AN EVALUATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA REFERENCE SERVICES STAFF: CURRENT AND FUTURE SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

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Abstract

The question of skills and competencies of reference staff has been widely debated in the field of reference services. It is evident that technology and user expectations have considerably altered the manner in which reference services are delivered in academic libraries. Scholars such as Chawner and Oliver (2013) argue that Changes in information and communication technology call for library staff involved in providing reference services to develop new skills while at the same time maintaining their traditional skills. Reference service staff requires not only traditional reference skills, but also skills in customer service, good communication skills as well as keeping abreast with the technological changes (Chawner and Oliver 2013). At the University of Botswana Library, reference service is provided in various designated areas by staff from different levels. The study will examine the current University of Botswana reference service staff skills and competencies. Specifically, in our research, we will be looking at three groups of skills and competencies namely general skills, technology skills and personal skills that are essential in the provision of reference services. Reference staff will be asked to indicate activities they carry out as part of their daily activities, the skills and competencies they have as well as the skills and competencies they judge to be important in the provision of reference services. Data will be gathered from all University of Botswana library staff offering a reference service, questionnaires and interviews will be used to collect data. The paper will conclude with discussions of the implications of the findings and practical and approaches to enhance reference staffs skills and competencies. The results will be useful to library managers, staff involved in designing professional development programs as well as to academics in library and information schools that teach reference courses.

Keywords: academic libraries; reference service; university of Botswana; reference service skills

BACKGROUND/ INTRODUCTION

Changes in information and communication technology (ICT) used to communicate mean that library staff involved in providing a reference service may need to develop new skills, while at the same time maintaining their traditional skills (Chawner and Oliver, . 2013.) Traditional skills include knowledge of reference sources, the reference interview and the ability to provide information literacy instruction. Whereas the new skills include the use of social media such as blogs, twitter and facebook to reach out to new clients (Chawner . and Oliver. 2013). Everyday reference librarian's help people locate the information they need and give directions to information sources. The question of skills and competencies of reference staff has been widely debated in the field of reference services. It is evident that technology and user expectations have considerably altered the manner in which reference services are delivered in academic libraries. Scholars such as Chawner and Oliver (2013) argue that changes in information and communication technology used to communicate with members of the academic library community require library staff involved in providing reference services to develop new skills while at the same time maintaintheir traditional skills. Reference service staff requires not only traditional reference skills, but also skills in customer service, good communication skills as well as keeping abreast with the technological changes (Chawner and Oliver 2013).

The University of Botswana Library (UBL) is an academic library with its main campus in Gaborone and additional campuses in Francistown and Maun. The UB Library main campus serves most of the graduate and undergraduate students. The library has an area at the ground floor specifically designated to offer reference services. Reference services are also offered at specific designated areas at different floors. Librarians offer a service at the reference desk at the ground floor and Library Officers offer reference services at the floor reference desks during scheduled times Librarians working at the reference desk are not reference Librarians per say but subject Librarians charged with one of the responsibilities of offering a service at the reference desk. These are professional Librarians with Degrees and Masters Qualifications. On the other hand, Library Officers are Diploma holders who mostly do technical jobs and are at the same time expected to man the reference desks on the floors. Here at UB library, reference Librarians perform other functions such as collection development, instruction, outreach activities etc. Librarians do not specialize in reference and user service.

The paper is based on the premise that members of staff offering reference services in the University of Botswana library do not have all the essential skills and competencies of reference Librarians. The purpose of the study is to gather feedback from the current reference Librarians and Library Officers to determine the competencies and skills they have as well as the ones they consider to be most needed in the field of reference services. Specifically, in our research, we will be looking at three groups of skills and competencies namely general skills, technology skills and communication skills that are essential in the provision of reference services. Reference staff will be asked to indicate activities they carry out as part of their daily activities, the skills and competencies they have as well as the skills and competencies they judge to be important in the provision of reference services.

Our survey findings will provide valuable data regarding the skills and competencies needed by Librarians and Library Officers offering a service at the reference desks. The survey will also help us make some conclusions about the training and lifelong learning for improving their competencies in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ivana Hebrang Grgic and Daniela Zivkovic (2012) define a reference Librarian as someone that assists, advises and instructs users in accessing all forms of recorded knowledge. According to Laura Sanders (2012), a reference transaction implies a knowledge of information sources and how to search them as well as the ability to communicate information to patrons effectively. Dole et al (2005) defines competencies as specific range of skills, abilities or knowledge that enables one to carry out professional responsibilities. Bosanguet (2012) wrote about core skills and competencies of reference Librarians. In his writing, he stressed the fact that usually environments in which people work fail to recognize the complexities of reference work and the contribution that the information professional makes to keeping relevant information accessible.

It should be noted that there are many definitions of competencies throughout the literature and these have evolved over time. Most of the definitions of competencies refer to technical skills, interpersonal and communication skills, discipline knowledge as well as information requirements of users. Definitions further assume that reference Librarians have knowledge of the resources, information access tools, including online catalogs, search systems and databases.

INTERPERSONAL AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Personal competencies are defined as a set of skills, attitudes and values that enable Librarians to work efficiently, be good communicators and survive in the new world of work (Haddow. 2013). These skills are further defined as creating and nurturing an environment of mutual respect and trust. It should be noted that a major component of reference work involves direct service to and interaction with patrons. Literature review shows that reference Librarians are expected to interact effectively with a variety of clientele and should be taught skills such as approachability, showing interest as well as verbal and non-verbal cues (Pellack, 2003). As observed by Laura Saunders (2012), interpersonal and communication skills as well as the ability to build relationships through active listening and inquiring is essential when offering a reference service. It should be noted that as reference services move online, interpersonal and communication skills may be even more important since Librarians are communicating with patrons in many different ways and often without the support of non-verbal cues (Saunders, 2012). Much as giving accurate answers to informational queries is important, establishing a rapport with patrons is more important and has been shown to influence a patrons willingness to return to the same librarian for further help. Literature review shows that the importance of interpersonal skills within the reference department cannot be over emphasized. Based on the literature review definitions and interpretations of interpersonal and communication skills, one can conclude that a reference Librarian is expected to be friendly, maintain enthusiasm, have a pleasant personality, be helpful and patient when dealing with users as well as remain calm and polite at all times.

TECHNOLOGY SKILLS

Patrons expect reference Librarians to know the latest technology. Reference Librarians are expected to know basic computer skills and computer troubleshooting, using the online catalog and databases as well as navigating and troubleshooting devices. Technical skills expected range from the use of email and the internet to planning for automation of services to developing web sites and other web based materials. Literature shows that technical

knowledge necessary to reference is not confined to end user applications or various communication softwares. As indicated by Laura Saunders (2012), technical skills expected of reference Librarians include among others the use of email and the internet, planning for automation services developing websites and other web based materials. This assertion is corroborated by Maness (2006) who observed that Web 2.0 will have substantial implications for libraries and recognize that while these implications keep very close to the history and mission of libraries, they still necessitate a new paradigm for librarianship. Interpersonal and behavioral competencies such as flexibility and creativity, appear to be related to a need to learn about and adapt to changes in technology.

METHODOLOGY / RESEARCH DESIGN

A quantitative research method was used to gather data from reference Librarians. Questionnaires were used to collect data. Closed and open ended questions were asked.

Reference staff were asked to indicate whether they were given any induction to prepare them to offer reference services, activities they carry out as part of their daily activities, the skills and competencies they have as well as the skills and competencies they judge to be important in the provision of reference services. Skills considered focused on general skills, technology skills and communication skills that are essential in the provision of reference services. The survey was anonymous. The list of competencies was based on the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) guidelines with some additional competencies and skills extracted from the literature review.

A questionnaire was given to all staff providing reference and the group consisted of senior Librarians, Librarian and Library Officers.

OBJECTIVES

This study was conducted to achieve the following

- Establish whether reference Librarians have undergone any induction or training to prepare them to offer reference services
- Activities carried out during the time when on duty at the reference desk
- Identify current skills and competencies of Librarians and Officers
- Identify skills and competencies reference Librarians and officers judge to be important in the provision of a reference service

FINDINGS /RESULTS

Our sample consisted of seven Senior Librarians, twenty one Librarians and three Library Officers.

When asked about undergoing any induction or training on how to offer a reference service when sitting at the reference desk, 29% indicated that they did undergo induction and training and 71% indicated that they have never been trained or inducted on how to offer a reference service at the reference desk.

When further asked to indicate how the induction or training was done, respondents indicated that it was done through workshops, in house training and presentations.

This is worrisome because only a minority of staff working at the reference desk indicated that they have undergone training and induction.

TABLE 1 The most usual work done by Librarians and Library Officers at the reference desks

ACTIVITY	%
Catalogue search	81%
Database search	74%
Giving information about the library	61%
User Education	42%
Doing personal stuff	10%
Inter library loan	6%
Reading newspapers	6%

The range of activities respondents undertook showed considerable variation. The most usual work respondents do when sitting at the reference desk is Catalogue search (81%), Database search is the second most usual work (74%) and giving information about the library rated at 61% .We can conclude that catalogue search, database search and giving information about the library are the activities that most respondents do when sitting at the reference desk. Less frequent activities included user education rated at 42%, followed by doing personal staff (10%), inter library loans and reading newspapers both at 6%. The most common activities were Catalogue search, Database search and giving information about the library. A review of literature indicates that reference librarians' core duties are to assist, advice and instruct users in accessing information. The results corroborate this assertion.

TABLE 2 Which of the following general skills do you have?

ACTIVITY	%
knowledge of Information resources	74%
Research skills	71%
Professional Search skills	68%
IT Skills	58%
Skills in conducting reference interviews	48%
Knowledge of policies, procedures, ethics and issues	42%
Managing conflict	39%
Managing new situations	29%
Foreign languages	10%

The next section of the survey asked respondents to indicate the skills they have. 74% of the respondents indicated that they are knowledgeable in Information resources. This was followed by research skills (71%) and professional search skills (68%). IT skills was rated at 58%, followed by Skills in conducting reference interviews(48%), Knowledge of policies, procedures, ethics and issues (42%), Managing conflict (39%), Managing new situations (29%) and Foreign languages at 10%. Considering the fact that most respondents indicated that most of the work that they do when sitting at the reference desk is carrying out catalogue

and database search for patrons, one would have expected reference interview to have been rated high since searching the catalogue and databases is preceded by the reference interview.

TABLE 3 Which of the following general skills do you consider the most important for reference librarians?

ACTIVITY	%
Professional Search skills	90%
Research skills	77%
knowledge of Information resources	74%
Skills in conducting reference interviews	68%
IT Skills	65%
Knowledge of policies, procedures, ethics and issues	52%
Managing new situations	29%
Managing conflict	23%
Foreign languages	19%

When asked about the general skills they consider important for Reference Librarians, respondents consider professional search skills the most important (90%). Other skills were rated as follows, research skills (77%), knowledge of information resources (74%), Skills in conducting reference interviews (68%), IT Skills (64%), Knowledge of policies, procedures, ethics and issues (52%). It is interesting that managing situations (29%) and managing conflict (23%) are not considered important by most respondents. Much as professional search skills and research skills have been rated as important, managing conflicts and situations is even much more important and can contribute to establishing a rapport with patrons since reference Librarians deal with people with different personalities.

TABLE 4 Which of the following technology skills do you currently have?

ACTIVITY	%
Online searching skills	100%
Social media	61%
Web design	23%
Hardware troubleshooting	19%
Software trouble shooting	13%
Web maintenance	6%

When asked about technology skills they have, all respondents indicated that they do have online search skills (100%). Social media was rated second (61%). The least rated are web design (23%), hardware troubling shooting (19%), software trouble shooting (13%) and web maintenance (6%).

TABLE 5 Which of the following technology skills do you consider the most important for reference librarians?

ACTIVITY	%
Online searching skills	100%
Social media	61%
Software trouble shooting	32%
Hardware troubleshooting	23%
Web design	19%
Web maintenance	19%

The most important technology skill for our respondents is online searching skills (100%) followed by social media (61%). Software trouble shooting (32%), Hardware troubleshooting (23%), Web design and web maintenance (19%) were rated very low. Interestingly, literature shows that changing information seeking patterns and behaviors of clients who are becoming less visible in the library, calls for Reference Librarians to not only have online searching skills but to also have computer trouble shooting and web design skills. Patrons changing information seeking patterns and behaviors calls for libraries to employ Web 2.0 tools such as Instant Messaging, blogs and many more to disseminate information and enhance services. Adopting some of the interactive technologies to engage and reach out to where our users are already interacting, calls for librarians to have skills in designing, editing, troubleshooting web based services.

TABLE 6 Which of the following personal skills do you currently have?

ACTIVITY	%
Communication skills	94%
Approachability	81%
Listening	81%
Team player	77%
Teaching and Presentation skills	71%
Adaptability / flexibility	68%
Conflict Management	45%
Stress management	42%

When asked about personal skills they have, communication skills (94%), Approachability (81%) and listening skills (81%) were rated high. Followed by team player (77%), Teaching and Presentation skills (71%) and Adaptability / flexibility (68%). Conflict management (45%) and stress management (42%). It is encouraging to note that most respondents feel that they have key personal skills namely communication skills, approachability and listening skills.

TABLE 7 Which of the following personal skills do you consider the most important for Reference Librarians?

ACTIVITY	%
Communication skills	94%
Approachability	84%
Listening	81%
Teaching and Presentation skills	74%
Adaptability / flexibility	55%
Team player	48%
Conflict Management	48%
Stress management	36%

The most important personal skill for our respondents is communication skills (94%). This is commendable because of the nature of reference work. The major component of reference work involves interaction with patrons. The next most important skills are approachability (84%) and listening skills (81%). Literature review shows that reference Librarians are expected to be approachable and interact effectively with a variety of clientele (Pellack, 2003). Hence it is commendable to note that the respondents also see these skills as vital for reference services. It is also interesting that listening (81%), teaching and presentation skills (74%) have also been rated high, skills that are essential when offering a reference service.

Respondents were asked an open ended question to indicate what they perceive as the biggest challenges of being Reference Librarians. Answers ranged from no reference interview skills, no training, multi-tasking as Librarians, being underutilized, not having adequate IT skills, constantly changing technologies to students lack of computer skills.

The other open ended question was how best reference service at the University of Botswana library can be improved. Most of the respondents indicated that training of Reference Librarians to equip them with reference service skills was crucial. This is also evident in the response they gave when asked if they were trained or inducted on how to offer reference services. Twenty nine percent (29%) indicated that they did undergo induction and training and seventy one (71%) indicated that they have never been trained or inducted. Respondents further indicated that the reference desk needs to be relocated since it is not visible, hence being underutilized. They further indicated that the design of the reference desk needs to be improved, have full time Reference Librarians and send staff to benchmark with other universities outside the country. The marketing of library reference services to students and staff was also made reference to. Taking advantage of and introducing online reference services using instant messaging, Skype, social media, sms, whatsApp was yet one of the improvements suggested.

DISCUSSION

Overall the results show that general and personal skills included in the survey received support from more than 50% of respondents, this suggest that an individual reference Librarian's general skills and attitude and personality is considered to be more important than most technical skills. Wise, Henniger, and Kennan (2011) found a similar pattern in their analysis of job advertisements for information management positions that covered a wide range of information-related work. Chawner and Oliver (2013) also found a similar pattern in their analysis of New Zealand academic Reference Librarians' current and future skills and

competencies. It is pleasing to note that respondents still view personal skills to be among the valuable skills for reference Librarians irrespective of technology having taken over.

It is worrisome to note that managing situations (29%) and managing conflict (23%) are not considered important by most respondents. Managing conflicts and situations is just as important and can contribute to establishing a rapport with patrons since Reference Librarians' deal with people with different personalities.

Results show that respondents felt that the most important technical skills would continue to be online searching and social media. This suggests that respondents expect library services to continue to shift to online delivery. Realization that social media is one of the most important technical skills implies that respondents do expect priorities to change as academic libraries become more reliant on virtual services and interactions with their clients. This finding is also supported by the responses to a question on how best reference services can be improved. The most common theme/ response in the responses was the shift to virtual communication through introducing online reference services as well as lack of IT skills with an increased need for training users and equipping them with IT/computer skills. As a result of this, reference staff will need to be equipped with IT skills to enable them to deliver quality online digital resources to meet the varied needs of the techno savvy clientele. The following responses from respondents sums it up well

> "Take advantage of and Introduce online reference services using instant messaging, Skype, social media, sms, whatsApp"

> "Not having adequate IT skills"

> "Constantly changing technologies "

> "Students lack of computer skills."

Surprisingly, respondents did not see software troubleshooting and web design as one of the important technology skills, yet in their responses they have strongly indicated that the UB Library needs to take advantage of and introduce online reference services using instant messaging, Skype, social media, sms, whatsApp etc. Introducing online reference services as suggested by respondents, calls for librarians to have skills in designing, editing, troubleshooting web based services.

Respondents also acknowledged the outreach aspect of the role of reference librarians when they noted that we need to market reference services to students and academic staff. This shows that they acknowledge that relationship building and marketing skills are becoming more important, especially in academic liaison work. A similar pattern was also found by Chawner and Oliver (2013) in their analysis of New Zealand academic Reference Librarians' current and future skills and competencies.

The other concern raised by respondents is the current positioning of the reference desk. A concern was also raised with regards to the design of the desk. Lighting in the reference area was also one of the issues. A high percentage of respondents, (71%) indicated that they have never been equipped with reference service skills. It should be noted that although respondents feel this way, they did indicate that they do have skills and that these skills are important to providing reference services. The high percentage of respondents indicating that

they have never been equipped with reference service skills may just be an indication that they need continued professional development.

CONCLUSION

In-depth analysis of responses confirmed the following

1. Seventy one percent (71%) have not undergone any induction or training to prepare them to offer reference services
2. more than 50% of respondents indicated that most of the time when sitting at the reference desk they search the catalogue, search databases and give information about the library
3. The respondents indicated that they have online search skills, Social media skills, knowledge of information sources, Research skills as well as communication skills, approachability and listening skills.(see table 2,4,6)
4. Respondents consider the skills that they do not have important in the provision of reference services (see table 3,5,7)

The reference service is a key area in the library that needs to be monitored, both by educators from a curriculum perspective and by Library Managers from training needs perspective. The importance of reference services cannot be overemphasized, as indicated in the ISO International standards, it is one of the key performance indicators used to measure library performance (ISO, 1998)

One of the most significant developments in reference services these past several years has been the emergence of the digital reference services (DRS) (Granfield and Robertson, 2008) also known as virtual reference services. Changing information seeking patterns and behavior of the clients who are becoming less visible in the library calls for reevaluating and reconsidering the manner in which the University of Botswana Library offer reference services. Responses from respondents also indicated that a lot more still needs to be done with regards to incorporating IT, the design and positioning of the reference desk as well as equipping staff with skills to improve reference services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make reference services staff professional development a priority
- Re locate and re design the reference service desk
- Take advantage of technology and Introduce virtual/ digital reference services
- Reference service staff should familiarize themselves with the existing University of Botswana Reference services Policy guidelines

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA LIBRARY

- Research on the implementation of a single service desk model, merging the circulation and reference desks
- An evaluation of reference questions handled at the reference desk to inform staffing levels at the reference desk

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