

Demographic Change and Public Libraries – Large-print and Audio books are not enough!

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Abstract. Demographic change needs to be considered in public libraries. It's one of the most important aspects and challenges in libraries in the upcoming years – especially against the background of constantly decreasing budgets.

Nowadays several ideas for new services for older people can already be found, such as a media delivery service – library volunteers who bring books and other media to older people – (for example practiced in the public libraries 'Bücherhallen Hamburg'), links and programmes targeting those aged 50 and older (for example a collection of '50+links' can be found at the homepage of the New York Public Library) or special older adult events, for instance programmes with speakers or films as well as computer classes.

In two public libraries in Hamburg and Wedel quantitative research projects took place to find out what older people expect from libraries and what they don't want or need. It can be seen that questionnaires are a good method to learn more about older users' needs and wishes concerning their library. For one of the above mentioned surveys not only active users of this public library have been asked to complete the questionnaire but also former users as well as non-users.

Keywords: Challenges, Demographic change, Public library, Quantitative research, Questionnaire, User survey

1. Demographic change and its impact on the role of public libraries

"The European Union is facing unprecedented demographic changes (an ageing population, low birth rates, changing family structures and migration)." (European Commission, 2013) Also "... the United States has been in the midst of a profound demographic change: the rapid aging of its population, as reflected by an increasing proportion of persons aged 65 and older, and an increasing median age in the population." (Shrestha & Heisler, 2011)

Demographic change needs to be considered in every public library. It's one of the most important aspects and challenges for libraries in the upcoming years – especially against the background of constantly decreasing budgets.

For this two broad research studies with the focus on new challenges and chances for public libraries have been accomplished at the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences at the end of 2012.

A lot of ideas for new services for older people are already implemented in public libraries, such as a collection of '50+links' (the New York Public Library – for example – has such a collection with links relating to 'Brain Fitness', 'Computer and Technology' etc.; <http://www.nypl.org/help/community-outreach/services-for-fifty-plus-adults/fifty-plus-links>). Public libraries are aware of their new role as a place to integrate older people. One public library – for example – has now a special area for the 'Generation plus' with sofas, armchairs and a special media collection and several specific events for their older users, such as memory training and computer classes (http://www.stadtbibliothek-guetersloh.de/Seite/GenerationPlus_Node_9160.htm).

This paper has its focus on the users of public libraries, not on the just as important effect of demographic change on the staff and the personnel policy of libraries.

2. Research studies in two public libraries

Two broad research studies with the focus on new challenges and chances for public libraries have been accomplished at the end of 2012. Two aspects have been in the focus of these studies. One was to find out the older users' needs and wishes concerning their library to be prepared for the demographic change. The other was to check how good these two libraries are already prepared to cope with these new challenges.

One research study had its focus on active users from 50 years upwards, the other on active users as well as former users and non-users, aged 60 and older.

2.1 The two libraries

The first research project took place in the *Bücherhalle Wandsbek*, one of 34 district libraries of the 'Bücherhallen Hamburg' (<http://www.buecherhallen.de>). The district library *Bücherhalle Wandsbek* with a staff of 12 (9 full-time equivalent) provides round about 46,000 media.

The second research project was conducted in the *Stadtbücherei Wedel*, a public library with a staff of 13, working on 10 positions, and circa 68,000 media.

Both research projects of these libraries can be compared regarding the libraries' size and performance (see Table 1).

Table 1 Characteristic numbers of the two libraries*

Library	Members of staff	Positions	Media	Visitors (per annum)	Number of loans (per annum)
Bücherhalle Wandsbek	12	9	46,000	146,000	411,000
Stadtbücherei Wedel	13	10	68,000	118,000	374,000

* These are average values based on the data in the libraries' annual reports 2011 (www.buecherhallen.de/ca/x/bsn/ and www.stadtbuecherei.wedel.de).

2.2 Research methods

For the research in the *Bücherhalle Wandsbek* users aged 50 and older were asked to answer a questionnaire which was designed especially for this research project. 100 persons participated in this research project. Also for the research project in the *Stadtbücherei Wedel* a questionnaire especially for this library has been developed with some differing questions resulting from the three research groups 'active users', 'former users' and 'non-users', all from 60 years upwards. 267 people conducted the questionnaire.

3. Discussing the results

Table 2 shows the demographic statistics of these two user surveys. Results of these two independent research studies conducted in two public libraries which are quite similar regarding members of staff, positions, number of media, of visitors and number of loans (see Table 1) can be analysed together and compared, as the same number of participants (100 in the *Bücherhalle Wandsbek* and 100 active users of the *Stadtbücherei Wedel*) completed the questionnaires. Even, if the average age of the active users is in the second study with 69.1 years higher than in the first (64.6 years) and that they differ in the ratio of women and men (2:1 in the first study, 1.3 to 1 in the second study).

Table 2 Demographic statistics of the two user surveys

Library	Total number of participants	Age	Retired	Women / Men
Bücherhalle Wandsbek	100 active users	average: 64.6 → 29 % under 60 → 42 % between 60 and 69 → 29 % 70 and older	60 %	67 % / 33 %
Stadtbücherei Wedel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100 active users • 67 former users • 100 non-users 	average: 70.4 (total) → non-users: 72.0 → active users: 69.1 → former users: 70.2	not specified	56 % / 44 %

In the following chapters some of the results which might be of interest for similar public libraries are discussed.

3.1 Bücherhalle Wandsbek

First general questions about the media collection and events as well as courses in the library have been analysed.

Types of books

Novels and non-fiction books are the most used types of books (82 % novels and 56 % non-fiction books).

As most users of this library prefer novels, it was interesting to find out their favourite genre. Not surprisingly 70 per cent prefer crime thrillers, followed by not separately classified novels from A to Z with 47 per cent and historical novels with 23 per cent. The least favoured genre is horror (3 %).

Within non-fiction books the top three topics are biography (37 %), geography and travelling (36 %) and 'Germany/Hamburg' (25 %). Surprisingly the topic 'Gardening/Cooking/Handicraft' got only 15 per cent.

Events in the library

68 per cent of the users are interested in events organised in this library. From those the introduction of books and author readings are the events most preferred (each more than 60 per cent). The least interesting event (with only 5 per cent) is to spend time together to knit or to do handicraft works (something other libraries offer, for example the *Bücherhalle Osdorfer Born*; <http://www.buecherhallen.de/ca/k/zbc/>). This corresponds with the preference of non-fiction books (only 15 per cent are interested in books about gardening, cooking or doing handicrafts). One reason for these results could be the

relatively young age of the persons who participated in this research project (from 50 years on), but as 60 per cent of the participants are already retired and 71 per cent are 60 years and older this might not have such a great influence.

Computer courses

Only 16 per cent would be interested in computer courses. This also corresponds with a low interest in computer books (only 6 %).

Next step was to find out how satisfied the users of the *Bücherhalle Wandsbek* are with certain aspects of this library. After the more general questions about the media collection and events as well as courses in the library several aspects relevant for older people, such as the accessibility, the electric lighting, the noise nuisance or the number of seatings have been analysed. Some aspects are presented in the following.

Media collection and the media items' presentation

88 per cent are perfectly satisfied or satisfied and only one person is unsatisfied with the media collection.

A total of 85 per cent is satisfied or perfectly satisfied with the presentation of the media items.

Accessibility

14 per cent evaluate the sections' signposting as excellent and 71 per cent as good, which means that the biggest part of the users are satisfied with this aspect.

36 per cent rate the accessibility of the building as very good and 57 per cent as good.

Number of seatings and working places

Both aspects are evaluated as good or very good from over 70 per cent (seating 71 %, working places 82 %). The reason for the difference might be found in that the older users of this library don't use working places as often as the places just to sit down (so use 20 per cent the library as a place to read, but only 2 per cent as a place to work and 7 percent to use the internet).

As can be seen, this library is quite good prepared to serve older people. It moved into a new building in 2009, which might be a reason for these good results. Especially as at that time budget for new furniture and lighting was available.

Large-print books

Another interesting aspect considering older users are the large-print books. These results can be transferred to other libraries as they are – compared to the above mentioned aspects – not depending on the building.

A total of 23 per cent of the participants didn't know about large-print books in the library and 5 per cent directly rate them as unnecessary. Although 77 per

cent know about them, only 26 per cent of them (20 per cent in total) borrow large-print books once in a while.

This shows that large-print books are not demanded as usually is supposed. One reason might be that large-print books are usually thicker and with this heavier than 'normal' books.

Media delivery service

One specialty of this library is their service to bring books and other media to older people. Here volunteers visit older people, who cannot come to the library any more, and bring them the ordered media items and read – if asked to – books aloud to them.

This is a service which proved to be of value (interviews with older people using this service can be found at: <http://www.buecherhallen.de/ca/x/hra/>).

3.2 Stadtbücherei Wedel

As already mentioned above in this library active, former as well as non-users have been asked to participate.

First aspect was to find out if there is a relation between using the library as a kid and as an older person. There isn't as 73.1 per cent of the former users of this library have been using a library when they were kids. 58.6 per cent of the active users and 50.5 per cent of the non-users did use a library when they were kids.

Types of books

Active users use the following types of books often (or once in a while):

- Novels and biography: 58 % (19 %)
- Non-fiction books: 40 % (27 %)
- Guidebooks: 18 % (33 %)
- Children's books and books for young people: 5 % (13 %)

Events in the library

For only 26 per cent of the active users events in this library are interesting. Readings are the events that were rated as the best.

Computer courses

41 per cent of the active users wish for computer courses in the library, but only 24 per cent of the non-users and 35 per cent of the former users. In total only 28 per cent have a general interest in learning the handling of a computer and the internet through computer courses provided by this library.

Accessibility

Most of the participants have no problem to orient oneself in this library (92 per cent of the active users and 100 per cent of the former users) and nearly everybody finds it easy to reach (96 per cent of the active users, 94 per cent of the former users and 88 per cent of the non-users).

Cafeteria

One idea could be to provide older users with an integrated cafeteria in the library, but less than half of the participants are wishing for a cafeteria (45 per cent of the non-users, 38 per cent of the active users and 43 cent of the former users). This library has already a small area where users can drink tea or coffee.

E-book readers and computer working places

Only a quarter of the active users wish for e-book readers in the library to try them out or for additional computer working places.

Media delivery service

Most of the participants in this study are not interested in a media delivery service, only 20 per cent of the active users, 7 per cent of the non-users and 10 per cent of the former users. One reason might be that the city Wedel has quite a lot of nursing homes where volunteers organize and read books to the older people living there.

In the following Table 3 some recreational activities of older people relevant for public libraries are listed.

Table 3 Recreational activities of older people

Recreational activity	often	once in a while	seldom or never
Do it yourself and handicraft works	34 %	23 %	43 %
Visiting cultural events	26 %	48 %	26 %
Reading books	76 %	13 %	11 %
Listening to audio books	6 %	6 %	88 %
Reading newspapers and magazines	84 %	8 %	8 %
Using the internet	39 %	16 %	45 %

4. Conclusions

Table 4 summarises some of the results of the two studies and show results which can be transferred to other, similar libraries, such as types of books, the most preferred type of events (author readings). There can also be found aspects that are evaluated totally different and should be introduced only carefully in libraries (the wish for computer courses as well as a media delivery service).

Table 4 Results of the two user surveys

Library	Types of books (read often or at least once in a while)	Interest in events in the library / most preferred type of events	Computer courses (percentage of those who are interested in these courses)	Accessibility	Media delivery service
Bücherhalle Wandsbek	novels: 82 % non-fiction books: 56 %	68 % / author readings	16 %	85 % rate the sections' signposting as excellent or good; 93 % rate the accessibility as excellent or good	a service which proved to be of value
Stadtbücherei Wedel	novels: 77 % non-fiction books: 67 %	56 % / author readings	41 % of the active users 28 % of all participants	92 % of the active users have no problem to orientate oneself in the library; 96 % find the library easy to reach	only 20 per cent of the active users would be interested in using a media delivery service

During the analysis of these two research projects two things became clear:

- For the accessibility it doesn't matter if the library is on the ground level (*Stadtbücherei Wedel*) or distributed over two floors (*Bücherhalle Wandsbek*), as long as the users can orientate themselves in the library.
- Even obvious services aren't always wanted, as for example the media delivery service (see Table 4), the large-print books (in the *Bücherhalle Wandsbek* for example only 20 per cent of the users read large-print books once in a while) or audio books (73 per cent never listen to audio books).

This shows how important it is to conduct a user survey before implementing bigger changes in public libraries to satisfy older users.

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www.stadtbuecherei.wedel.de