

## Book reviews



Amy Stubbing, *Data-driven decisions: a practical toolkit for library and information professionals*. London: Facet Publishing. 2022. 180. ISBN 9781783304783

**Reviewed by:** Katrina Clifford , Kingston University, UK

### Overview

Anyone who works in a library will be familiar with the fact that data is collected or generated through their work. They may even be the ones responsible for these tasks. From circulation figures to head counts, data is everywhere. This book aims to be a ‘simple, jargon-free guide to using data for decision-making’.

Firstly, it’s important to understand that it’s not the sort of book where you start at one end, read your way through and at the end know a bit more about data. The first half of the book is neatly summarised in the start of the subtitle ‘A practical toolkit’.

### Content and structure

Chapter by chapter the author guides you through a toolkit she has devised, going from identifying your data need, through collecting and mapping data to analysing, acting, and reviewing. Each of the six steps are given their own chapter. In each of them the author describes what is entailed, how the toolkit works, and what it is essential to know about each aspect.

Whilst it’s designed to be practical, it is possible, as I did, to read the six chapters without having an example to work through. Indeed, it might be easiest to have a read-through first, to get a feel for the layout of the toolkit. It is helpful if you have some experience of having collected data in the past, though not essential. There are examples throughout the text which are relevant and not too niche to one type of library.

One of the strengths of the book is that the author highlights elements of the process that might be easily overlooked. For example, testing data collection methods as well as tips to get staff on board (especially if they are needed to collect the data!). It also challenges the idea that lots of data is good, emphasising that data collection must have a purpose and more than one source may be needed to answer a query, something I’d not considered before.

The toolkit contains a lot of information in its 80 or so pages and would function well on its own. However, the author has gone further, and the second half of the book is devoted to case studies showcasing real-world examples of where data has been collected and used in a variety of ways. It might be tempting to skip past the toolkit, straight to the case studies at the back. However, whilst they don’t explicitly reference the toolkit, it does help to understand the underlying principles of optimal data collection to fully appreciate what is being discussed. Whilst some aspects might be familiar, a few of the case studies go beyond what might be considered ‘typical’ library statistics and cover a wide range of aspects of evaluating stock, service and staffing. There is also a chapter devoted to developing a culture of data at an institution.

These vignettes act like a little ‘mini-conference’ of projects and it’s clear that the authors have a good grasp of what they’re talking about and can reflect on what they’ve learnt.

### Style

The book stems from what was a practical workshop, and, at times that is apparent. The conversational style of writing drew me in nicely at the start. However, tone is very difficult to convey in the written word and a couple of times the casual asides that work in a classroom type environment don’t come across that well, appearing mildly patronising or impeding the flow of the text.

Largely though the content flows easily from one section to the next, at times perhaps a little too easily. Some of the chapters it was not easy to see what was a subsection and what was a new point. Numbered headings and sub-headings may have helped (and would be easier when coming back to it or referring others to points).

Whilst having examples of how to fill out the tables as each aspect was described was useful, it would have been improved by having a fully filled-out table in both appendices.

Overall though these points are minor, and I’d recommend the book to a wide range of people. It is a straightforward introduction to the topic and would nicely complement the practical task of data collection. It would appeal to those who have an interest in data and be useful

to those who must make decisions or supply information to those who do. It may also prompt senior managers to look at their service in a fresh light. It's not a once-through and done book, but something that you could come back to again and again. As you became more familiar with the toolkit you wouldn't need to read it all again, but it can remind you of things you may have forgotten to consider.

I'm already quite comfortable with handling data but wanted to see what else I could pick up and use more effectively or in different ways. I was concerned that it might be too basic as it comes over as being aimed at/written for those who may be less experienced, less confident or less sure of the need for data in the first place. However, this wasn't the case, and I found my thinking challenged on aspects I thought I knew and picked up some tips that will ultimately help make the process easier in the future.

The main take-home point from the book is that data-driven decisions is not about trying to fudge your collection or results to support a decision you have already made. Rather it is about feeding data into your decision-making process and making the decisions based on what you find. In a sector grappling with both the impact of Covid and increasingly stretched services, where staff must justify every penny spent, the need for this book is perhaps greater than ever.

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Patrick Lo, Robert Sutherland, Wei-En Hsu, Russ Girsberger, *Stories and Lessons from the World's Leading Opera, Orchestra Librarians, and Music Archivists*, Volume 1: North and South America; Volume 2: Europe and Asia. Emerald Publishing: Bingley, 2022; 296 pp.: ISBN 9781801176538.

**Reviewed by:** David Baker , Plymouth Marjon University, UK

Patrick Lo is already well known and well established as a compiler of works based on interview with leaders in the field that forms the subject of the book. In 2013, he published an interview with Robert Sutherland (one of the co-editors), the first such with a performance librarian in a widely recognized library journal. This resulted in Lo's *Conversations with the World's Leading Orchestra and Opera Librarians* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2016). *Stories and Lessons from the World's Leading Opera, Orchestra Librarians, and Music Archivists* is the latest of these publications.

The importance of this present work is immediately evident from the three forewords, by Riccardo Muti, Music Director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Patrick McGinn MOLA (Association of Music Performance Librarians) President, 2020–2021, and F. Paul Driscoll, Editor in Chief, *Opera News*. But there are other resounding endorsements, including those from Zubin

Mehta and James Conlon as well as a range of distinguished instrumentalists from around the world. All these people recognize the fundamental importance and value of the music library and the music librarian in the performance setting.

That is but the beginning. The two volumes (with 25 and 28 chapters respectively) bring together interviews with more than 50 orchestra, opera, and ballet librarians and archivists working for some of the world's leading performing arts and educational institutions in countries around the globe, including: Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, England, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Korea, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Scotland, Sweden, the United States and Wales.

This is the most significant and attractive strength of *Stories and Lessons from the World's Leading Opera, Orchestra Librarians, and Music Archivists*. Despite the often-significant differences in the backgrounds and contexts in which music librarians work, there is nevertheless a strong thematic and professional link between the many contributions, much aided by the concluding chapter common to both volumes; not surprising, given Robert Sutherland's comment that the music performance library 'is often regarded as the information centre or hub for the entire performing arts organization'.

As Paul Driscoll adds: 'the professional music librarians of the world's opera and orchestra libraries are the guardians of a great tradition . . . anyone who loves music will treasure the stories of these women and men and be humbled by their individual and collective devotion to music'. Not only that, but they are also key to organizational success in a more fundamental way, it could be argued, than in any other sector of librarianship, and with a broader remit than most within the profession, despite, as is evident from many of the stories in the present volumes, being almost invisible for much of the time.

This publication, then, provides a rich source of applied theory and practice that goes well beyond the subject-specific case studies in an area which has been under-researched until now. Because of the interview methodology used and the standardized 'template' approach to questioning, underpinned by the careful selection of interviewees (a roll call of major figures in the field and more) and the consistent and coordinated research, the librarians featured in this publication 'speak directly' to the reader about trends, practices, cultures, organizational structures and more. An ability to respond to, and fully satisfy, user needs in demanding and often pressurized circumstances (including during the COVID pandemic and in straitened financial environments) and a deep understanding of the material required, including the diverse and changing uses to which it will be put, are clearly of paramount importance!

As a result, the people interviewed for this book are deeply integrated with their user base like no other, in