

National Library of Medicine report for EAHIL



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NLM: rebuilding, rethinking and readjusting

As the National Library of Medicine (NLM), we serve a pivotal role in supporting biomedical research, scientific discovery, and global access to health information. We do this by acquiring, organizing, preserving, and providing free online access to high-quality health information resources and scholarly biomedical literature from around the world. We provide diverse physical collections and electronic resources in support of biomedical information science, informatics, and data science serving a global audience of scientists, researchers, and the public.

Like many other organizations, the COVID-19 global pandemic forced our Library to close its doors, reshaping how the library functions and serves its users. As a national library with a clear mission, we continue to shape user accessibility, workflows, technologies, and communication for many organizations worldwide. We strive to anticipate emerging trends, adapt to the changes, and serve as an engine for innovation and discoverability. As we consider the shift in the accessibility of information for our users, we are aware that the foot traffic coming to the physical library has decreased, and that our users are now predominately online.

We are using the lessons learned from the past two years as an opportunity to rebuild, rethink, and readjust-through transformations of our physical structures, rethinking how to better meet user expectations, and readjusting to a new “normal” of how and where we work.



The transformation of our physical spaces

Let's face it...no one is working the same way that they were two years ago. At NLM, we are not only considering the staff but also our users and asking ourselves - how do we meet people where they are in both physical and virtual environments?

We are currently in multi-year renovations and modernization efforts across several parts of our buildings, developing new office spaces, state of the art collaboration rooms, data utility centers, and even grading efforts to mitigate drainage issues. In the main library, we have been busy emptying and updating two huge floors to create a unified reading room for our

users, and a modern and functional work environment for our staff. In addition to being eco-friendly, the selected furniture in our renovated spaces offers modular and flexible design elements that are ideal for collaboration and yet can be easily adapted with safety provisions like attachable walls. Technologies like virtual touring, augmented reality, machine learning and so much more will augment how we interact, learn, and collaborate in a hybrid workspace moving forward.

Another challenge for our Library is keeping up with the demands for our physical collections. We have a long-range plan to maximize our collection space and improve efficiencies in our stacks, including additional compact shelving to increase capacity; this is no easy task because it requires strengthening both the floor and ceiling to accommodate the extra weight. Aligned with our mission and priorities as a national library, these upgrades will protect materials and preserve the historical record for future generations.

Meeting users where they are in the virtual space

As we renovate our buildings, we are also thinking about how we conduct business with users whose expectations are constantly evolving. Traditionally, our library's focus has been on print. Many libraries have an expectation that we will remain the "library of record" and be able to provide access to our print material on request.

We never anticipated the length or impact of closure from the pandemic. To fulfill our mission of providing access to the biomedical literature, we are in the process of creating an aggressive digital strategy and the infrastructure to support it.

We will always have researchers, historians, and other users that need or prefer to come to see and feel our physical objects. But we recognize that most of our users now want to access NLM's "shelves" electronically.

There is an undeniable and, I think, permanent shift in how users need—and expect—to discover and access information – online from anywhere, at any time, in any format, and in an array of languages.

To support this, we are harnessing data science and customer experience methods that will allow our global users to easily discover the biomedical information they need. Using predictive techniques like machine learning, we can also serve up customized information—that expands and personalizes the user experience.

Libraries must rethink users' needs, redesign how they serve them, and adopt an agile mindset. We must strike a balance between stability and flexibility to strengthen coordination for quicker responses to this ever-changing technological landscape.



Rethinking our future of work and workforce

As we renovate our buildings, we are also thinking about how we conduct business with users. Let me move on to our future of work which has been heavily influenced by two years of maximum telework. Like most organizations, we are rethinking how we most effectively accomplish our work while providing a flexible and inclusive work environment. Today's "post-pandemic" ways of working have stretched us to consider remote and hybrid flexibilities with office and meeting space designed to support this new way of working. We nurture our workforce with 21st century skills by providing modern technologies and engagement tactics to ensure they are participating in the shaping of our future organization.

Hybrid work flexibilities that allow the worker to choose the option that works best for them, whether that means onsite, remote, or hybrid, and equipping them with the technologies to facilitate their work will enable and support the workforce and lead to achieving our long-term goals.

In closing, the pandemic has given us the opportunity to reimagine our future. The use of our physical spaces will continue to change over time, user expectations will drive how we deliver information, and how we support and nurture a diverse and inclusive workforce. It shouldn't take another pandemic for our future successors to take time to pause and consider how they do work or where it's conducted.

