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## Library reference service and the new developments: study on the reference process and the recent changes.

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### Abstract

*What is "reference service"? Librarians have a long tradition of assisting users to find information. How does this tradition change with the new technologies and the abundance of information sources? Technology has expanded, and it continues to expand. It has the possibilities for incorporating digital reference. How does the role of the digital reference librarian differ from that of traditional reference librarian?*

*This paper will look at these issues while describing the reference process, reference services and its recent changes.*

### Introduction

The dramatic changes in information technology has revolutionized the reference service in a library, Internet and other networked resources, in particular, have greatly impacted the reference librarians' role. Information explosion has given a new dimension to the library reference service.

Today information has become a vital raw material in our rapidly changing, highly cost conscious society. The ever - increasing cost of obtaining and exploiting this information is stimulating libraries and librarians to consider techniques regarded as either too specific or too extravagant.

Traditionally, active information services have been the province of the special libraries, but demand for information is fast altering the boundaries. Librarians have to be conversant with some of the techniques involved with information services in satisfying the demand. Academic and public libraries are being encouraged to develop information and dissemination services. They themselves need information on what to provide, to whom and at what sort of cost. It is intended for librarians in all types of libraries, who need to start, maintain or change the dissemination services. Normally this service is called Reference Service. Reference Service is considered the heart of the library service. Reference service in a library is most often defined as direct, personal assistance to readers who seek information. Of the three common functions of library; the acquisition, organization and dissemination of information, the reference service is directed primarily towards the last one, the

dissemination function.

### **What is a Reference Service?**

Reference service is defined as all library services given to individuals on a one-to-one basis, regardless of the kind of information, the purpose, which it will be put to, or any demographic characteristics of the library user (King,1985). This definition will include several areas not always included in narrower definitions of reference service. Reader's advisory service will be included because the process of finding out what topics interest the reader and finding books that fit the topics is like finding out what fact the inquirer wants to know and finding a source for that fact.

Reference service comprises the various ways in which librarian helps the reader to find the information he wants. He helps not merely by obtaining the document wanted, but also by finding out in the specific information he wants.

According to Ranganathan (1961), reference service is a personal service to each reader in helping him to find the documents answering his interest at the moment of pinpoint, exhaustively and expeditiously.

Some readers know exactly what they want and the document containing that information. Then the librarians have only to provide the document. If it is not available in the library, the librarian has either to direct the reader to the other sources where the material may be available or to obtain it from other sources for the reader. Other readers may have a clear idea of what they want but lack the time to search through a large quantity of materials to find what they want. Here the librarian does the preliminary scanning, narrow the volume of material thereby and saving the time for the reader. There are others who are not sure of what they exactly want and they have to be shown many alternative sources of information before they find what they want.

Thus Reference Service is not a very simple task. It is about identifying which questions can be answered and attempting to find answers to them. The librarian tries to successfully bring together the user and the right information. This work provides both the library and the staff with some marvelous opportunities for on the job learning to develop a skill. This characteristic seems to be fundamental to our professing inextricably part of our essential identity as professionals.

It has been known for many years, that reference work cannot be taught. This is an art and skill within an art that depends on practice, not precept. Like all intellectual disciplines, this is acquired by study. But the art of reference work defined as personal assistance given by the librarian to individual readers in pursuit of information or even more simple, finding information somebody has asked for, can only be lead by experience (Grogan,1967).

### **The Reference Librarian**

The reference librarian is the library worker who is assisting the individual. This may be the only librarian, specially designated as the reference librarian or the person qualified by experience-who ever is assigned job of helping user at any particular time.

The literature of librarianship often present the work of reference service as an attractive, academic

discourse, conducted leisurely by highly qualified, dealing in an orderly and rational fashion with enquirer, put to them by orderly and rational people who are absolutely clear about their needs and thoroughly confident in their dealings with libraries (Davinson,1980).

This is a true picture of reference service. Certainly Reference Service is the fun-job of librarianship, providing perhaps more scope for job satisfaction than any other. The role of reference librarian and attitudes to reference service must inevitably change as a consequence of development in the technology of communication. The demand for change made by the growth of computerized and audio-visual media based activities and other social pressure has brought about the need for various reappraisal of the role of librarian in the information transfer and storage area.

### **Needs of Reference Service**

Today information is recorded in a variety of ways. A reader may need a specific type of information for a specific purpose. The number of documents produced is very large. So it is impossible for the reader to keep track of its variety and location. The reference librarian's main function is to keep track of the documents in the subjects of the clientele which his library hopes to serve. In addition to that, studying as closely as possible the information needs of the clientele and providing connecting links between the readers and the books are also some of the duties of the reference librarian.

Without such a service much information may remain unproductively on the shelves. Therefore needless to say that reference service is very essential to the information field.

Growth in education is one of the main reasons to emergence of importance of reference service. As the population increases, the number of literature, the number of people seeking information are also increased. Education has also outgrown the boundaries of classroom. The increase in number of students and the new methods of teaching have made it impossible to be student oriented. In a highly competitive world the driving force to better one's education is become more and more compulsive. In such a situation reference service becomes a paramount importance.

### **Reference Process**

There are four main stages in the reference process. Librarian should identify the problem, analyze the enquiry, conduct the search and review the results.

Identifying the problem is often the most difficult part of the inquiry. A key factor in the success of any reference library is the skill in analyzing the queries put to them. But first an account should be known of the method of grading questions according to the complexity of the information required. Enquires falls into four main types.

- **Direction and Administrative-** Little need to be said about these since most of the libraries are designed to answer such questions immediately from the catalog.
- **Factual enquiries** - perhaps more descriptively called fact finding enquires. The answer is usually a specific item of information, but this does not mean that such queries are easy to solve. They may often involve a lengthy search through the whole store of information .

- Subject Enquiries – more accurately described as ‘material finding queries’. From the librarian’s point of view on something on a subject, enquiry are two featured. The result of this search is a bibliography. Secondly, since there can be no definite answer the point is never reached where more material might not be discovered by further search.
- Research Enquiries- Any types of question described in the ‘specific search’ section. The essence of successful research is that something added to the store of human knowledge; either a completely new discovery or on the new relationship between know facts.

Before the search begins, the library establishes the following facts: a precise description of the subject of the Enquirer, the amount of information already known., the sources checked so far, the amount of information required and at which level, and any limitation on the material. (language, time, speed). These facts are very useful to conduct the search.

### **Identify user’s information needs**

To maximize the impact of the reference service, the library should know something about his clientele. Every library has a unique population. The library should want to know who is the potential audience that uses library service, which service they use, how frequently and for what purposes, whether and how non-user can be drawn into the libraries’ sphere of influence.

The library will also be curious about how the library fits into the general patterns of information source and communication. The answer to all of these queries will be specific to the library in question. Generally a Public library has wider audience than any other type of library. Special libraries have more selected clientele, although their scope is broader than sometimes supposed. The characteristics of the user population should influence the reference service. With the passage of time, every good library should develop an intuitive awareness of the demands made on its service. In talking to its clientele and observing the use they make of the library, a library should piece together a reasonable guide for the future allocation of its resources. But some times this is not adequate. Accurate measurements may allow the library to establish its priorities. Library surveys are the basis for many investigations into the library operations. Since the library is fundamentally social organization where information is transferred with human exchange it must have the expertise in directing the use to the most appropriate service.

### **Conduct the Search**

The next part of the reference process is the search. The question needs to compare how information is organized in the various information sources. Based on this analysis and previous experience, the librarian decides what to try first, keeping in mind the alternatives if the first try is not successful. When analyzing the reference question, it is important to know how specific the information should be. The level of specificity at which the search is handled depends on the judgment of the librarian.

## Reference Sources

Once the librarian has a clear idea of the type of information the user requires, the next problem is where to find it. Reference sources are the answer to that problem. Familiarity is needed with many varied sources in order to be successful at interviewing, searching, and finding information. Since new sources, subjects and groupings of information are always becoming available, learning the sources is an ongoing task. Even the most experienced and expert reference librarians feel the need to continue learning in this area.

In day to day activities in most reference sections, the library relies on reference books, which are carefully identified and assigned to special section of the library. Learning about new electronic reference sources is very important for the reference librarians. Most important is the opportunity to try various searches. Finding time to explore the web on a regular basis is very important because sites and information change so frequently.

There are so many new services to gain information for the clients. Except the above services, electronic transfer is a common service using new information technology. Using Internet or any other online search, electronic transfer could be assigned. The internet has brought libraries to cross roads. The nature of collection, services and information organization is changing rapidly. There is considerable anxiety about changing roles and responsibilities in this new digital environment.

## New developments in the reference service

The last few years have seen the beginnings of major changes in reference service of the application of computer and telecommunications technologies. Technological changes have occurred in several of the most basic tools, including the library catalog, periodical indexes, reference sources, and communication systems for transmitting information to user.

Two of the more significant changes, from the perspective of reference service, are the replacement of print periodical indexes with electronic versions, often including full text of many of the articles and the world wide web. The web provides many sources of government information, tourist and current factual information.

Patrons now may access a library's automated catalog directly from their home via the web. Many libraries are offering e-mail reference service and faxing of information to their users. Reference service twenty four hours a day, seven days a week is no longer a dream but an actuality.

Increased user demand for instructions in finding information on the web has become a standard of library reference service. This allows librarians the opportunity to teach users about evaluating the quality of information on the web.



## **Reference service**

Libraries everywhere are now implementing digital (internet based) reference services. Many are email based, some chat based and a growing number is using web contact center software. Services may be offered during office hours or 24/7 and perhaps as part of a cooperative network.

Demand for digital reference service is increasing in the general community as internet and email usage increased. In 1999 it was estimated that 760 million email messages were sent per a day (Gray 2000). As Order (2001) notes "Ask Jeeves" which is basically a tweaked and targeted search engine, gets three million queries a day.

Libraries world wide are extending their reference services by offering what is often termed "Ask A" services. For the last several years past such services have been mostly email based services. The customer submit an email query, either directly or via web based form, to which the librarian supplied an answer within a time frame.

## **Beyond email and chat:**

### **Contact center software**

Libraries are increasingly moving to real time digital reference through the use of Web-based contact center software. This enables the librarian and customer to interact and share and control applications remotely. It is important in implementing real time reference software which is easily and economically available to customers. Contact center software queues and routes queries to the next available service point and it is interactive. As Coffman (2001) notes that the best of these programs feature a wide variety of interactive tools that allows agents to push web pages to customers, escort customers through catalogs or databases, collaboratively fill out forms or search screens, and share slide shows and other content online. The service provider may also develop scripts, store and reuse answers, develop and use knowledge bases (FAQs), and profile customers.

Contact centre software is currently being developed and trialed in a number of sites. Also under development is the use of VOIP (Voice over Internet protocol), which allows the service provider and customer to converse verbally. With most computers equipped with microphones and speakers cards, verbal conversation is increasingly becoming feasible. There are numerous products available, for example, LSSI (Library Systems and Services Inc.,LLC)'s virtual reference desk, and Cisco's web line product. Through these two vendors, a wide range of products are available.

Over 75 libraries are using or testing LSSI's Virtual Reference Desk software. This is a hosted service so all that is needed is a link on the website to a web address provided by LSSI. Helfer (2001) provides an excellent description of how the software works.

From the customers' perspective, the customer clicks on a link on the library's website to begin the VRD (Virtual Reference Desk) session. They then provided their details and question on a login screen, and click to join a queue and a wait a librarian. If the estimated wait time exceeds a certain length they have the choice of sending an email query instead of waiting.

From the librarians' perspective, the librarian monitors queues and responds to queries. The software allows both chat and interaction where the librarian can send web pages to the customer. If the customer's browser is sufficiently advanced this may be two-way with the customer able to send web pages to the librarian.

The librarian and customer may use forms together, the librarian may show the customer slideshows and prepared scripts and may assist in answering frequently asked queries. If needed the query may be referred (transferred) to another librarian, or indeed to another library. At the end of the session, both librarian and customer receive a transcript of the session, a copy of which is stored by the system.

## **Conclusion**

Reference work is the part of the library administration which deals with the assistance given to readers in the use of the resources of the library. But now a days the reference librarian may assist readers to use resources outside of his library. The actual contact with the reader is the goal of the reference librarian's work. Reference work includes the direct, personal aid within a library to persons searching for information for whatever the purpose and also various library activities especially aimed at making information accessible as easily as possible. The techniques used in answering reference questions are fundamental tasks in reference section.

The rapid proliferation of both electronic and paper reference sources in a variety of formats has made the role of memory in reference work more critical than ever. While librarians might be tempted to utilize traditional memory improvement technique to help in remembering the ever expanding universe of reference information, the utilization of new technology is also very important.

This added dimension has spotlighted the importance of the reference librarian as an information mediator. Hence, the importance of a good understanding is the basic of reference work. Library users expect library workers to tap into computer and instantly obtain the information they want.

The dramatic increase in access to information resources due to the world wide web and networked full text databases, has revolutionized library reference service in this information age.

Since the technology has expanded, and continues to expand, the possibilities are high for digital reference. Cooperation is occurring on a global level with librarians from all types of libraries joining forces to provide new and improved services. There have been strong growth in the use of email – Ask A service such as a Ask Jeeves. There have been development of a range of interactive software offering the opportunity to provide what must be termed true virtual reference service. These developments are redefining the role of librarians to bring them back into the forefront of information provision. There is an unprecedented move by libraries to collaborate on an international basis to provide 24/7 digital reference service and software models for service delivery are being developed and implemented . Library customers may be served by librarians in another part of globe from a totally different type of library service to provide them with an accurate, authoritative answer to the query at their part of need. A library providing digital reference service any place, any space, at any pace, at any time has indeed become a reality.

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