

# Washington State Library (WSL) Virtual Reference

*Combining the power of libraries, librarians and technology helps regional reference demand soar*



## Situation

Washington's collaborative reference initiative launched at a time when most libraries and states were still only considering the merits, and possibilities of this type of reference service. The changes have been significant, but gradual. It began as a group of eight libraries (two academic, two special, and four public) participating as QuestionPoint pilot test libraries in 2002.

One of the early challenges included persuading librarians they could get real answers more quickly by tapping into their partner librarians in the QuestionPoint reference consortium. This challenge was met through quarterly meetings. "Because special libraries participated from the beginning—and because they have done such a splendid job fielding referred questions—accepting outside expertise has been natural," says Buff Hirko, Statewide Virtual Reference Coordinator, Washington State Library.

The single biggest change followed the merger of the 24/7 Reference cooperative reference and QuestionPoint, effectively doubling the number of QuestionPoint libraries in the state. The 24/7 Reference libraries were familiar with chat service, while the QuestionPoint reference libraries understood email service. Some of the 24/7 libraries were part of a regional cooperative in eastern Washington state two operated separately. In 2006, two new academic libraries and one new public library system were added to the chat cooperative. Together they are a complex group of libraries at different stages of implementation with widely varying experiences.

## Solution

No doubt there has been new learning along the way. First, a real appreciation for other libraries—their staffs, collections, and resources—and the benefits of differing approaches

## AT A GLANCE

### Washington State Library, Olympia, WA

- QuestionPoint Washington (QPWA) began as part
- of a statewide virtual reference project:
- In 2002, originally part of an eight-library regional
- reference pilot program
- By 2006, evolved into 21 statewide libraries using a single service platform

***"We've been very successful in creating value for libraries and patrons. Acceptance has been strong and growing."***

to reference service. Second, the potential for using QuestionPoint as a management system for all reference service. Finally, respect for the role of training for service in the online environment—nothing is more important in the provision of high-quality customer service.

Libraries continue to refer questions by e-mail to QPWA members with specialized resources (e.g. legal, health, horticultural) and, fine-tuning has occurred over time. Representatives from member libraries meet quarterly to share information, issues, and solutions. This is one of the most important benefits of membership—sharing ideas, from the "nuts and bolts" of using QuestionPoint to questions about staff scheduling, training, and more. Staff and patrons both benefit from increased hours of coverage, depth of service (language and subject expertise) and the collegiality that results from shared practices and policies.

## Results

The statewide collaborative reference initiative began as a number of grant-funded pilot projects that used different applications. Today, 21 statewide libraries

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participate on the same QuestionPoint platform, some offering 24/7 collaborative reference, and some libraries responding to patron questions through email and chat only. On balance, “We’ve been very successful in creating value for libraries and patrons. Acceptance has been strong and growing,” says Buff Hirko. It remains the goal of the Washington State Library to connect as many libraries as possible into a single shared service extending its positive effects to more libraries and communities in Washington and the Pacific Northwest.

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For more information about QuestionPoint, visit [www.oclc.org/questionpoint/](http://www.oclc.org/questionpoint/), call 1-800-848-5878 or send e-mail to [libservices@oclc.org](mailto:libservices@oclc.org).