The Library as Visual Workplace

*Visual solutions offer the simplicity library employees (and patrons) need.*

Have you ever worked at the information desk and found yourself answering the same directional question again and again? Or gone to the closet to retrieve a new toner cartridge only to discover the supply exhausted? Have you ever spent twenty minutes looking for an extra book truck, only to find five tucked away in the gift processing area? Well, if you have, chances are you’re not alone. So how do librarians avoid these frustratingly repetitive tasks and breakdowns in communication? The solution is to transform the academic library into a Visual Workplace, where the answers to vital questions and supply chains are literally installed into the work environment, as close to the point of need as possible.

**What is a Visual Workplace?**

According to visual workplace expert Dr. Gwendolyn Galsworth, the purpose of a visual approach is to “identify and eliminate information deficits” through the implementation of “visual solutions.” Visual solutions can be anything from maintaining order through clearly labeled shelves and tools to implementing visual standards which properly document repetitive tasks such as book processing or re-shelving. In her 2005 book, *Visual Workplace/Visual Thinking*, Dr. Galsworth defines the Visual Workplace as a “self-ordering, self-explaining, self-regulating, and self-improving work environment - where what is supposed to happen does happen, on time, every time, day or night - because of visual solutions.”

**Libraries are Information Factories**

Why do libraries lend themselves so well to the basic tenets of the Visual Workplace? The answer is simple; libraries are information factories. Through various production and service points, information is acquired, packaged, shared, and distributed to our customers. As librarians, we are masters of organization. We are trained to adhere to all sorts of standards (call numbers, subject headings, name authorities, etc.) But are we orderly? Are we efficient? How often do we look inward, and assess the expediency and accuracy of our service and delivery cycles? By analyzing and adopting the basic tenets of the Visual Workplace, libraries can streamline communication, boost performance, and enhance patron satisfaction.
Institutions that have implemented Visual Workplace solutions have realized significant reductions in material handling, required floor space, wait time, and rework (repeating or revising a task.) These changes have lead to measurable increases in worker productivity, safety, quality, and morale.²

**Foundation in Lean Manufacturing Practices**

The Visual Workplace can trace its foundation to the Japanese Lean or 5S manufacturing phenomenon popularized in the 1980s. Put simply, 5S is a systematic approach to workplace organization. It’s based on five pillars or elements that allow organizations to lower costs, increase productivity, improve safety, and achieve greater employee satisfaction. The 5S pillars include Sort (eliminate clutter), Set in order (organize), Shine (keep areas clean), Standardize (implement best practices), and Sustain (maintain achievements).³

It is important to note that a successful Visual Workplace is a combination of both lean and visual solutions, where workers are empowered to bring order to their work environments, and information to the point of use.

**Getting Started**

So how do libraries “go visual” and begin transforming their organizations? In her 2006 introductory article on visual workplace concepts, author Tonya Vinas relays five actions that will help any organization get started:⁴

1. Do some basic reading and self-educating on visual workplace concepts and examples.
2. Gather visual-making supplies, signs, and bins.
3. Review work areas and habits. Look for unnecessary motions and searches for tools and information.
4. Identify permanent locations for tools and information, and make the answers visual solutions.
5. Talk up improvements, and share insights and examples with other employees.

Over the past fifteen years, a number of very good books and guides have been published on the benefits of the Visual Workplace. As expected, the majority have appeared in the fields of manufacturing and organizational management. Several
publications, however, have focused on applying Visual Workplace principles to medical and office environments. Tom Fabrizio’s 2006 book, *5S for the Office* presents a useful system for identifying and eliminating waste in corporate office settings. In 2011, author John J. Huber published *Lean Library Management*, the first book to apply lean principles to the library environment. While geared mainly toward public libraries, the book offers valuable strategies on improving the many delivery service chains and customer service challenges that exist within all libraries.5

**Leading By Example**

The power of the Visual Workplace is often best expressed through examples. Many of the resources cited above are packed with descriptions and photographs of creative and inspiring visual solutions. Some illustrate expedited workflows, while others highlight reductions in waste and unnecessary motion. Galleries of additional examples can be found on the web at Visual Workplace Inc., and on the Library as Visual Workplace blog.6 Explore these resources, and adapt them to improve your library environment.

**Take a Look Around**

After familiarizing yourself with the literature of the Visual Workplace, take a good look at the following staff and student worker areas within your library:

1. Circulation Desk/Area
2. Interlibrary Loan
3. Acquisitions/Technical Services
4. Reference/Information Desk
5. Digitization Labs
6. Conservation/Book Repair Areas
7. Disaster Supply Closets
8. Receiving Areas
9. Office Supply Closets
10. Mailroom/Shipping Areas
11. Storage/Gift Processing Areas
Do you see work or service areas that are overcrowded, unorganized, inconvenient, or confusing? If so, make these areas your priority. Begin by identifying what is missing or unclear, then ask fellow staff and student workers to experiment with possible visual solutions. How can information be more clearly communicated, with answers integrated into the surrounding workspace?

**Library Patrons as Visual Workers**

You may think that Visual Workplace principles apply only to library staff and student workers. However, as libraries increasingly offer more self-service options, a new type of employee has emerged – the library patron. According to a 2010 *Library Journal* nationwide survey, 85% of libraries offer some type of self-service. When patrons use self check-out, print microfilm, scan documents, request interlibrary loans, or release print jobs, they interact with library workstations. In essence, they become short-term library workers. How well do we convey instructions in these areas? Are these workstations self-ordering, self-explaining, and self-improving? Do we provide clear visual instructions, or solicit feedback from library users? If we are to develop visual solutions that will streamline self-service options, we must engage our newfound “patron workers” and discover their information deficits.

**Sharpening Your Focus**

The Visual Workplace is much more than the adoption of lean production principles and the implementation of additional signage. While it seeks to streamline workflow and eliminate confusion, it also empowers workers to develop innovative solutions to everyday problems. As academic libraries continue to redefine their roles in the digital age, Visual Workplace principles can serve as a powerful tool in enhancing patron satisfaction, increasing productivity, and demonstrating overall institutional value.

Lastly, it is important to emphasize that the Visual Workplace is not a change in management philosophy directed from above, but a change in organizational culture driven from within. As we all know, change takes time. So start small and be creative. Experiment with proven Visual Workplace techniques, and develop new ones of your own. Over time, you will discover solutions that will clarify your workplace “vision,” and bring your library’s services into sharper focus.


