



Create a more human library

Designed for Productivity

The new Darien Library expects circulation to increase by at least 25 percent. But the staff hours devoted to circulation are expected to drop, thanks to RFID and automated materials handling technology

The half-century-old library serving Darien, Connecticut was stretched to the limit. Designed for 120,000 items, it held over 160,000. (Every time a new book was added, staff had to discard an old one.) It drew 100 visitors an hour, but had parking space for only 84 vehicles. Staff members were sharing desks and some were working out of closets. Its trustees were calling for community services that couldn't be provided in the existing facility.

The only practical solution was to build a new library, so the staff and trustees started planning and fund-raising. In 2007, construction began on a \$27 million facility that is a model for contemporary libraries—a “great, good place” that will comprise an extensive collection of books, magazines and electronic media, as well as computers, reading rooms and a café. And to ensure customer satisfaction and staff productivity, the new Darien Library will incorporate state-of-the-art RFID and automated materials handling technologies.

Alan Kirk Gray, the library's assistant director for operations, explained why the new facility was designed with RFID in mind: “Everything we do is designed to make life easier for our patrons. We chose RFID for that reason. In some respects, it's a layer of technology between the staff and the customer, but it feels seamless.” That intuitive ease-of-use stands in contrast to barcode technology, which Gray said is “harder for patrons in both self-checkout and return.”

Gray added that RFID will also provide an important improvement in staff productivity. “We've invested in upgrades to our current barcode system, trying to improve its efficiency. At our circulation desk, our librarians have touch screens and ‘aggressive’ scanners that don't demand precise alignment. But it hasn't been enough to keep up with the growth in circulation.”

The new library's RFID system, however, will introduce Darien's customers to self-service checkouts, which should have a significant impact on staff productivity. Gray expects that 95 percent of customers will be using the 3M SelfCheck Systems after a year of operation, with that number climbing to 99 percent after another 12 months.

Self-service is expected to increase customer satisfaction and allow staff to be assigned to higher value activities.

“The new building will be twice the size of our current facility,” Gray explained. “An expectation of a 25 percent increase in the first year would be conservative. But staffing for circulation and material handling will actually decrease by 30 percent, thanks to the automated materials handling and RFID system.” Overall staffing is expected to rise by about 20 percent.

Although automated materials handling systems are available with barcode scanners, Gray said these “put a burden on patrons. Why would we install a system that increases our productivity but puts a burden on our customers? Who's working for whom?” In contrast, he said, RFID is “much easier, much more intuitive and a boon to our patrons.”

The Darien Library's decision to go with 3M's system was based on the company's technology and products, as well as “its standing and its financial presence.” Gray said. “We're confident they will maintain leadership. They get the market and they will be there when we start installation.

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