

Why Libraries Should Be the Next Great Start-Up Incubators

An old idea reinvented for the 21st century.

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Co-working spaces are often treated today as a novelty, as a thoroughly modern solution to the changing needs of a workforce now more loyal to their laptops than any long-term employers. But the idea is actually as old as the public library.

One of the world's first and most famous libraries, in Alexandria, Egypt, was frequently home some 2,000 years ago to the self-starters and self-employed of that era. "When you look back in history, they had philosophers and mathematicians and all sorts of folks who would get together and solve the problems of their time," says Tracy Lea, the venture manager with Arizona State University's economic development and community engagement arm. "We kind of look at it as the first template for the university. They had lecture halls, gathering spaces. They had co-working spaces."

This old idea of the public library as co-working space now offers a modern answer – one among many – for how these aging institutions could become more relevant two millennia after the original Alexandria library burned to the ground. Would-be entrepreneurs everywhere are looking for business know-how and physical space to incubate their start-ups. Libraries meanwhile may be associated today with an outmoded product in paper books. But they also happen to have just about everything a 21st century innovator could need: Internet access, work space, reference materials, professional guidance.

Why not, Lea suggests, put these two ideas together? Arizona State is planning in the next few months to roll out a network of co-working business incubators inside public libraries, starting with a pilot in the downtown Civic Center Library in Scottsdale. The university is calling the plan, ambitiously, the Alexandria Network.

Participating libraries will host dedicated co-working spaces for the program, as well as both formal classes and informal mentoring from the university's start-up resources. The librarians themselves will be trained by the university to help deliver some of the material. The network will offer

everything, in short, but seed money. “As we develop this pilot and start to scale it out,” Lea adds, “we would like to be able to direct people on how to find those resources.”

Libraries also provide a perfect venue to expand the concept of start-up accelerators beyond the renovated warehouses and stylish offices of “innovation districts.” They offer a more familiar entry-point for potential entrepreneurs less likely to walk into a traditional start-up incubator (or an ASU office, for that matter). Public libraries long ago democratized access to knowledge; now they could do the same in a start-up economy.

“We refer to it as democratizing entrepreneurship,” Lea says, “so everyone really can be involved.”