

A Greater Need for Reference Librarians

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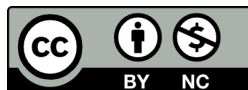
Deposited 02/08/2023

Citation of published version:

Sandy, John H. “A Greater Need for Reference Librarians.” *Science & Technology Libraries* 27, no. 3 (2007): 87-89.

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A Greater Need for Reference Librarians

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In this era of virtual libraries and sophisticated search systems, one might think the need for reference librarians would be diminished, but evidence shows this is not the case. Many factors affect the demand for reference assistance.

The first, and most obvious, factor is the continued reliance on legacy systems built up over many years. Information contained in books, journals, and microforms is still useful for learning about culture, science, technology, and events that have shaped world history. Since it is unlikely that all this information will be available electronically in the next several years, reference librarians must be prepared to instruct users in the best methods and techniques needed to tap into these valuable resources.

A related factor is the library's dependence on older equipment which must be frequently retained to access special formats. Related to this is the fact that existing integrated library systems often do not perform to modern expectations. This situation is hampered by the slowness of library technology providers to build robust new technologies for the library marketplace. At least in the short term, guidance from reference librarians is essential for library users to gain some benefit from these legacy systems.

Another major concern is what might be described as the gap in information literacy. This is not to disparage the information seeking skills of library users, but rather to recognize that the information landscape is a very complex place and finding information requires an understanding of the principles of information science and application of well-thought-out techniques and strategies. It is unrealistic to expect library users to be self-sufficient in gathering and exploiting information, when most of their time and energy is spent in learning, teaching, and creative pursuits.

Accelerated change is another factor that weighs in favor of more reference assistance. One way to understand this is to observe practitioners in the field. Reference librarians must invest enormous amounts of time keeping abreast of the proliferation of information and knowledge, as well as the wide variety of information providers and modern technologies used to find and deliver information. It is abundantly clear why library users feel challenged when they choose to go it alone.

Therefore, it is not surprising that reference librarians are constantly seeking new ways to reach out to their constituencies. Developing automated reference systems, Web page guides, and other instructional tools takes a considerable amount of time and resources. And while reference librarians have always been involved in creating tools to help users, the new products of today take a much higher level of commitment than was the case in the past.

This expansion of services is driving reference to new heights, as well. To stay relevant, libraries today are offering much more than books. Shortly after the arrival of the PCs in the early 1980s, librarians and academic planners envisioned what some called the scholar's workstation, a setup which would give individuals everything needed to turn out the final product. As libraries move in this direction, more onsite and remote reference help is needed to teach users how to gather information and synergistically exploit analytical tools and information processing devices and software.

A final issue relates to greater accountability and leveraging value. Libraries are seeking a high return on their information investments. This is accomplished when users gain information they need and research is done in a way that saves time and energy. Reference librarians are well positioned to bring library resources and library users together to achieve better results.

A question begs asking, are reference librarians ready to meet the challenges in the new information environment? Looking forward, the answer depends on whether individuals can master and exploit modern technologies such as broadband telecommunications, Web-enabling software including XML, Flash, JavaScript, and SQL, and an array of new mobile hardware devices which have the capability to converge data, audio, and video. Further, the central role of reference librarians as capable managers of these and other technologies which can lead to beneficial value-added products and services for users cannot be overlooked.

While virtual help is clearly in the ascendancy, personal reference service will continue to meet the needs of many users. More reference librarians with well-honed information gathering skills, a firm grasp of technology, and a vision to grow services will be needed to deliver a myriad of services in the new millennium.

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