the architecture of participation? Sure I do. What about Ajax? Yeh, why not. What about Flash then? I guess... Does Web 2.0 mean social networking? You betcha. APIs? Dude... Collective intelligence? Of course. Perpetual betas? Now you're talking...

Look: Web 2.0 is made of people (heh).

So I've come to terms with Web 2.0. Well I had to, because I sure as heck am not going to let Gartner and IBM get all the credit! :-)

Posted by: [Michael Casey](#) | [May 23, 2006 01:21 PM](#)

Michael, I think you're right here: That is, sometimes change is disruptive--but that doesn't mean disruptive change is either the ideal, the norm, or to be sought out. (Nor inherently avoided, to be sure.)

No, I don't think you're being exclusionary or trying to force something on libraries or librarians. If I did, I wouldn't be commenting here. I think you're doing serious and interesting thinking and writing, exploring complex situations.

Posted by: [walt crawford](#) | [May 23, 2006 02:30 PM](#)

Hi Meredith,

I can really relate to your post as our organization has undergone upheaval after upheaval and is looking at another round of multiple changes. Some of the upheavals really could have been done better with an evolutionary approach.

However, how does one implement new technology that includes new functionality without disruption?

For example, our portal has been evolutionary -- if anything it's been impeded by an incremental post (but I'll leave that for a blog post!). However, MPOW is in the process of implementing a new telephony system that will include all employees -- not just call center agents. This software adds VOIP, headsets, presence awareness and messaging for all employees. These are disruptive features that will require quite a bit of training. I know that if it could have been done incrementally -- it would be better accepted. Yet -- how can one do this in this example?

Needless to say, like many agency and corporate settings, ours is still getting the hang of Web 1.0 and some Web 1.5

Posted by: [Kelly G](#) | [May 26, 2006 10:49 AM](#)

D'oh, Sorry for posting to Meredith when you are Michael :::shamed faced:::

Posted by: [Kelly G](#) | [May 26, 2006 10:51 AM](#)

➔ Post a comment

(If you haven't left a comment here before, you may need to be approved by the site owner before your comment will appear. Until then, it won't appear on the entry. Thanks for waiting.)

Name:

Email Address:

URL:

☐ Remember personal info?

Comments: (you may use HTML tags for style)

Preview

Post