

A postcard from Malmö Public Library – open for business during Corona

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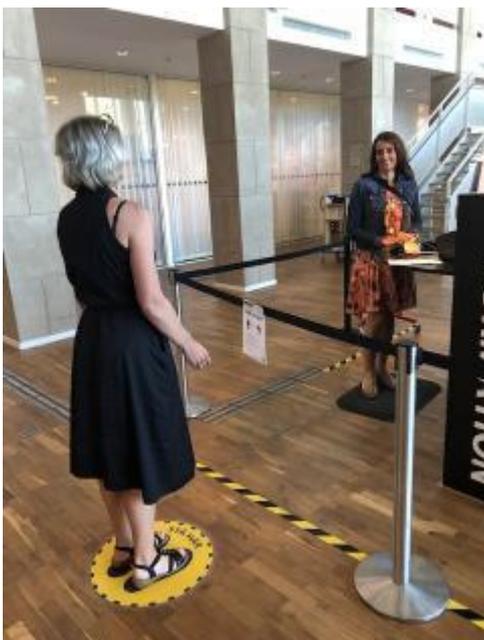
As you might have heard, in mid-March, when the rest of the world went into lock-down due the Corona threat, a small country in the far north, called Sweden, remained completely open. Well, not entirely true actually, but there you go.

Anyway, that means that we now have the unique experience of leading "normal" lives while adapting to the threat of the Corona virus. Something that happens right now in more and more places as countries and regions around the world slowly but surely are opening up after a period of lock-down.

In the library world it has meant that the vast majority of the public libraries here in Sweden have remained open. However, this certainly doesn't mean that it is business as usual.

Our international media supply chains have of course suffered from the lock down, but the Swedish ones have basically kept on working but with delays and some changes.

Every library has adapted to the situation and to the recommendations made by the Swedish authorities, i.e. keeping up social distancing and increased hygiene standards. This means limiting the number of visitors, cancelling events, limiting access to computers and support, (and enormous amounts of disinfectant gel). It also means limiting the number of staff in the public areas of the library and facilitating distance work. In Malmö for instance we have also chosen to remove almost all seating possibilities to make sure we are not attractive to students and other users likely to spend longer periods of time here.



The recommendations made by the Swedish authorities have been very strict when it comes to showing any kind of symptoms that could be related to the Corona infection - do you feel sick? In any way? Stay at home! (And, yes, the sick pay has been increased to remove any kind of economic incentive to go to work when ill.). The result being that we have had weeks when half the staff has been at home sick. So far we have managed to stay open, more or less, but we are aware and prepared for the situation when it happens.

Some of our colleagues have family members that are part of risk groups. Of course, we take that very seriously and

make sure to accommodate them here at work, making sure that their contact with the public is limited or completely avoided.

It is also important to keep in mind that we are all different, some of us find the situation to be uncomfortable but manageable and some of us are more stressed and affected and nothing is right or wrong under the current circumstances. This has to be respected! No one is forced to do anything that jeopardizes their health or well-being. From the managements side the message has been clear that the staff has the mandate to handle any situation that might occur in the contact with the members of the public in a way they see fit with a total focus on the security of the staff.



As any public gathering of more than 50 people is forbidden, and any gathering that is not strictly necessary is greatly discouraged all conferences and fairs have been cancelled. Instead, many of the organisers have turned to digital solutions and online meetings. And this is probably the key to how to work in this strange situation we find ourselves in right now.

The digital development we all have been talking about (and some of us have been hoping for) is all of sudden here, not out of choice but out of necessity! The librarians in Sweden have very quickly become truly at home in the digital world of Zoom and Teams, doing book talks for children filmed with Iphones, hosting book circles for elderly on Skype and so on.

In Malmoe, we have actively encouraged our users to explore and use our digital services instead of actually visiting our libraries. And early in the process we also siphoned resources towards our new digital hub that serves as the "information desk" in our digital world. The hub can be reached by phone or e-mail. Colleagues from different library departments handle everything from "ordinary" information desk questions to guiding users to digital resources and helping with the actual handling of the devices necessary to access digital resources (if you have never handled a tablet and you are about to download your first e-book or having your first video talk with your grandchildren you might need a helping hand) and our new take away book bags and pick up services.



The personnel in the digital hub are also working with developing and adapting new services and offers for our users as they go along. We have found during these past months that this very flexible and experimental way of working has served us and our users very well.

If anything positive can come out of a situation like this it must be this, that our digital services have rapidly developed into something we are proud of and are going to bring with us into the future and that the digital skills of our users have blossomed.

These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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