
Re-examining the role of the Reference Librarian in the new Information Age

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Abstract

Against a background of rapidly developing technology and changing social attitudes, the traditional work of reference librarian has changed. It has been greatly impacted by access to electronic resources on the World Wide Web. This paper examines the changes in the reference librarianship in the context of resources collection, resource sharing and document delivery, bibliographic instruction, re-engineering, approach to library services, networked resources, the Internet and training staff with new skills.

1. Background

Librarians in general, and reference librarians in particular, are becoming a critical factor in the successful management of knowledge, since information in today's world has become a valuable commodity. Society is turning increasingly to computers with greater power and ease of use, new information storage devices and automated systems to deliver data. As a result we see reference services evolving towards a high- tech model as we encourage the use of technology to reduce manual processes.

The context in which today's librarians must make decisions is also changing rapidly. They must deal with a publishing industry, which is fighting with rising costs and the problem of pricing new types of products. Delivering information to users' desks, instead of requiring them to come to the library, raises new operational issues and requires new expertise.

The role of the reference librarian remains essential and the same to help patrons fulfill their information requirements as an intermediary between resources and data search

media. Within the context of an academic environment, the reference librarian has a unique opportunity to take a leadership role in helping to prepare the information user community for the information age and ensuring access to information to a larger segment of the academic community. Because of their dual role as reference librarian and information specialist, the reference librarian's responsibility is very diversified and of wider scope. Some of these responsibilities will include resources selection and collection management, bibliographic instruction, and effective liaison with faculty and students, reference, information retrieval and document delivery.

2. Resources Collection

The sheer bulk of materials, print and non-print, published each year are daunting. By the same token, the kind of information for which people seek assistance at the reference desk has changed significantly. Therefore, meeting these demands in one form or another is a pertinent part of the reference librarian's responsibility.

Library collections today are more than just the books held in the stacks of an individual institution. As scholarly output rises, as materials budgets fail to keep pace with inflation in publishing, and as the economies of scale in managing large research libraries' collections diminish, the "collection" must be considered to be whatever provides access to and delivers as much of what is needed as possible. According to Duckett¹ several factors are key to the success of this collection concept.

- the identification of collection strengths and individual items.
- the commitment and means to share resources among institutions.
- delivery mechanisms to speed the transmission and receipt of scholarly information and documents.
- reliable national and international telecommunications networks.
- trained scholarly information specialists to help users identify, access, acquire and use the raw materials of their work.

Thus, in an attempt to have a well-rounded and balanced collection, the reference librarian needs to keep abreast of the current changes in format and cost factors affecting databases and current materials on the market. He/she needs to train and retrain himself/herself about literature selection tools, electronic products and the trade bibliographies available on the market.

3. Resource sharing and document delivery

Library networks or consortia have grown considerably in number in recent years. Such co-operations have been formed to share materials, equipment, personnel, or services, but most often are concerned with the inter-library lending of materials and to a lesser extent in a shared use of automated systems. Thus it is expected that the reference librarian always needs to be on the alert in order to cope with the changing situations affecting the smooth operation of library services. His/her role in the inter-library lending and electronic document delivery services is vital and eminently necessary for the primary user to become a sophisticated information consumer.²

Delivery of information in electronic format has presented reference librarians with a baffling array of product options for providing information to library patrons. No longer is

an issue simply what titles are most appropriate for the library collection; library staff, having selected a given information resource, must also decide in what format and through medium the library should deliver the information to the patron. Options for many information media include print, microforms, CD-ROM, online, or locally mounted databases. Thus reference librarians need to establish a framework within which they may address important questions regarding the options for delivering information in an electronic environment.

4. Bibliographic instruction

Bibliographic instruction is a very important component of the game in which the reference librarian cannot avoid being involved. In the old days the librarian served as the keeper of the books, journals and catalogues, and also as an adviser, teaching the reader how to find and use the information in the collection. Today the user needs better online directories, guides, printed handouts, demonstration and instructional programmes. These needs must be addressed by the reference librarian in the most instantaneous and efficient manner. Today, more than ever, the reference librarian should avail himself/herself at all times to aid in the use of the library and its resources, to help with bibliographic problems and to assist in the search of machine readable databases using CD-ROMs and online catalogue (OPAC).

The library maintains the responsibility for print and non-print materials and their relationship to the instructional and research activities of the institution; at the same time it also seeks to identify how access to information can be increased through the use of computer technology.

The fact that many library users will not have direct access to equipment or the knowledge levels to use effectively the online environment requires that librarians continue to be sophisticated translators of patrons' needs. The reference librarian in a research library setting is no exception to those requirements. He/she is to play an intermediary role for online inquiries and related computerized information services around his/her "workstation"- the reference desk.

5. Re-engineering

Information technology has enhanced daily library operations. Technologies such as public access catalogues and other databases have increased the access to bibliographic information, providing faster and more efficient access to wider materials. In particular, the Internet offers reference librarians very powerful capabilities to assist their own users with remote access in locating and accessing relevant material, and provides a mechanism for making widely available information about their own collections and services.

Each succeeding application of technology has placed new types of demand on libraries and librarians. The knowledge management environment will yet again alter the qualifications needed by the professional staff and requires substantial changes to traditional library and university organizational structures if the new strategies are to succeed.

All these lead us directly to the concept of re-engineering the library. C. Ferguson³ says that re-engineering in academic library service organizations should contain the following elements;

- implementation of a user-centered focus;
- transforming the user services staff into case workers;
- state-of-the-art information technology must be used to assist in the transformation of our organization;
- we must abandon the notion that every technical process must have numerous checks and balances;
- more activities and processes will be achieved through team-based work groups;
- collaboration across campus with such groups as faculty and computing professionals is essential

Adding value and empowerment requires huge improvements in the library enterprise. Current processes, organizational structures, knowledge and skill level, technologies, physical facilities and so on, will reach their limits. In order to get past the weak link in a process, an entire process must often be redesigned. This is what re-engineering is. Libraries, if they stay the way they are currently organized, might, for a while, make a certain level of progress, but it is definite that they will lose their advantage to other libraries or other enterprises bent on replacing library services with a whole new level of service value.

6. User-centered approach to library services

How can the reference librarian participate in the full-value process in terms of the provision of materials and service? There are several ways in which his/her participation can be realized and ascertained. Some of the areas in which he/she should be prepared to perform may include:

- be open to new ideas and services by giving up old preconceptions;
- view library services from a new perspective as technology changes and be a full participant in the change process;
- always consider services from the user's point of view;
- open himself/herself to creativity in library services and his/her professional growth;
- be accommodating to and cognizant of the heterogeneity of the library user's from the viewpoint of their educational and research levels, and choose the right kind of literature and computerized databases on the basis of the above levels.⁴

7. Networked resources and the Internet

An important responsibility in which reference librarians need to step forward to exercise influence is in the organization of networked information resources. The Internet offers a powerful new way to communicate and to gain access to information of all types. Librarian need to grab the initiative more forcefully in creating better organization of and access to what is available on and through the Internet.

The web of networks criss-crossing a country now raises even more questions. The Internet, a super network composed of local, regional and national networks, allows entry into large host of databases including thousands of online catalogues. Information about this networking system is widespread beyond the scholarly community and access to remote catalogues naturally tied in with other library-related functions, such as inter-library loans, database retrieval and online document delivery.

On the other hand, as information technology develops and services expand or alter, it becomes increasingly clear that the success of information services is more likely to be achieved through adjusting the services to meet the specific needs of an individual. Henceforth, the reference librarian will find it necessary to keep on working closely with students, becoming more involved with the instructional learning process and developing greater rapport with faculty members. They must look ahead of what is forthcoming by way of newer technology. Lipow⁵ says "there is an increased need for skilled information specialists to assist users with research strategies, interpretation of information, and selection of appropriate material and databases." The utilization of automated systems, therefore, may not necessarily relieve the reference librarian of work, but the systems make the work more effective.

8. Staff with new skills

In the new information age, library users desire a wide range of alternative, customized service options, self-service, and universal accessibility and availability. Users want convenient, easy, continuous service access, 24 hours per day, from anywhere. Users want the power to decide when, where and how to obtain access to a library service. They even want to determine the level of library service they should receive. The question now is how can the library staff organize, quickly adapt and deliver this continuously escalating level of service?

There are several ways to build a staff with new skills. Personnel with necessary experience can be employed. Existing staff can be trained task by task or systematic training can be conducted through workshops, courses and course sequences. As scholars and students become more sophisticated information users, they increasingly make direct use of data in electronic media, rather than using librarians as intermediaries. Therefore, reference librarian's time spent on helping users to identify, locate, acquire or access and then learn how to use online databases is worthy of a major effort on their part.

As has been pointed out in the preceding paragraphs, the scope and the nature of the librarian's role in the networked environment ought to be redefined and expanded. In order to achieve this aim, much attention is needed in several aspects of personnel and professional development. "It is essential that library professionals continuously acquire new knowledge and skills to ensure that they remain a vital part of information services of the future. Today, the technology is there to support the vision of the scholar's workstation and librarians are well advised to take a proactive role in shaping the technological changes. These technologies are based on digital information systems- the machine-readable records that comprise the online catalogues, the CD-ROMs and the databases that only a few of us know relatively well."⁶

9. Future prospects and conclusion

Libraries are developing in a very mixed environment and no one is proposing that we let go of the present and take a wild leap into the future. Nothing currently available begins to provide the unique benefits of a book. Print journals continue to be the dominant means of communication, at least within some segments of the social sciences. No library can yet afford even to consider leaving the print environment. However, we cannot afford to discount the emerging future either.

The future of reference services is to a great extent being shaped by forces well beyond the control of the reference librarian as information provider. As James Rettig⁷ says, "Networking, restructuring and automation on the global level, information access in lieu of ownership are some of the leading, broad-based forces now affecting academic libraries. Commercial information services, rapid document delivery, the proliferation of highly specialized databases and networks, as well as electronic imaging, are other factors more directly related to conventional library services which contribute to the transformation process of the traditional reference services."

Whatever may be the overriding factor; the face of reference services is changed forever. No longer do professional librarians spend long hours at reference desks, waiting for questions to be asked. Technology, which used to be within the almost exclusive domain of information professionals, is now within the grasp of most of us in our homes. For librarians to influence and shape the future of information services within the highly technological and global information environment, a change in vision, as well as activities and operations, is required.

Planning for the future must include strategies for providing economical access to information regardless of format and, ideally, for supplying library patrons with materials they need in the format of their choice. Even though there is great potential for storing and transmitting information electronically, the printed book will remain a primary format for storage and dissemination of information for years to come. These basic purposes have not been subsumed or supplanted by technology as the library has taken on new roles and functions.

In terms of the future perspectives again, new technologies will continue to appear on the scene. Coping with the emerging technologies, reference librarians will continue to play a strong role with emphasis on electronic media, advising users of strategies to identify relevant electronic sources. In short, the reference librarian, needs to prepare himself/herself now more than ever to face the new challenge of enhancing the provision of an effective, computerized document retrieval and delivery service, for the future will be one of changes driven by sophisticated technology and information.

In the academic or research library setting, reference librarians will need to be competent and responsive to their clients' educational requirements in as far as exploring the library's resources is concerned. Making users as information literate as possible is their primary duty and such they should strive to provide to those they serve, not only information resources, but also information seeking skills and an awareness of available information that will make users as self-sufficient as possible in meeting their information needs.

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