

One desk + One stop = One solution

Introduction

The University of Queensland Library has the largest academic collection in Queensland. It includes more than 2,110,000 journals and monographs, approximately 590 electronic databases, 16,500 electronic journals linked at a title level through the catalogue and 45,000 electronic journals.

The Library comprises thirteen branch libraries located on the St Lucia, Gatton and Ipswich campuses as well as in a number of teaching hospitals. A key goal of the University of Queensland Library is to provide high quality, relevant, current and timely customer service to our approximately 43,000 clients. However in today's climate of ever changing information, facilities and customer expectations not to mention shrinking budgets and conflicting demands on these budgets the challenge facing managers and administrators to provide these services becomes more and more demanding.

Two of the branch libraries at the University of Queensland, The Dorothy Hill Physical Sciences and Engineering Library (DHPSE) and The Biological Sciences Library were, precipitated by building refurbishment, able to re-evaluate the way they were providing front-line customer service and facilities in their libraries.

It is very challenging to find the right style and level of service that will connect with our customers, who range from the generation of baby boomers through to generations X, Y and beyond. Making changes which offers new and exciting services to one demographic group can often be quite different to what is required to meet the needs of others. To achieve the best possible outcome for library customers, staff, service and budgets, requires careful application of the many principles of best practice and experience in change management.

Investigation of similar customer service facilities in other libraries had highlighted some interesting experiences as indicated through a literature search.

Literature Search

Literature investigating the advantages and disadvantages of separate information and lending desk is not in great abundance. *'The practice of combining the service points of these two functions does not seem common among the larger libraries although smaller branch libraries have done this for years.* (Naismith, 2004)

One of the key drivers for some of the main branch libraries at the University of Queensland to re-evaluate their front line services was mainly due to the decline in the reference desk statistics over the last five years.

As Jill Powell et al (2007) points out in her article,

"Decreasing reference statistics, increased outreach efforts and the opportunity to provide a better service fit for today's users are often the driving reason for combining desks."

Like many other major academic libraries around the world the reference desk has long been a mainstay of the academic library (Flanagan & Horowitz, 2000) their article continues *“that at many libraries, staff wait behind the reference desk for users to come by and use their services”*, they go on to say;

“In an environment of self-service databases, electronic forms, Web information, and the growth of distance education, however, waiting at the reference desk may no longer be appropriate. More important, it is no longer adequate.”

As noted in the introduction to this paper academic libraries service clients from Baby boomers to Generation X, Y and beyond; and Generation Y or the Millennials are now by far the majority of the population in this client group.

In their book *Millennials Rising* Howe and Strauss (2000) identify the following seven traits of this Millennial generation:

- special
- sheltered
- confident
- conventional
- team-oriented
- achieving: and
- pressured.

These traits and characteristics are important for libraries to be aware of as they plan future methods of service delivery to this generation. Ott and Chhiu (2007) looked at these traits and other characteristics of the Millennials and deduced

“Millennials do not care what format their information comes in as long as it fulfils their needs. They believe in their ability to communicate and get information from anywhere.”

Background

For both the DHPSE Library and the Biological Sciences Library the start of the “change” in service model thinking came about for quite different reasons but under similar circumstances of building refurbishment and decline in reference statistics.

Until 2006 both libraries had offered a traditional style of “front line” library service from an information desk and a loans desk. Both libraries had their information desks only staffed by professional librarians with the lending desk staffed by library assistants and / or library technicians. Movement of the different level of staff between the two desks was very limited, with the librarians having little knowledge of the complexity of the lending activities and the library assistants knowing little of the variety and complexity of questions being asked at the information desk.

At the information desks the experience was similar to what has been described in Jill Powell’s article mentioned in the literature search above. Both libraries have been

experiencing a reduction in “traditional reference” queries and an increase in queries relating to printers / photocopiers and directional “Where is the...?” queries. In addition professional librarians were being expected to do additional tasks in their working day; interacting more with their Schools or Faculties, being rostered for on-line reference query services as well as conducting information skills classes, meant that covering 13-14 hours of desk shifts was becoming harder and harder to manage.

At the lending desk, changes were also occurring. With the increase of on-line resources, lending statistics were declining. The introduction and acceptance of self check-out machines, together with the on-line / telephone renewals, on-line placement of holds, on-line forms for document delivery, electronic delivery of articles to clients had meant that not only were the lending statistics declining but the need to physically visit the library was diminishing.

The Journey for the Dorothy Hill Physical Sciences and Engineering Library

This Library has a culture of continually reviewing and investigating to improve its facilities, its services and the delivery of these services to its clients. At the University of Queensland Library there is also a strong philosophy of self service for our clients where feasible.

It was within these service parameters that the idea of having a single point service desk for our clients began to germinate. It was envisaged that a combined service desk together with open access high use and holds would allow for the provision of a one-desk, one-stop service.

- **Why One Desk + One stop**

The justification for pursuing this concept / model was backed up by a number of in-house surveys and statistics. As in much of the literature previously discussed, the experiences and the statistics in the DHPSE Library showed a decrease in the number of “true reference” queries being asked at the information desk. At the lending desk there was a continuing decrease in the amount of lending activity. In-house surveys in 2005 highlighted that less than one third of the questions being asked at the information desk were considered “true reference” queries. The other two thirds of the questions were made up of directional, ‘IT’ or service type questions.

Together with this change in the complexity of questions at the information desk and decrease in lending activity there was also a shift in the work of the professional librarians. They were required to go out of their offices and be more pro-active in their liaison with their schools, departments and faculties. Being on the information desk, and also being rostered for on-line reference services such as “Ask a Librarian” and “On-line Chat”, together with an increase demand for the librarians to be teaching more information skills classes, clearly the thirty six and a quarter hours per week would not cater for all these activities and a re-look at work routines was necessary.

The one desk trial started in the DHPSE Library because of an occupational health and safety issue at the old information desk. Modifications had to be made to the desk and during that time the librarians moved their information service point over to the lending desk.

During the summer semester of January – February 2006, the lending and information service points operated from the lending desk with some interesting and unexpected results. From the librarians perspective this proved to be a very positive re-location.

- They enjoyed working alongside the library assistants.
- They felt more visible to their clients, both students and academic staff.
- They felt that because they had this more frequent contact with clients they were able to liaise more regularly.
- It was also felt that our clients were noticeably less confused when they walked into the library, they didn't have to choose which desk to go to for help.
- As it was a fairly quiet semester, only one person was rostered on the combined desk giving all levels of staff more time for off desk activities. The desk roster was shared between librarians and library assistants.

After alterations to the old information desk were completed, the decision was made to continue the one desk trial through the semester 1 2006 as it was thought this would give a more realistic idea of the impact of “One Desk” through the busy time of the academic year.

- How does it work?

The one desk service point used was the original lending desk; the Library was not in a position to make any alterations to the lending desk to accommodate an additional service point during this trial.

The intention was to offer the services of the library assistant as the “first port of call” for the user and this would allow for the filtering of the questions with the more complex reference questions being passed on to the librarians. It also allowed for the desk to be staffed by one person at the quieter times, first thing in the mornings and in the evenings.

There was also a certain amount of shared responsibility with the librarians helping out with lending duties during busy times and library assistants answering some of the more basic reference queries.

The reality of operating the two service points from one desk was highlighted during the busy first semester. Whilst both groups of staff were positive and keen to continue this way of operating, issues arose and produced challenges which had to be addressed.

- The Positives – The Librarians Perspective.
 - The librarians had more exposure to students and academic staff when they were borrowing items.

- From a collection development point of view the librarians found it useful hearing and seeing what material was being borrowed, used and asked for.
 - As the librarians were not spending as much time having to be at the information desk, they had the opportunity to have more time away from the desk for other liaison services and collection development activities.
 - Working along side the lending service point enabled the librarians to become more familiar with the lending and document delivery services. This has allowed them to gain an important overall view of these library services.
 - The librarians felt they were forging closer working relationships with the team of library assistants.
- The Positives – The Library Assistants Perspective.
 - There was a strong feeling of the benefits of working more closely with the librarians
 - The library assistants felt they were learning useful information by hearing some of the reference queries being asked and were learning some of the strategies being used by the librarians to answer these queries.
 - The library assistants appreciated the assistance with the lending activities at busy times
 - There was a greater appreciation and recognition of the work that is done at the lending desk.
 - More of the basic reference queries were being answered by the library assistants and this allowed them to employ enquiry skills which were different from skills used performing the normal duties of a lending desk.
- The Negatives – The Librarians Perspective.
 - The physical design of the desk is not ideal.
 - Initially a lack of clarity of roles for the staff at the two service points.
 - A concern of hearing mis-information being given to clients by less experienced library assistants.
 - There was a feeling that our clients may still be unclear about where to ask for information.
- The Negatives – The Library Assistants Perspective.
 - Different approaches to service delivery. library assistants regularly deal with high volume transactions and guidelines and procedures that often require them to say “No”. Librarians on the other hand are used to taking time with clients asking questions and ‘interviewing’ and exploring possible solutions to locate information resources.
 - Some library assistants had difficulty working along side librarians who would correct and contradict the information that they had given to clients.

- A lack of clarity of the roles for the staff at the two service points.
- Addressing the issues

Following the identification of the above issues that arose from the first semester trial management arranged for a one day workshop to be held for all the staff in the DHPSE Library.

The workshop was facilitated by an external consultant. Both the change in our working environment and the transition to different work practices were discussed. This open and honest discussion allowed individuals to understand why there was some conflicts between the different staffing groups in the way services were being delivered; and more importantly allowed the staff to realise that whilst styles were different everyone was endeavouring to ensure a satisfactory result for the clients.

Staff were encouraged to identify and discuss issues that had arisen from the first semester trial and out of the workshop the three most critical practices that had caused friction were documented. The workshop then set up electing three working parties, each one comprised of different levels of staff, and these groups spent time investigating these practices and developed proposals to be put to the whole team on how to deal with the issue in the future.

The groups that were established were:

1. The first group was to investigate whether High Use material should be allowed out of the Library. This practice highlighted the difference in the library assistant's approach to adhering to policies and procedures and the librarians' approach of always trying to be helpful and to ensure a good positive outcome for our clients.
2. The second group looked at whether staff should override the library system to allow the renewal of items that shouldn't be or couldn't be renewed. As with the first group this practice also highlighted the difference between the service deliveries of the two staffing groups.
3. The third group investigated how and when staff should refer questions from clients to other staff. This practice highlighted the concern that librarians had about some mis-information being given out. It also highlighted the issue of what level of staff should be answering what level of reference queries. Finally this group also looked at how librarians should go about correcting colleagues possibly in front of clients.

From these working parties, practices and strategies were identified and agreed to by all the staff. To assist in the communication of these strategies and to help in the development of a more unified work group a number of actions followed.

- A "one desk" wiki was developed to assist the team to communicate events that happened at the desk. When staff start their desk shift they are able to check the wiki for what has occurred on previous desk shifts, FAQ and current matters of interest.
- A "new persons guide" was created for all levels of staff to ensure that new staff members were fully introduced to the practices within the DHPSE Library. All levels of staff were involved in the initial writing

of this document and continue to be involved in the updating of this document.

- Introduction of subject teams for certain processes meant an increase in the shared working environment of the library assistants and librarians. This also resulted in a more unified group of library staff.
- Introduction of a DHPSE Library blog to better communicate between library staff and the library's clients was a one desk initiative.
- At staff meetings the one desk was a regular agenda item to ensure issues were discussed facilitating more two way communication between staff and management.

▪ The Outcomes for the Dorothy Hill Physical Sciences and Engineering Library

For the DHPSE Library we have continued with the refinement of the one desk. There is a strong resolve amongst the staff that this is the way ahead for delivering front line services in this library. The advantages that have been achieved include:

- A one-stop desk for our clients.
- More appropriate use of the librarians' time.
- Better use of the skills of the library assistants.
- Achieving a positive learning experience for both librarians and library assistants.
- Creating a more flexible workforce.
- More unified team approach amongst all the different levels of staff.

A high priority has now been placed on the physical design of the desk and to this end consultation with specialist designers, staff and clients will be undertaken.

Re-design of the work flows at and around the desk is being investigated with the possible introduction of open access / self serve for the very busy High Use and Holds collections.

There are plans to train all levels of staff as this library moves towards different levels of staff taking on new duties for example library assistants answering more reference queries.

We continuously monitor the impact of our service delivery to our clients. We need to continuously market and inform our clients about improvements in services.

Space planning library wide is being undertaken at the University of Queensland and as one of thirteen branches we need to be very aware of what is being considered at a corporate level whilst trying to plan services at branch level.

The Journey for the Biological Sciences Library

For the Biological Sciences Library the journey began from a completely different situation started in early 2006 with the commencement of a major refurbishment of this Library.

Staff moved into temporary accommodation, professional staff and para-professional staff worked from a single temporary desk and although these staff kept their traditional roles more interaction between the two groups started to take place.

The major refurbishment to the Biological Sciences Library saw the inside of the Library completely gutted out and transformed the building into a new, vibrant, colourful 21st century library and state of the art learning environment. These refurbishment changes gave the managers and staff the opportunity to investigate how front-line services were being offered in libraries around Australia and around the world and to adopt a completely new model for service delivery in the new Library.

Together with various other service changes a trial of a model was adopted called the “Roving Librarians.” In this model the Library completely abandoned the traditional lending and information desks and established a “welcome” desk at the front entrance to the Library. With the introduction of open access high use and open access holds; the positioning of self-check-out machines, both in the main Library at the exit doors and in the open access high use / hold area, the emphasis on the welcome desk was more towards answering and filtering basic enquiries as a first point of contact.

The following is a description of this process taken from a presentation given by Sachs and Schindler (2007) from the Biological Sciences Library.

- Why roving?
 - With a completely refurbished building the opportunity was there to introduce a new style of service.
 - With over 200 computers spread over 4 levels users may not need to leave their workstation to go looking for assistance.
 - There would be an opportunity to offer a proactive service, users who look as if they are having difficulties can be approached and assistance offered.
 - There would be an opportunity to mix with the users rather than sitting behind a desk waiting for the users to approach the staff.

- How does it work?
 - The librarians roved between the hours of 10.00 and 2.00 pm Monday to Friday
 - There are four 1 hour shifts each day and a librarian would only have one of these shifts each day.
 - During this shift the librarian carries a hands-free phone and can be contacted by the staff at the welcome desk if help is needed or by users who can ring this phone from many of the internal phones scattered around the four levels of the Library.

- In addition to the roving librarian there is a librarian on call throughout the day to assist at the welcome desk.
- The expectations:
 - There were great expectations that the librarians would be swamped with questions as they roved around the Library.
 - There were also expectations that they would be called on their hands-free phone from the courtesy phones around the building.
 - Users would constantly stop the roving librarian and ask them questions.
 - It was intended that the roving librarian would carry and use a tablet or iMate to help assist in the answering of questions.
 - That the roving experience would be similar for everyone.
 - That it would be easy!

After the trial in first semester 2007 of working with this new model, the library staff have been able to take stock of the new arrangement and evaluate its success or otherwise.

- Were the expectations met?
 - There were fewer questions than expected however the numbers were about the same as had been at the old information desk. Most of the questions (approximately 75%) were directional queries, again very similar to the old information desk.
 - The librarians found that the tablet was not the most convenient way to answer questions. Apart from it being awkward to carry whilst roving it was often easier to use a vacant pc or the user who was asking the question was already at a pc.
 - Individual staff members had varied reactions and experiences to the roving model. Staff who were pro-active when roving and making eye contact reported having more success than staff who perceived this style as a possible intrusion on people who may not want or need any assistance.
 - It was noted that there were fewer IT queries and it was also felt the users were more switched on to IT issues.

The Outcomes for the Biological Sciences Library

There were a number of positives and negatives from this model:

No lending desk, No information desk, Roving Librarians, Inclusion of a Welcome Desk.

- The Positives included:
 - The staffs were able to assist library clients at their point of need, and they no longer had to move from where they were settled and working

to go in search of help from a staff member sitting behind a desk on one of the other levels of the library.

- The staffs were far more visible in all areas of the library. Clients will frequently see staff moving around different levels, and this is good not only for ease of giving assistance being offered to and asked for by users but also for security issues. Because the staff members are more visible they are in a far better position to monitor unruly / noisy behaviour, inappropriate behaviour and any inappropriate use of library computers.
 - Staffs are more aware of maintenance issues around the library, of plumbing problems or IT issues, they see when computers and photocopiers are not working, when light bulbs are out, when equipment or furniture are damaged. There is a far more proactive approach to the “look and care” of the library building and facilities as a whole.
- The Negatives included:
- Without having a information desk help is not always obvious to “new” and “old” clients of the library.
 - Some staff who roved reported it was tiring and sometimes boring when there were few questions and because they were roving they were unable to do other jobs, which was something they could always do whilst sitting behind the old style information desk.
 - When the welcome desk was busy it was not always easy for staff at the desk to stop what they were doing and call for back-up.
 - There was a feeling amongst some staff that the users may feel they were “being watched”.

For the Biological Sciences Library the outcome of the trial of the roving librarian model has not been as successful as envisaged.

- The statistics have shown that the librarians handled far fewer queries than had been anticipated.
- The librarians did not find it a satisfying experience as they would often find themselves on one floor when help was required on another.
- It did not appear to be a good use of the librarian’s time.
- Whilst the number of queries both directional and reference were low for the librarians, for the library assistants rostered on the welcome desk the statistics were much higher.
- It appeared that the roving librarian model was not being embraced by both library staff and the library clients.
- Adequate publicity for the change in service delivery was identified as a possible problem with the introduction of the service together with the adequate training of staff.
- Whilst a number of phones had been placed on all levels of the newly refurbished library to allow clients to contact the roving librarian this service had not been utilised. (Sachs & Schindler, 2007)

For second semester 2007 The Biological Sciences Library will move away from the 'Roving Librarian' model and concentrate more on the One Desk Model similar to that being used in the DHPSE Library.

Management will be looking at staffing options for this "One desk" which may be staffed either by 1-2 library assistants with librarians rostered on call or a combination of librarians and library assistants in peak hours with librarians on call in quieter hours.

What lies ahead – looking forward?

The delivery of front line services at the University of Queensland Library is something that will continue to be questioned and challenged.

The service delivery changes outlined in this paper merely reflect a service that due to the ever changing environment, technology and user requirements and expectations needs to be constantly examining itself and be ready to re-invent itself as the need arises. As Flanagan and Horowitz pointed out in their article

'The concept of integrating reference and circulation service points is not an end, but rather a means to evolving toward a model of service in keeping with technological advances and the need to deploy all staff to a broader array of tasks'. (Flanagan and Horowitz, 2000)

The trials that have been undertaken at both the DHPSE Library and the Biological Sciences Library will continue to evolve and change as both library staff and our clients demands continue to evolve and change.

The DHPSE Library will continue with their "One desk model" and take it forward by now refining the physical layout of the desk and strive to get more services delivered as 'self service'. To this end the library staff is fortunate to be able to discuss their ideas and concepts with a member of the University of Queensland School of Architecture to develop some design plans.

The Biological Sciences Library will change their approach and move towards a similar style as the DHPSE Library.

Since the introduction of these two trials the largest branch library at the University of Queensland, The Social Sciences and Humanities Library has, in first semester 2007, started its own trial to roster library technicians on to their information desk. This library has physical constraints that prevent the combining of the two service points into a one desk model.

As with the other two branch libraries their information desk service point has experienced the same changes in client queries that are being asked and the same increase in duties for the professional librarians. This library will continue rostering library technicians on the information desk and intend to address issues of training and referral of questions during second semester 2007.

Conclusion

What has been learnt from these two trials is the need for models that are not only flexible in their design but also cater for the variety of generations we continue to serve. At all stages of planning new service delivery models library management and staff need to address issues such as:

- Communication with clients and staff
- Budgetary constraints
- Training
- Flexible models.

The trials in the three branch libraries have shown that there is no perfect model. Flanagan and Horowitz indicated in their paper, that when planning about the future of the “*Integrated Service Point at Massachusetts Institute of Technology*,” there is always “*advantages and potential for further refinement.*” Whilst we continue to retain our culture of reviewing and investigating to improve our library facilities we too can “*continue to evolve so that we meet our customers’ expectations, or perhaps even exceed them.*” (Flanagan & Horowitz, 2000).

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