Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Development of Technology Competencies for Public Services' Staff Has Limited External Validity

A Review of:
Wong, G. K. W. (2010). Information commons help desk transactions study. *Journal of Academic Librarianship, 36*(3), 235-241.

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Abstract

Objective - To develop an understanding of the types of technology questions asked at an information commons help desk for the purposes of staffing the desk and training. Specifically, the study looked to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of assistance do users seek from the help desk?
2. How complex is it to handle the technology questions?
3. What are the key competencies desirable of the help desk staff?

Design - Qualitative analysis of transactions completed at an information commons help desk.

Setting - A medium sized academic library located in Hong Kong.

Data - 1,636 transactions completed at an information commons help desk between January 2007 and May 2009.

Methods - From the opening in 2006, the staff of the information commons help desk recorded all transactions electronically using a modified version of the open source software LibStats. The author examined the transactions for roughly the second and third weeks of each month from January 2007 to May 2009 in

an effort to determine the types of questions asked and their complexity.

Main Results - In response to question one, 86.3% of questions asked at the help desk concerned technology; the majority of those questions (76.5%) were about printing, wireless connection, and various software operation. For question two, 82% of technology questions were determined to be of the lowest tier (Tier 1) of complexity, one-third of the questions required only "direct answers," and 80% of questions could be answered consistently via the creation of a "knowledge base of answers for these foreseeable questions." For question three, a list of fourteen competencies for help desk staff were created.

Conclusion - With the low complexity of the technology questions asked, the creation of a knowledge base of common questions and answers, and proper training of staff based on the competencies identified in the study, an information commons could be effective with one integrated desk staffed by a librarian and paraprofessional staff member.

Commentary

More and more academic libraries house information commons, and even those libraries without a proper information commons still have a plethora of computers in their buildings. Technical knowledge of computers and computer software and applications has become *de rigueur* for librarians and library staff who answer questions at a public desk. This study attempts to address what technology competencies are needed for staffing a public service desk in an information commons.

The author qualitatively analyzed questions asked at an information commons help desk over a two-year span, and her methodology is lacking in several areas. Wong never explains why she chose to only examine the questions from two weeks of each month; she neglected analyzing half her data. Wong never describes how the data is analyzed (i.e., Did she use software like NVivo? Or did she analyze the questions by hand?), nor does she provide a copy of the coding chart. Wong admits determining the complexity of a question is very subjective, and she created a framework to assist her in this task; however, she gives no explanation as to what criteria she based her framework. As a result, her findings seem to be mostly opinion based on her level of computer literacy; others examining the data might come to different conclusions about the complexity of the technology questions being asked at the help desk.

At the very least, the study needed another person to examine the findings to provide some reliability. Most importantly, the study has limited applicability to other libraries. The competencies Wong developed grew from the questions patrons asked at the help desk. However, Wong works in a science and technology university in Hong Kong, and the questions her library's patrons ask may differ greatly from those asked at a small liberal arts college in the Northeast United States or a large university in Australia. In addition, technology competencies are also based on the types of software and applications a library installs on its public computers. The study does provide a model for other libraries to determine the competencies needed by their public services' staff, provided the short comings above are fixed.