

Should Public Library Management Be Privatized?

Viewpoints from the Field

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In September 2010, the *New York Times* published an article about the privatization of public libraries.¹ This article described the trend in some communities to turn over the management of public libraries to a private organization. In response to this article, library staff around the United States engaged in spirited online discussions about whether libraries should be privatized.

Privatization is “the shifting of library service from the public to the private sector through transference of library management and/or assets from a government agency to a commercial company.”

-ALA

Taking notice of these discussions, the Library Research Service (LRS), a unit of the Colorado State Library, launched a 60-Second Survey in November 2010 to get the library community’s opinions about privatization. A total of 2,509 people from every state and 15 countries responded, making this the most popular 60-Second Survey yet. In addition, 59% of respondents (1,485) left additional

comments, making it even more clear that this is a topic of great interest to library professionals and other stakeholders.

Survey Results

Given an either/or choice, survey respondents overwhelmingly sided with public sector management, with 86% agreeing with a statement that management should remain in the public sector so that profit does not become libraries’ primary objective. The other 14% agreed that management should be privatized if it means that libraries can do a better job of providing services and materials to patrons at lower costs.

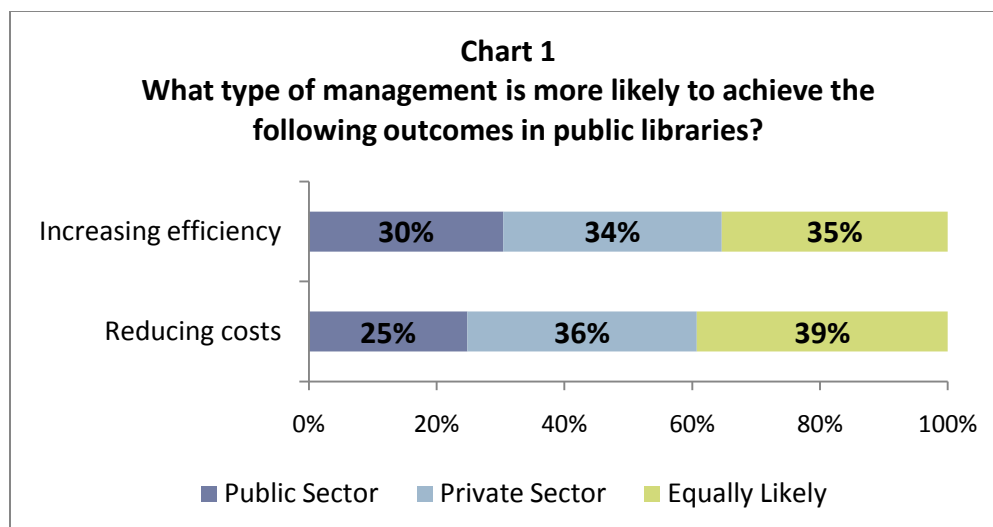
Survey respondents also identified whether they thought public or private sector management was more likely, or equally likely, to achieve a list of outcomes for public libraries. Public sector management scored the highest, by far, on all outcomes but two: reducing operating costs and making library operations more efficient. In these areas, respondents were closely split among the three answer choices, with around 1 in 3 voting for each (the public sector, the private sector, or both as equally likely to achieve these outcomes) (Chart 1).

In the style of an online readers’ poll, LRS’s 60-Second Surveys are short and to the point. Narrow by intent, these surveys capture the perceptions of respondents on a single timely topic. The online surveys are publicized through local, regional, and national library listservs, blogs, etc., and as a result most respondents have some connection to the library profession.

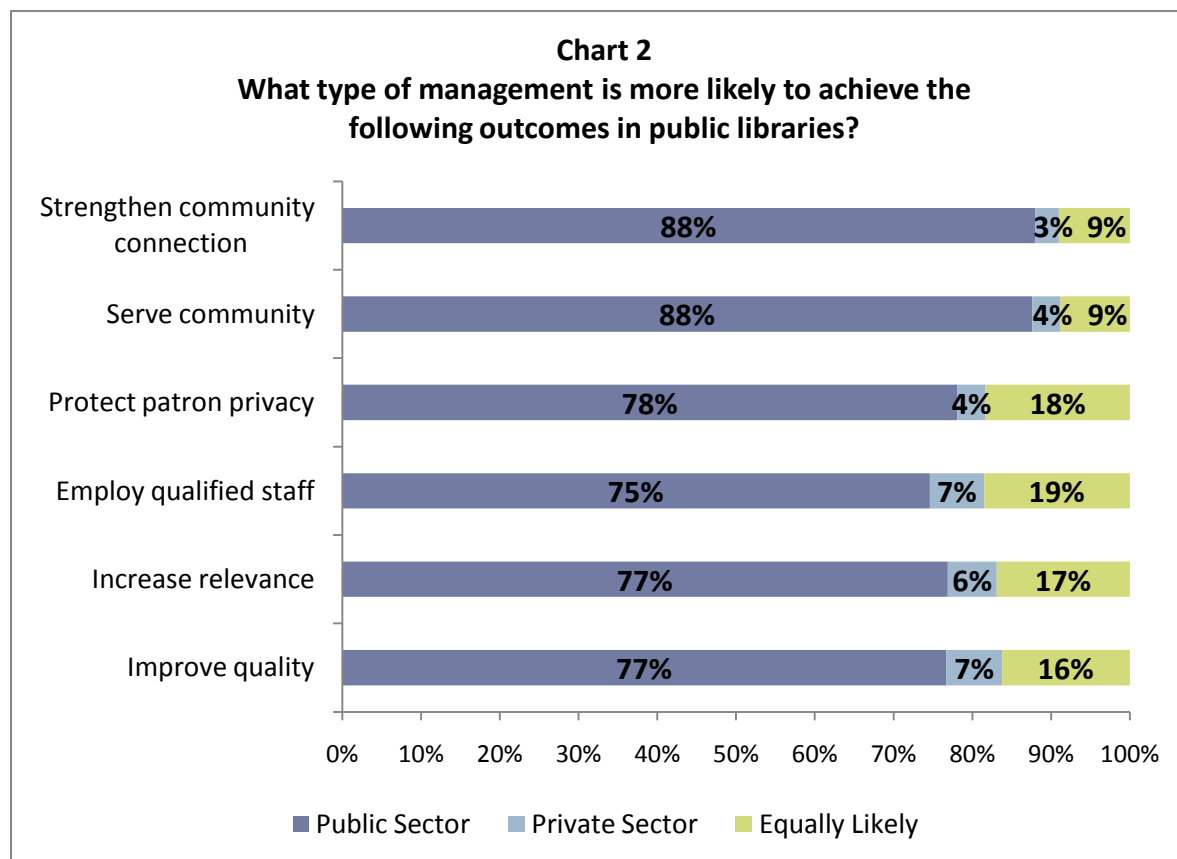


¹ Streitfeld, D. (2010, September 26). Anger as private company takes over libraries. *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/27/business/27libraries.html?scp=1&sq=libraries%20streitfeld&st=cse>

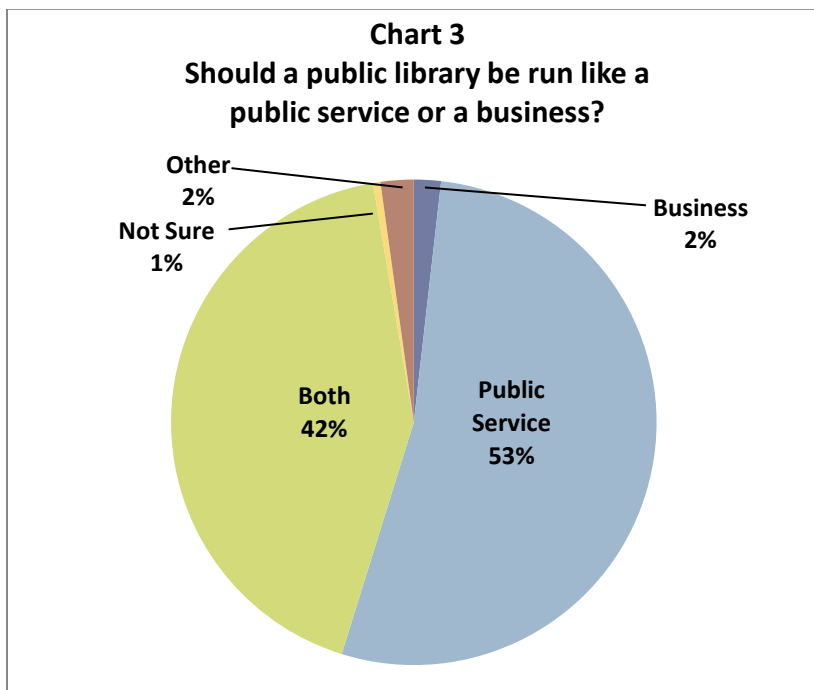




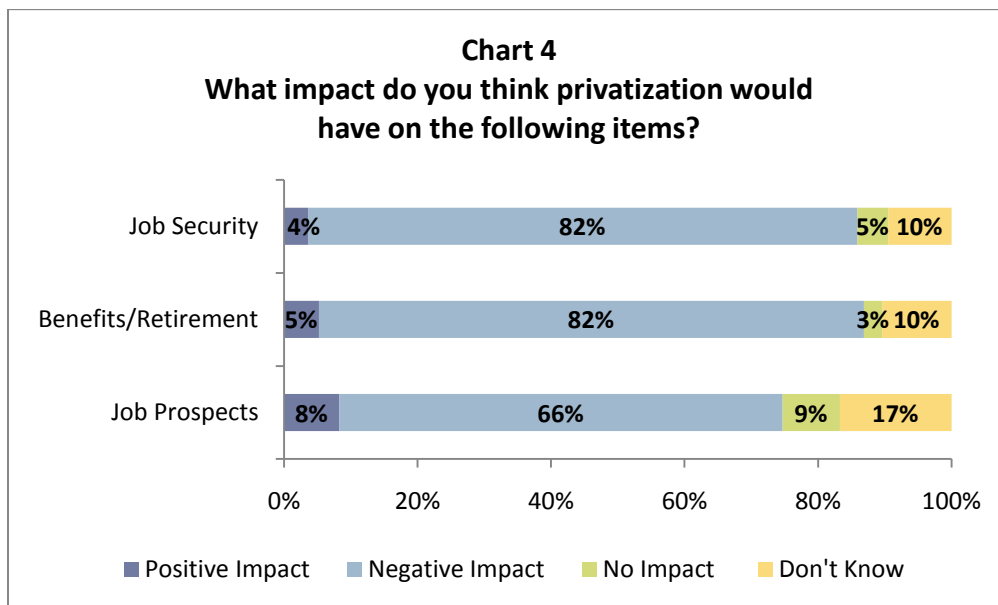
At least 3 in 4 respondents identified public sector management as the best way to improve the quality of library services, increase the relevance of libraries' collections, employ qualified staff to meet community needs, and protect patron privacy (Chart 2). Public sector management drew even more support – from nearly 9 out of 10 respondents (88%) - when they considered the library's ability to serve all the members of its community and the strength of the library's connection to the community it serves.



More than half (53%) the respondents indicated that a public library should be run like a public service rather than a business, but a sizeable percentage (42%) said it should be run like both (Chart 3). Just 2% thought that a public library should be run like a business.



Eight in 10 (82%) respondents thought that privatization would have a negative impact on library staff's job security and benefits or retirement plans (Chart 4). While the majority (66%) thought the negative impact would also extend to job prospects for degreed librarians, a higher percentage were unsure of the potential impact (17%) or thought privatization would have no impact on job prospects (9%).



An analysis of the survey comments showed that nearly three-fourths (73%) contained pro-public management sentiments, while close to one-fourth (23%) were either pro-private or discussed alternatives to the black-and-white, public-versus-private debate. For example, several respondents suggested incorporation as a private, nonprofit entity (such as the New York Public Library) or implementation of business practices into libraries' current management structures.

Conclusion

Results from this study indicate that the library community, as represented by the survey respondents, has serious concerns about the impact of privatization on public libraries. For further discussion of these results, see the article "Who's the boss? Does privatization have a place in public libraries?"² in *American Libraries*.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

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² Helgren, J.E., & Hofschire, L. (2011, July/August). Who's the boss? Does privatization have a place in public libraries?, *American Libraries*, 42, 16. Retrieved from <http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/features/07122011/who-s-boss>

