

Telework and the Academic Librarian

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INTRODUCTION

College and university faculty and students prefer the convenience of anytime, anyplace access to scholarly materials when conducting research and completing assignments. Distance education programs are common whether the students are across town or across the continent. Faculty researchers collaborate with their peers nationally and internationally by utilizing virtual technologies. Academic libraries have been quick to integrate electronic and digital technology into their operating environment by investing heavily in the purchase and creation of digital collections as well as the purchase of the hardware and software to deliver content to these virtual scholarly communities. Librarians have adapted to working virtually. This article explores freeing librarians from the physical boundaries of the library, allowing them to provide virtual reference services by telecommuting.

BACKGROUND

Adequate, authoritative resources on every topic imaginable are available electronically. Authentication software makes it possible to access expensive subscription databases from practically anywhere with an Internet connection. Subscription databases coupled with the growth of free, high-quality Internet resources has led to an explosion in the creation of virtual libraries. As Broughton (2000), a librarian from Bowling Green State University, states, "it only makes sense that since we spend hundreds of thousands of dollars making resources accessible remotely, we now need to serve the people who use them." Thus the trend of librarian experimentation with various software products that enable them to provide real-time, synchronous, virtual reference. The next step at the University of Akron's Science & Technology Library has been to free the librarian from the boundaries of the physical library by telecommuting to provide virtual reference services.

Universities are developing teleworking policies, and faculty who already have a long tradition of working from home can now teach, advise, and meet with colleagues

virtually from home or any location. The telecommuting employee is becoming increasingly commonplace. A survey from 2001 indicates that approximately 28 million people worked away from the office primarily from home or on the road (Kistner, 2001). By 2004 that number had increased to 44 million (In-Stat/MDR, 2004). Librarians now also have the tools for virtual work.

The Science and Technology (S&T) Library at the University of Akron (UA) is open 93.5 hours a week, has a staff of 4.5 library faculty with a clientele of 3,810 full-time equivalent (FTE) science students and 306 FTE science faculty. Like other urban campuses, UA has many commuter and nontraditional students. Increasingly these students were contacting the library with reference questions and requests for research assistance by e-mail or telephone. In 2001 the University of Akron Libraries (UAL) began experimenting with virtual reference (VR) software which allowed clients to contact a reference librarian via a link on the libraries' home page. Ultimately, UAL joined the OhioLINK consortium in offering a state-wide virtual reference service using common software and shared staffing. The year 2001 was also the year that the university launched its "wired for wireless" initiative. This initiative provided every full-time faculty member with a laptop computer which could be used for university-related work off and on campus. Faculty received liability insurance, instructions on safety, and appropriate use guidelines. Consequently, S&T Library faculty had well-equipped computers available for use anywhere.

Once university employees and students could establish a virtual private network (VPN) connection to the university's network, thereby solving authentication issues associated with subscription databases and secure sites on campus, they had comprehensive access to online resources as if they were on campus. Their library research environment became the same on and off campus. The VPN also created a parallel on-campus/off-campus work environment for librarians.

Beginning as early as the 2001 VR trial, S&T Library faculty began to consider the possibility of telework during evening hours when fewer reference questions were being asked. Although cost saving is frequently identified as a goal for the employment of teleworkers in

the corporate sector, we viewed this as a modest project requiring no new resources and with no expectation for cost savings.

Project Goals

Six goals were identified for the pilot project:

- Extend the availability of the professional staff over more hours during the week.
- Increase the total number of reference transactions.
- Replace the “just-in-case” reference desk scheduling model with a “just-in-time” model.
- Increase the ability of the reference staff to work more effectively on other projects when reference services are not needed.
- Begin to build a database for frequently asked questions (FAQs) and create a “canned responses” list for the campus-wide virtual reference project.
- Test librarians’ ability to rely solely on electronic resources to satisfactorily complete reference transactions.

A Telecommuting Pilot

The first six weeks of the pilot occurred “in-house” to test the feasibility of relying solely on electronic resources. In other words a librarian worked from her office to mimic being off-campus without access to any of the printed resources normally available for reference work.

The experience of the 6-week trial was encouraging and supported the belief that it was feasible to provide reference service from a remote location since local print resources were not required for most queries. Beginning with the summer session, the librarian worked from home as a virtual reference librarian for two evenings a week when the library was physically closed. Initial results from the pilot project were presented at the 2002 Virtual Reference Desk Conference (see Calzonetti & deChambeau, 2002).

Ongoing Telecommuting

The response to the pilot project was positive and UAL expanded its virtual reference services by joining the consortial OhioLINK virtual reference project. The S&T telecommuting reference project was continued with the addition of a second science librarian. Ultimately, telecommuting to provide evening reference services became an option for all science reference librarians. In other words, librarians have a choice whether to work on campus or work elsewhere.

The types of questions researchers asked were informative. As other case studies have found, technical help

is often needed before the actual research can begin (e.g., Marsteller & Neuhaus, 2001). Examples of these types of problems include trouble connecting to a subscription resource from off campus, trouble authenticating, forgotten personal identification numbers, and so forth. Some questions are best answered by other departments or units on campus and become referrals. General and research questions are becoming more complex as researchers become more comfortable in the virtual environment. Most inquiries were for assistance identifying relevant journal articles on specific topics rather than requests for simple facts.

CONCLUSION

Telecommuting is not an exceptional workplace practice. Universities and libraries have been experimenting with the idea in various ways. For examples, see the *Telecommuting and Alternate Work Schedule Policies and Procedures at Universities* located on the National Center for Transit Research’s Web site (see NCTR, 2004). Undertaking our project depended on a set of factors that may not exist in all academic library settings. Factors that make telecommuting possible as an option for the UA science librarians to provide reference service are as follows:

- A computer-literate clientele with increasing expectations for reference service from remote locations
- Availability of an extensive body of authoritative electronic resources, both subscription based and free
- University of Akron laptop program enabling faculty to work from home without incurring substantial additional costs
- Comprehensive, secure access to the online university resources from off-campus through use of UA’s VPN
- UAL participation in the statewide, consortial OhioLINK virtual reference project

Administrative issues had to be resolved for the VR project to work. Computers were provided by the university. The library administration was willing to support the project by paying for the Internet connection. However, the connection was utilized for such a small percentage of time each week for work that the participating librarians agreed to maintain their own Internet connections. Telecommuting hours had to be factored into faculty workload. Training student employees to make appropriate use of the telecommuting librarian is critical and requires ongoing efforts. Finally, monitoring the effectiveness and quality of our service is continuous. For the future, we plan to look for measurable assessment indica-

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