THE FUTURE OF SERVICE DELIVERY FOR LIBRARIES IN CENTRAL BANKS/REGULATORY AGENCIES

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Providing Quality Reference Services at a Special Library

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Introduction

Libraries throughout their history - from clay tablets in Assyria and in Knossos, Crete during the Minoan Civilization to electronic documents - focus on making their collections available to users. "The purpose of the *library* of any kind is to obtain, preserve and make available the recorded knowledge of human beings" (Katz, II, p.13). In the past the library's primary role was to collect and organize information, but today the focus is more on how to access the vast amount of information. Specifically, reference librarians carry on their shoulders the responsibilities to meet user information needs and struggle to prove the value of their services.

Librarians act as mediators between the puzzled user and the information. The information highways' perplexities require an experienced, intelligent guide. The reference librarian is that guide. Two searchers – anthropologist Bonnie Nardi and librarian Vicki O' Day in their book called *"Information Ecologies"*, describe librarians as a keystone species - one of a species in an ecology, whose loss leads to the extinction of other species in the ecosystem (Ross & Kluegel, 2003, p.38).

The Reference and User Services Association of the American Library Association (RUSA/ALA) defines the *Reference and User Services Librarians* as: "librarians that assist, advise, and instruct users in assessing all forms of recorded knowledge". Thus, the role of the reference librarian is the most vital one in a library.

How can reference librarians provide quality services to the users?

- There are both traditional ways and modern means of service. A traditional way is the reference interview. It is applied to in-person and to virtual reference.

- In addition to the onsite visit of users, there are new channels of communication: the virtual reference services.

- In this speech we will explore the advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face vs. virtual reference.
- We will try to touch the issues of user education, information literacy, user satisfaction and evaluation of reference services.
- It is important to highlight the competencies of reference librarians.

1. Reference interview

Reference interview is a creative, problem-solving process that is collaborative. "It is when somebody needs some information for something that they are trying to do in their life. But they are not sure where to find it. So they ask a library professional for help" (Kluegel, 2003, p.38). During the reference interview the information specialist elicits the information needs of the client. This can be a delicate and complex process (Just ask, 2006, p.34).

Communication channels included in reference services are:
- In-person visit to the library
- Telephone
- Fax
- E-mail
- Web-based services
- Chat reference
- Co-browsing
- Instant messaging
- Videoconferencing: enables people in different locations to see and hear each other and co-operate on their computers via telephone lines (in a conference)
- Voice over IP: for disabled persons
- Cellular phones: PDA (Portable Digital Assistants: promotion of services, advertisement of exhibitions and events, messages as information on events, reminders for overdue items, announcement on reserves, answers to questions)
- Palm-tops

Objectives of the Reference interview
- It has to find out what and how much information a user needs. That depends on the user who asks the question [when a scientist and a child ask "do you have

something on horses?" the librarian will ask different questions, search in different ways and bring different kinds of information to each of the two patrons].

- The librarian formulates a search strategy and translates the user's terms into key words.
- An objective is the evaluation of the information found.

What is an enquiry?

An enquiry is a transaction where a staff member tries to:

- Find or recommend resources within the library or online.
- Assist in the use of these resources.
- Answer the question either through the use of library tools, databases or websites (Murray, 2005, p.157).

Reference process

The reference process consists of three primary elements:

1. The *information*. It is found in many formats (books, magazines, journals, electronic resources, Internet and databases). We are surrounded by tones of information which is constantly growing. More than 2.5 m. articles are published in a year.

2. The *user/patron/client/end-user/customer.* This is a person who comes to the physical or virtual library with an enquiry and seeks assistance by the reference librarian. The user considers him/her as an expert, intelligent and last resort for finding the necessary answer.

3. The *reference librarian*. S/he is the mediator between the information and the user. S/he is the person who interprets the question, identifies the proper source for the answer and judges if the answer is adequate. The reference librarian acts as an instructor for the user (Katz, I, p.10).

Reference questions

The queries can be divided into two general types, depending of the knowledge a user has on a topic:

a. *The user asks for a known item,* e.g. document, book and journal article. The reference librarian searches the library's catalog, a bibliography or a database.

b. *The user asks for information but his/her knowledge on the topic is limited.* That query triggers the reference interview.

Categorization of questions

The reference questions can be divided into four types:

1. *Directional questions.* "Where is the catalog?" These are the easiest to be answered and require negligible time by the reference librarian. The directional queries count 30-50% of the total queries per day.

2. *Ready reference questions.* "What was the exchange rate between USD and ECU in 1995?" Those questions require a straightforward answer. The reference librarian consults reference materials (encyclopedias, almanacs, the Internet). They count 50-60% in a public library. The main feature of them is the *5 w's: who, what, where, why, when,* but also questions that need a Yes or No answer.

3. *Specific-research questions.* "I have to write a paper on how inflation is measured. What do you have?" The user requires not only data (ready-reference question) but also a document (book, report, bibliography) to get ideas on the topic. It takes more time for the reply.

4. *Research questions.* The user is a researcher, an adult, a specialist, a scientist, a business executive and has already some knowledge on the topic but seeks more specific information. The time spent is much more than in previous kinds of questions.

The last two types of questions are usual at a special library, e.g. a central bank library. They are classified as *document retrieval*, where users require information. The first two types can be classified as *data retrieval*. They need answers in the form of data (Katz, I, pp.14-18). Sometimes the distinction between the last two types of questions is obscure. A query can be articulated as a specific-research and gradually become research question.

Steps of the reference interview

Most patrons do not ever recognize the existence of the reference interview as communication structure. In fact, in many cases even librarians do it automatically, by intuition. To be successful at the end of the process, librarians have to follow the prescribed steps (Katz, II, pp.165ff; Westbrook, 2006, pp.253-257).

1. *Opening the interview.* Nowadays libraries are not the first place for people who need information. They search the free Internet, the web, free data sources, discussion lists and ask peers. Librarians must be proactive and establish good communication that makes the patron feel comfortable. In remote environments it is the welcome screen or contact information in prominent places of the website.

2. *Establishing the information needs of the user.* In the online communication the reference librarian must make full use of typical conventions of online communication (e.g. short sentences, abbreviations) to build an environment of trust with the user. Those typical conventions can be adjusted to the patron's use of them. In the face-to-face communication the reference librarian is a good listener.

3. *Confirming and clarifying the question.* Reference librarians listen to the question and try to clarify it. Experienced librarians know that the original question the way the user puts it, is rarely the real question that reflects the real information needs of the user. It helps that the librarian restates ("if I understood well...") the question and demonstrates an interest in the problem and a commitment to solve it. A distinct advantage of the e-mail request is that when a person writes is more careful and specific to the request. The librarian wants to learn:
   - What kind of information is needed (definition, illustration, article)
   - How much is needed (fact, book, mass of material)
   - How is the information going to be used (for a talk, assignment, beginning of a search)
   - What degree of sophistication is required (beginning article or an advanced monograph)
   - How much time does the user wish to spend in finding and using the information
   - When is the information needed?

   It is obvious that it is not necessary for the librarian to ask all clarifying questions in order to proceed with the reference interview. The questions help in narrowing or redefining the need for information and give the librarian a notion how to build the search strategy.

4. *Conducting the search.* This is the most essential part of the reference transaction. In this step patrons may become discouraged or satisfied. So librarians, as effective searchers, must engage users in the search, while

guarding them against information overload via instruction. The complete search strategy involves:

- Selecting search terms related to the information desired
- Verifying spelling and other factual errors in the original query
- Identifying sources appropriate to the patron's need.

The reference librarian explains how to use sources and clarifies the steps of the search strategy. The librarian leaves the user to work independently but steps back to ask if additional help is needed. In the online environment the librarian uses appropriate technology, such as co-browsing, pushing web pages, scanning, faxing to help guiding patron through library resources (RUSA guidelines).

5. *Answering the question.* In choosing among potential resources, some subjective and internalized criteria come to the fore. The patron may need support in considering criteria, such as the depth and scope of information. In synchronous online or in-person contact this is better accomplished. Librarians should encourage patrons to express their concerns about the usefulness of the answer.

6. *Follow-up.* Patrons who have received their answers must try to make sense of them. Librarians can support the process by continuing to provide information as needed. Librarians encourage patrons to "go-off-line" and check on the usefulness of the information by reading the articles or visiting the suggested websites. Reference librarians should ask patrons if the question is completely answered. They encourage patrons to return ("if you do not find what you are looking for, please come back and we will try another way of help"). This is the stage where librarians make *referrals.* [Referrals "are the means used by librarians to assist students if the informational needs are more readily met in another location or by another person within the library, the library system, in a library outside, or in a non-library institution" (Gebhard, 197, p.32)]. They consult other librarians or experts in the field when additional expertise is needed. They refer patrons to other resources, libraries or institution.

7. *Closing the interview.* Librarians take care not to end the reference interview abruptly. In the digital environment this can be an offer for additional assistance and a suggestion for the patron to visit or call the library. Premature closure is one problem and lack of closure is the other. The lack of follow-up shows lack of interest in the individual. Premature closure occurs when a librarian gives up on the problem or delivers a possible solution with no attempt to determine its usefulness.

Problems with the reference interview

The reference interview is a vivid communication process between two players: the users and the reference librarians. It is easy though that the user will be dissatisfied. Mutual respect and trust are called for in any interview situation (Katz, II, p.170). Most people who approach the reference desk expect to like the librarian. The secret of rapport is the attitude of the librarian.

A thorough study on the problems arising from the reference interview is the *Library Visit Study*. It started in 1991 by a group of Canadian researchers at the University of Western Ontario. They search users' perceptions about reference services both in the face-to-face reference and in the virtual reference. The latest findings were presented by Kirsti Nielsen at the IFLA Conference in Oslo 2005.

According to the study, there are three common causes of dissatisfaction in both in-person and virtual reference transactions:

1. *Bypassing the reference interview.* It occurs when librarians make no attempt to determine what users really want to know. Librarians hear the question and turn to the computer "without speaking she began to type" manner. Instead of conducting the reference interview, the staff member latches on to a keyword in the user's initial query and uses it as a search term in the catalog. This practice often wastes time because the users wander helpless.

2. *Unmonitored referrals.* This problematic situation occurs when the reference librarian gives the user a call number or refers the patron to a source within the library but does not check to make sure that the user gets an actual answer to the question. In virtual reference the unmonitored referral occurs when the librarian sends a URL to the patron without information about the source that suggests and closes with "hope this helps". Then the patron discovers that this source is of no relevance to the query but does not come back to the reference service.

3. *Lack of follow-up*. Follow-up occurs when the librarian comes back to the patron to check the efficacy of the sources s/he suggested, by asking the user if the information provided meet the patron's information needs. The librarian can also invite the patron to return to the service (in-person or virtual).

A possible solution to those problems could be if librarian spent a few more minutes to conduct the reference interview. It would be much more cost and time efficient. In addition to those problems users mention other complaints, such as:

- In-person reference patrons note a lack of clear signage for reference desks, lack of any means of identifying the professional librarian, unapproachable and busy library staff. At the virtual reference desk users encounter deeply hidden links to those services, requirements for personal information, lack of descriptions of the service and technical barriers.

- Librarians give the impression that they quickly want to get rid of the user by immediately referring the user to someone else usually outside the library.

- Librarians imply that users have a minimum knowledge of the query.

- Librarians try to get users to accept more easily found information, instead of the information actually asked for.

- Librarians discourage users to expect defeat because the topic is too hard, obscure and vague.

- Librarians send non-verbal signals that the transaction is over.

- Librarians claim that the information is unavailable in the library.

- Librarians tell users that they are going to track down a document but they never return and users leave the library disappointed (disappearing librarian: Kluegel, pp.41-42).

- Librarians search only the online catalog although information might be available at other sources (databases, Internet).

Techniques for a successful reference interview

A good reference interview is collaboration. Users and librarians are equal partners in the search. At the end of the process both parties have achieved a new understanding. The key for a good reference interview is the need for good communication skills. To some extent the techniques below reflect the RUSA *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers,* June 2004.

1. *Approachability*. Reference librarians should appear willing to give assistance and make patrons feel comfortable in going to that person for help. Librarians must be sensitive to the needs of users, open to relaxed, friendly and fair conversation, able to overcome or deal with "difficult' patrons (shy, arrogant, hostile). In remote reference, approachability means placing contact information

in prominent locations of the website that users can easily find. Reference services must be located in a visible place with sufficient signage. Reference librarians should stop any other activities when a patron reaches the reference desk, in order to give the user full attention. They remain visible to patrons and rove through the reference area offering assistance. In remote reference, librarians should provide prominent links to all forms of reference services (web page).

2. *Interest*. For a successful reference interview librarians must demonstrate a high degree of interest in the reference transaction. Librarians must pay attention to patrons' information needs and should be committed to providing the most effective assistance. Those librarians achieve a higher level of user satisfaction. The cues for showing interest to the users' needs are:
   - Librarians retain eye contact with patrons throughout the reference transaction but not stare at the user.
   - Librarians maintain "word contact" with patrons in remote transaction by sending prompts ("are you still there?")
   - Librarians acknowledge users' e-mail questions and reply promptly.

3. *Listening/inquiring*. Listening is a major consideration in the reference transaction: pause, listen and look attentive. Active and not passive listening at the reference desk includes hearing to patrons but also evaluating and summarizing the message for further action. Listening means good communication:
   - Reference librarians - as good communicators - communicate in a cordial and encouraging manner.
   - Librarians use a tone of voice and written language appropriate to the nature of the transaction.
   - Librarians do not interrupt users when state the query.
   - Librarians rephrase the question and ask users if librarians understood it.
   - Librarians use open-ended questions to encourage requestors and make them feel at ease ("how will this information enhance your work?").
   - Librarians use closed and clarifying questions to refine the search strategy ("how much do you need"?)
   - Librarians use reference interview or web forms to gather as much information as possible.

4. *Verbal and non-verbal cues (*Katz, II, p.174). Verbal signals are only 10% of the message at the reference desk. The remaining 90% consists of signs. Facial expressions are easily understood (fear, surprise, disgust, contempt). Gestures should be kept to a minimum. The tone of voice is to be kept even not to show anger, irritation but excitement and positive feelings. Speak in relaxed manner and dress properly. Other appropriate cue, the tilt of the head, a brief look of fascinated approval of the query and a smile are guaranteed to establish the proper atmosphere.

Conclusion

The qualities that constitute a successful reference interview tend to be inherent to the personality of the librarian. However reference librarians should not alter their personality to fit to the situation. Reference librarians – as mediators between information and user – are synonymous to the reference interview. Conversation, interview, discussion are words as essential as any resource in today's library. A successful interview implies a librarian's open attitude and excellent communication skills. Experience is the most valuable factor in conducting reference transactions in addition to training, books and discussion on others' experiences. Users request "how" to find the answer to their information needs and not "where" to find it. They expect librarians to be knowledgeable. Let's be eager, approachable, pleasant, smiling, keep the library's gates open to users. Those attitudes have no cost but are beneficial for librarians and patrons.

2. Virtual reference services

Today the information needs of the users are changing. They require information where they are, when they are and as quickly as possible. Libraries are being adjusted to the new information needs and provide in-house, outreach, synchronous and asynchronous services to meet users at their point of need. Virtual reference serves to meet users at their point of need with the assistance of the librarian (Lunneborg, IFLA, Oslo 2005).

Definition

According to the RUSA *Guidelines for Implementing and Maintaining Virtual Reference Services,* June 2004, *virtual reference* is a reference initiated electronically, often real-time, where patrons employ computers or other Internet

technology to communicate with reference staff, without being physically present". Other terms for virtual reference are *online real-time reference, live reference, digital reference, online reference, electronic reference, remote, chat reference* (Moyo, II, p.22).

Online real-time reference refers to synchronous electronic communication that allows patrons to seek assistance from librarians without having to come in person to the library. In the asynchronous online communication librarian and user do not interact simultaneously. Virtual reference services are sometimes implemented by traditional means of communication, such as telephone, mail, document delivery and in-person visits to the library.

Components of web-based chat programs

- question submission form
- "current queue" page of questions waiting to be answered
- links to other services
- archive of questions
- staff only part of the service

Necessary features of web-based chat programs

- chat service
- co-browsing: librarian and patron browse simultaneously
- facilitate referral service: connect patron to another library
- allow prolonged sessions: communication, networks
- log dialog: create archive that can be searched
- create statistical reports
- support e-mail options
- support distribute service: for multiple locations or in collaborative models

Technical considerations for installing virtual reference

- compatibility with existing networks and existing software and infrastructure
- availability of network, infrastructure and software resources in combination with relevant initial costs
- availability of electrical and telecommunication lines
- quality interface: ease of use for reference librarians and users (Kebede, XII, p.17)

Sources librarians use for virtual reference are:

o Online library's catalog

o CD-ROMs

o Online databases

o Full text of e-journals

o Free Internet and search engines

o Books

o Print sources

Issues of concern for planning virtual reference services

A library that plans to introduce virtual reference services should do it carefully. The library must be aware of maintenance cost, staffing, training, integrating the virtual reference with the rest of reference services, marketing and promotion of the new service, evaluation and follow-up.

- It should define the target audience and clientele that will use the service.
- The level of services – ready reference or in-depth reference – is to be defined, the types of question the virtual service will accept and answer.
- The hours of service and parameters of time should be announced.
- It should involve computing staff in planning, implementation and technical support and check the compatibility with existing library software and equipment.
- In planning the training of the staff involved in the service, communication and interpersonal skills should be taken into account.
- Additional consideration should be taken to responsibilities of administrating the service, procedures for communication with member libraries, guidelines for using licensed online electronic resources.
- The guidelines for evaluating the services and analysis of usage statistics, patron feedback and user surveys will ensure the quality and improvement of the service.
- There are precautions about treatment of personal data and assuring the patrons how and how long the data will be used.
- Virtual reference is a labor intensive service. Collaborative models have the advantage of sharing the question load at multiple locations. That will elevate the burden of the service, especially in the 24/7 service.

- Collaboration in virtual reference has many benefits: extends hours of service, distribute staffing of the service, expands the expertise of the staff.
- Partner libraries share the wealth of resources and the costs.

There are commercial products available for reference services. They are designed to have a user friendly interface and easy navigation, standard structure as a web-form, use icons and images and information to orient and guide the first-come user, provide a link to the library's website and its resources, provide links to relevant online resources and FAQs. Contact details (via live chat service, e-mail, web-form, fax, postal address, telephone) are essential to guide the user.

Best practice examples of virtual reverence services

At the IFLA Conference in Oslo 2005 a paper was presented on two cases of virtual reference service. There was description of the service background, the selection and installation process and the administration scheme.

In Sweden in April 2005 a system bridged two consortia: *Ask a Librarian* (a service for public libraries) and *Librarian on Duty* (for academic libraries). Forty libraries participate in the service utilizing VRLplus by Docutek. The system handles e-mail questions, chatting and co-browsing. Co-browsing enables librarians to show users how to search in different databases. Users at the same time can show librarians how they carried out their search. The chat session can be sent to patron's e-mail. The libraries have conducted user surveys and realized that 95% of patrons who used the service are satisfied with the assistance and the service (http://www.eref.se).

In Florida there is a statewide virtual reference service called Ask a Librarian with 85 participating libraries of all kinds from the State of Florida. The service utilizes VRLplus by Docutek. It has capabilities for teaching sessions through the software's chat and co-browsing. Thus librarians show patrons how to use web resources and open web resources (pushing pages) to the user's screen. Users can also send questions via e-mail. Each library can customize the service linking to local reference services and to the collaborative service. The user satisfaction of the service is high (http://www.askalibrarian.org).

Instant messaging (IM): an alternative to virtual reference

Instant messaging is a svelte alternative technology to the slow but powerful heavy-weight web-based chat technology to virtual reference, designed to overcome technical barriers (Houghton, 2005, p.30; Lupien, 2006, p.19). IM is a faster form of live reference chat. IM software supports Internet-based synchronous text chat. Teens have already embraced IM in popular programs of IM as MSN Messanger, AOL Instatnt Messanger and Yahoo! Messanger.

- IM allows patrons to use the technology they prefer than forcing users to communicate with librarians using "library technology".
- IM is generally free, although commercial IM products exist and it is easy to use.
- IM works with most computers, operation systems and connection speeds.
- IM does not require the user to fill out web-forms and log on to the service.
- IM gains popularity and a number of libraries have started to offer this service instead of virtual reference.

Instant messaging vs. virtual reference

The tendency to use IM is a reaction to the frustration for libraries and patrons of using VR.

- According to the defenders of IM (Lupien, 2006), many technical problems impact VR services.
- Many VR software programs are not compatible with certain browsers and operating systems.
- Many of its features are designed to protect computers from intruders, such as pop-up blockers and firewalls (*firewall* is a system designed to prevent unauthorized access to or from a private network). It is inconvenient for the user of VR to disable pop-up blockers before using the service.
- Many users lack computer literacy, the expertise to download the software necessary for entering the VR services.
- It is also difficult for vendors to keep up with making their products compatible.
- The user of VR does not always have a high-speed Internet connection for receiving VR services.
- Using IM the user can connect with a librarian and open an IM program, then type and send a message to the librarian. The type of chat is less formal with IM than VR.
- Cooperatives do not exist in IM reference, so the service is available only during normal library hours.

- Training to use instant messaging takes 5 min. (type, copy, paste, click button) but training for web-based chat takes longer.
- IM programs must be downloaded on user's and librarian's computer in order to get connected. These programs are light-weight and have minimal technical problems. But web-based programs require users to accept a plug-in rather than a full software program.
- Web-based chat has more extra features for a library than IM: statistics, keeps transcripts of sessions, stores access to document delivery services, follow-up functions helping librarians evaluate the service.

Programs tested: VRL by Docutek; Virtual Reference Toolkit by Tutor.com and 24/7 QuestionPoint by OCLC.

3. In-person vs virtual reference

Traditional reference services
- Provide librarians with a critical link with users
- At reference desk it is reasonable to begin searching immediately with users.
- That is possible because visual and aural channels are open.
- It is mentioned in the literature that librarians can provide better service through (Moyo, p.24; Cautfield, XVII, p.379) traditional methods of reference (Lupien, 2006, p.15)
- Librarians conduct the reference interview and are more successful to give the correct answer to users.
- They return to the requestor more frequently (follow-up).
- Both librarians and users can use verbal and non-verbal cues and body language.
- Formulating the question online without the give and take of non-verbal cues and face-to-face conversation presents an additional obstacle (Desai, 2006, p.174).

Benefits and drawbacks of virtual reference services

1. Benefits:
- Library can extend hours of service, especially in 24/7 collaborative schemes
- Library can enlarge the pool of potential users
- VR improves the image of the library
- Sharing staff reduces the burden on any one institution
- VR overcomes physical and geographical barriers to "visit" a library

- It improves access to electronic library resources (full text e-journals, e-books, digital collections, web-resources, electronic document delivery)

- It is a key library service in meeting remote users in the online environment

- It is an additional communication option

- It meets user expectations (Moyo, II, p.23).

2. Drawbacks:

- Lack of in-depth search. Virtual reference users usually are no adept at research than are patrons who ask questions at the traditional reference desk

- Only text-bases chat communication

- Reference interview is incomplete due to time limitations and pressure to respond quickly

- Chat reference communication is severely constrained and limited, bereft of non-verbal cues with the verbal exchange reduced to typing

- Some questions are time consuming, while there are reasons for misunderstanding the question (Cautfield, pp.378-379)

- Software requirements for the user

- Keeps personal data

- Oriented to computer literate users

- Relevant low level of user satisfaction.

4. User education / information literacy / user satisfaction / evaluation of reference services

Unless a library has users to utilize the resources, it is a mausoleum, a dead cube of books in a nice environment, a historical monument. Our purpose is to provide services that make patrons feel at ease, comfortable and satisfied. This attitude adds value to the library.

How can we achieve user satisfaction?

There are many surveys conducted by individual libraries, consortia and regional libraries to measure user satisfaction. The RUSA *Guidelines on Virtual Reference Services* we mentioned before and the *IFLA Digital Reference Guidelines* refer to surveys where clients evaluate reference services. They act as a barometer for measuring the necessity and efficiency of services. We talked earlier about the high level of user satisfaction in the virtual reference services provided in Sweden and Florida.

The results of a user survey on the virtual reference serviced provided by the Northeastern Ohio Library Association (NOLA) Regional Library System through AskUsQuestions.com (Kloss, p.570) indicate that patrons are satisfied with the services. The results indicate that librarians feel confident about their ability in using the Internet and the new service.

Patrons and librarians must be computer literate and information literate to be able to use new technologies. The personal and computational capabilities of users distinguish the information needs of patrons in electronic information environments from those of other types of information environments (Kebede, p.19). Information sources are of limited value to users, if they are not accessed and used with patrons' existing capabilities. Patrons expect libraries to provide different or supplementary to the traditional services

User education / information literacy

Libraries should be involved in information literacy programs in their institutions. The aim is to promote information literacy skills of users and enable them to manipulate and control the information. "*Information literacy* is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (*ALA/ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, 2000*).

The **methods** of instruction vary depending on users' level of education, age, specialization and occupation:
- Group or individualized instruction
- Group library tours (general library orientation)
- Classroom lectures on a specific topic
- Pathfinders or subject guides
- Library guides, leaflets, brochures
- Computer-assisted instruction
- Seminar on a topic, workshop, handouts, hands-on experience
- Library orientation in a general orientation program for new staff

The **topics** to be taught are plenty:
- The online library catalog
- The classification system the library uses

- CD-ROM indexes
- Print indexes and print reference tools
- Basic search strategies and information retrieval
- Searching full-text electronic resources (e-journals, statistics, dictionaries, online reference sources) (Ashoor, pp.400-401)
- Presentation of a new library service or product

It is important for a small library to prepare subject-specific instruction where the audience is homogenous in educational background, interests and business activities. User education is a continuous process. At the end of the information literacy program library can offer an evaluation form to be filled out by the participants. We need the feedback of our users. It will help us determine strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis).

The **benefits** of organizing information literacy programs are various:
- They are heavy-weight marketing tools
- They improve the image of the library and raise the status of the librarians
- They increase potential library users
- They show that the library keeps its services up-to-date offering virtual reference
- The IL programs increase the usage of resources
- Library demonstrates its value to users and promotes its services.

User evaluation can help the library in many ways:
- It can restate or refresh the collection development policy and reallocate the library funds (Bradford, p.263)
- It sets priorities in services
- It assists the library to change its orientation from traditional to electronic
- It decides on establishing training to reference librarians how to use the electronic resources
- It decides on the reference desk staffing levels with the reference interview
- It gets new and fresh ideas from patrons that might take into consideration.

5. The Competencies of the reference librarian at the digital age

In the previous chapters much was said on the challenges that new reference services pose to librarians. Information professionals are faced with the challenge to

strive to demonstrate the value of the information they provide. The proliferation of information is tremendous and information professionals need to have skills and experience to acquire and distribute the data to the end-user. Reference librarians are struggling to understand what best to do as the information environment continues to change (Janes, p.561).

Another challenge is acquiring high quality information services with limited resources. It is crucial in a corporation because information budgets are seen as a soft target and businesses cut them when they face financial constraints (Dickinson, pp.93-94).

The role of the librarian in the information arena is well depicted in an article by W. Koehler (pp.405-406). In previous centuries the librarian acted as a guardian for the books. Uberto Eco paints that picture in the *Name of the Rose*. In the early 20th century "the image of the librarian changed to one of the knowledge facilitator and gatekeeper to information finding aids". In the 21st century librarians "use technology intelligently to enhance services". An additional role for the librarian is that of *mediaciatrican*. *Mediacy* is related to *media + literacy* and has the concept of information literacy. The librarian is an intermediary to navigate among a wide variety of formats and teach users to use those formats and technologies.

Reference librarians must meet the Statement of Professional Ethics of the ALA. They must be objective, approachable, have good attitude towards users, impartial, eager to help, smiling, knowledgeable, multi-tasking, intelligent, with communication, interpersonal and teaching skills, guides for patrons, good listeners to users requests.

Reference librarians are multi-tasking creatures:
▪ They master electronic formats.
▪ They teach how to use the resources of the library and experts in proposing new information sources (collection development).
▪ They are equally skilled in knowing what should be discarded from the collection.
▪ They act as administrators and participate in meetings but at the same time they fix the jammed printer paper, they replace the toner in the copy machine while answering the telephone.

Let's pay some attention to the RUSA *Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services.* The Guidelines define *competencies* as "behaviors that excellent performers exhibit more consistently and effectively than average performers".

The competencies are:

- *access*: librarians cope with user information overload, have the ability to identify documents through a bibliography and provide answers to the question.

- *responsiveness*: librarians provide services that respond to user information needs. Understand the context of users' information needs, analyze the sources, suggest specific works, listen, are approachable, show respect and interest to users.

- *Organization and design of services*: competencies on organizing reference services. They achieve it by presenting information resources, creating bibliographies, tutorials and tools that increase and facilitate access to resources. They display information and are capable to make searches.

- *Critical thinking and analysis*: the aim is to provide high quality services. Reference librarians use print and electronic media to connect users, synthesize information sources and evaluate them as well as do the follow-up in the reference interview.

- *Knowledge base*: there are various areas of knowledge, essential for the reference librarian (knowledge of basic tools, copyright issues, communication principles, information competency standards).

- *Environmental scanning*: reference librarians keep the eyes open to update and maintain knowledge of current developments in reference and user services (review the bibliography, attend conferences and seek for emerging technologies).

- *Application of knowledge*: librarians utilize new knowledge and apply it to enhance reference services.

- *Dissemination of knowledge*: librarians share expertise with colleagues and mentor newer staff (teach, discuss, mentor, participate).

- *Active learning*: they contribute to improving professional practice through engaging in projects.

- *Marketing*: a marketing plan is an aspect of strategic planning.

- *Communication and outreach*: they develop a written marketing plan and a public relations plan for the staff and determine community relationships.

- *Evaluation*: librarians evaluate the effectiveness of the marketing of reference and information services (focus groups, SWOT analysis).

- *Collaboration*: librarians must work with colleagues, professional organizations, agencies to ensure that users receive the information service they need.

- *Relationships with users*: librarians treat users as collaborators: equally.
- *Relationships with colleagues*: reference librarians work closely with colleagues to provide excellent information services.
- *Relationships with the profession*: librarians develop collaborative relationships within the profession to enhance services.
- *Relationships beyond the library and the profession:* librarians identify partners who have knowledge and expertise of value to the library's users.
- *Evaluation and assessment of resources and services:* consistent assessment of user needs, resources and services is essential to keep the information services vital (user surveys).
- *Service delivery:* librarians evaluate new or existing services to meet the users' needs.
- *Information interfaces:* librarians evaluate the format, access and presentation of resources.
- *Information service providers:* librarians employ evaluation techniques that measure staff performance (develop and use measures, work with the information service staff to develop consensus of service standards).

The competency guidelines are very detailed. They give us an overview how demanding the reference services are.

Conclusion

We should not abandon traditional reference services in favor of virtual reference, but offer them both in a hybrid library environment to attract new users. Libraries should continue to fulfill their mission in modern ways.

We have to bear in mind that every reference transaction commences with a properly conducted reference interview. Traditional reference services are still alive and will continue to be. Print reference may be in crisis, but reference librarianship is not (Roncevic, 2005, p.19). Whatever the future will be, it is clear that patrons have queries and come to libraries and want to be taught how to navigate in the vast amounts of growing information. They need better information literacy support to face the perplexities of the information overload. That necessity enlarges the responsibilities of reference librarians to acquire skills and apply them in satisfying customers' information demands.

Libraries hold the knowledge and librarians have the expertise to combine traditional and electronic services for the benefit of the user. Libraries are vivid organizations because they facilitate people, human beings. The purpose of a library remains the same. The formats change with the evolving technologies.

It is vital for the reference librarian, especially in a small library, to be enthusiastic with the profession. It is an important factor that helps librarians overcome any difficulties. The secret of success is to pay attention to patrons' requests and to provide quality services. Consequently, a successful reference librarian raises his/her profile as well as the image of the library.

"Knowledge growth, a key purpose of most digital reference transactions, requires harmony among three types of knowledge: *techne*, *episteme* and *phronesis*. Techne refers to 'knowing how', whereas episteme refers to 'knowing that'. Phronesis is the ethical knowledge (prudence, discretion). The lure of digital reference lies often in the joy of techne and the satisfaction of episteme. Only phronesis, however, helps us effectively connect with the patron on a holistic level (Westbrook, C&RL, May 2006, p.257)

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