

**Latino Entrepreneurs Support:
Growth Opportunity for Public Libraries**

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Most people are aware that experts forecast the 2010 US Census will reveal greater cultural and ethnic diversity in the United States. What is less generally known is that immigrant and minority groups are just as likely if not more likely than established groups to take the leap into Entrepreneurship according to the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation's report *Minority Entrepreneurship*. This creates a sizable opportunity to combine two historical strengths of public libraries – outreach and business support. The combination can be a powerful driver that not only gives new possibilities for business librarians, but also places the library at the center of new growth in almost every community. Serving this group has its own challenges. To meet those challenges, libraries need to consider the following key items if they want to serve the Latino business community:

- Commitment to Ongoing Services
- Commitment to Hiring Bilingual People
- Building Key Partnerships

To help illustrate how all these things work, we can use the Johnson County Library's recent expansion in Latino entrepreneur support as a case study of how we came to grips with each of these items.

Commitment to Ongoing Services

This is perhaps the easiest of all considerations for public libraries to make. Business Librarians in public libraries are some of the best and brightest minds we have. They often are asked to help burgeoning business owners through the difficult and often time-consuming process of doing industry research, key ratio research, and even assisting with finding relevant demographic information.

Having a person on staff dedicated to serving the business community is absolutely essentially to building a successful bridge to the Latino entrepreneur. After all, they want the same kind of research and access to information that every burgeoning business person does. Often, just like other types of entrepreneurs, they have a finite amount of time each day to work on their business plans. They need to be confident that the person who is helping them is well-versed in business research and brings to the process more than what they could find with just a Google search.

This commitment to service is how the Johnson County Library began its relationship with our current partner – the Kansas City Hispanic Economic Development Corporation (HEDC). This leading non-profit provider of bilingual business development services was presenting the Spanish-language version of the Kauffman Centers FastTrac program and came to Johnson County Library because of the commitment to ongoing service to

entrepreneurs. In short, they wanted the best service and information available. Of course, like all new clients we understood we had to grow our ability to meet the need of this vibrant patron group. That meant making some key personnel decisions.

Commitment to Hiring Bilingual People

Services to any specialized populations mean that libraries must adapt to meet needs that perhaps they hadn't thought about before. Often, when reaching out to the prospective Latino entrepreneur – as well as many other groups – you run up against access barriers quickly. Sometimes they are cultural understandings of what libraries are. Many times they are the result of something even more basic – language barriers.

The first ever class on library resources we provided to the HEDC was a new and at times clunky exercise in translation. The business librarian would speak for a few minutes and then a representative from HEDC would translate into Spanish. It adds time and creates a barrier. Of course that is only the beginning. Using a public library requires the ability to sign-up for a library card, explanations of basic library services, and the ability to work with someone even when the HEDC facilitator is not present. In short, if a library wants to work through a language access issue it requires a human resources commitment.

Many libraries are just like the Johnson County Library. We did not have great language capacity and certainly not a business librarian who spoke Spanish. We did, however, have a strategic plan that called for enhanced services to the Latino community here. The response was to change hiring practices at one branch – the Oak Park Library. This branch is located in the heart of a community that has seen historic and recent influxes of Latinos. We made the strategic decision to make bilingual capability a hiring preference for any position that opened at this branch, and followed that up with a concerted effort to recruit Spanish speakers to library service. The result is increased usage by the community as they gained confidence that language won't be a barrier to service. . This insured we were committed to ongoing services through our hiring practices to provide daily access to Spanish speakers to our services, which included our business services.

While Johnson County Library has made significant progress in hiring staff that can do basic services in Spanish, specialized services like business remain a challenge to this day. To help solve that problem, the best answer was an expansion of a key partnership.

Building Key Partnerships

Libraries may find that it can be relatively easy to hire bilingual staff once the decision is made. Libraries can also seize on the entrepreneurial nature of most new communities to leverage existing business reference capability in a powerful merger. For business services to the Latino population, that ultimately means hiring a business librarian with Spanish-language skills. That is often more challenging. To help meet the need and continue a commitment to this initiative, it can be a wonderful opportunity to focus on creating or expanding key partnerships.

Libraries possess space – open to the public kind of space – that can be very valuable to nonprofits who serve Latino communities. It can also provide the library with a way to bridge from a limited menu of services today for the Spanish-speaking entrepreneur to a tomorrow with a more robust service offering. It can be easier than you think, and it can start with office space.

The Johnson County Library decided to build on our relationship with HEDC by offering the organization office space at our newly focused Latino Services branch. This was a tremendous bonus for both organizations. HEDC was able to expand out from its urban offices into an area where the Latino population – and particularly the Latino entrepreneur – was moving. The Johnson County Library brought bilingual business expertise into its new Latino services initiative. In fact, over 30 people showed up for our Memorandum of Understanding signing ceremony including a mayor, several library board members, a few council members, and the owners of the largest Spanish-language media company in the Kansas City area.

Today, we host almost all the HEDC classes for entrepreneurs at our focused branch. Basic research and

access questions can be dealt with effectively by our bi-lingual staff for the benefit of the HEDC client. More advanced questions involve translating the question and answer are handled by our senior business reference staff members. In this way most libraries can successfully move a core business reference service into a service that reaches out and helps provide a successful program to aid new populations start new businesses for the benefit of all.

Lessons Learned

The Latino community continues to grow across the United States and will be a great opportunity for public libraries to build upon the historical strengths of business services and outreach to serve this new community. The keys to making this happen are:

- Commitment to Ongoing Services
- Commitment to Hiring Bilingual People
- Building Key Partnerships

These are the building blocks of successful service for the Latino entrepreneur and helping to insure a better economic future for everyone in your community.