

The U.S. Army brings worldwide library access to Soldiers on the front line

Web-based reference service helps get time-critical information to those who need it most.



Situation

In 2002, the Defense Digital Library Research Service (DDLRS) was implemented by Ann Parham, the Librarian of the Army, and is administered by Bill Hansen, Director of the Armor School Research Library. Using OCLC's QuestionPoint 24/7 Reference Service in a pilot program with the Library of Congress, the Web-based reference service was launched with 12 Army and 1 Marine Corps library as initial members.

Army librarians saw the need for a Web-based reference service that would provide worldwide support to their customers—24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. While most Soldiers do have ready access to extensive library resources, the Ask a Librarian service allows Army libraries to reach out and provide support to customers who are unable to access local resources. This includes critical support to Soldiers in remote areas, Reservists who live far from their bases, or those needing information when library services just are not available. The Army operates 365 days a year around the world. To be relevant, its library system needed to operate on the same schedule.

Today there are 20 member libraries located around the world. The consortium of libraries includes community libraries (similar to public libraries, but on military bases), academic and technical libraries. These libraries have a diverse focus, depending on their constituencies. In addition, 15 Department of Defense-based information centers lend special subject expertise and resources as needed. The DDLRS supports research and development, continuing education, undergraduate and post-graduate programs, medical centers, classroom and hands-on training on Army systems.

AT A GLANCE

- Consortium of 20 member libraries offering 24 hour, 7 day a week library access,
- 356 days a year
- 15 Army-based information support centers that lend special subject expertise
- Over 8,200 questions answered between
- 2005 and 2006

“QuestionPoint helps us make life better for Soldiers and their families.”

The DDLRS serves the information needs of active duty Soldiers, National Guard, Reservists, Army families, Army civilian employees and retired military personnel. Their mission is to provide professional, Web-based reference service to Army users anywhere, anytime, through a collaborative Web-based network of military libraries.

Solution

All Army personnel can access QuestionPoint through Army Knowledge Online (AKO), the Army's all inclusive Internet portal, from any browser. Many consortium members have a link on their library homepage such as the one at the Armor School Research Library at Fort Knox (www.knox.army.mil). For security reasons, AKO is a closed community available only to military personnel and their families. This is where the majority of its users find the link. Army librarians provide answers to questions and research guidance using OCLC's QuestionPoint reference

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service. Customers input questions that are routed into the system—the library assigned to that time period receives them. Questions are submitted by clicking on the ‘Ask a Librarian’ feature at any time of day or night. Answers are provided via e-mail. Within DDLRS, the most questions are answered by the Combined Arms Research Library (CARL) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. But many questions are also directed to librarians at Ft. Drum, NY; Ft. Hood, TX; Ft. Campbell, KY; Schofield Barracks, HI; Yongsan Korea, Heidelberg Germany and Ft. Lewis, WA, depending on the time of day. Web-based reference service allows Army library staffs to contribute to making life better for Soldiers and their families.

Libraries can make a difference in whether someone stays safe or gets hurt. Many Army library customers require access to material on restricted sites, such as those from a military Web address. Frequently soldiers with no idea where to turn for information submit questions beginning with: “I am in Iraq” or “I am in Afghanistan.” Their requests are often for official documentation such as regulations, manuals and technical orders. Much of that is available through the Web, but difficult to locate. QuestionPoint helps librarians get critical information to Soldiers in the field just by using an Internet connection. For many, the only resource available is the Internet and the Web is the only practical way to get information back to them.

The DDLRS has opened up resources at Army Libraries that are not generally available on the Internet. “QuestionPoint has allowed us to leverage paper collections the Army spent decades building. We are able to get access to these closed collections for the people who need them the most,” according to William Hansen, Director of the Armor School Research Library, Fort Knox, Kentucky. “A number of Army organizations are digitizing one-of-a-kind materials to make

them available on the net, but for now and the foreseeable future, the only access point to much of this material is the librarian and the QuestionPoint provides the link”.

Other types of questions are usually from the general public and concern topics associated with the Army. For example, “My grandfather was in a company in the 101st Airborne Division. What can you tell me about the company’s action during the Normandy Invasion?”

The transcripts of all the questions and answers have become very useful to the DDLRS. The libraries build a relevant, on-point knowledge base that covers needs specific to the Army. The majority of requests are for Army-related documentation, training, policy and history. Question and answer sets are stored for future use by librarians who save time and money when answering the same question again. “We’re not all experts on the same subject, says Connie Wiley, Librarian, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. A considerable amount of research goes into answering these questions, and this lets us build the knowledge base to preserve the information and use it again. It’s been very useful to have a globally accessible inventory of Army-specific knowledge.”

Results

Implementation of the DDLRS has been a success because it is creating visibility for libraries. Customers often have very specialized information needs. Army librarians are tied into the Department of Defense training, research and development, academic, technical and historical networks that can provide subject matter experts who are able to supply information that is not generally available. Few public librarians will ever be asked the questions that are routine in the Army library community. DDLRS helps leverage Army-specific knowledge and expertise.

For Soldiers in remote areas, the Ask a Librarian service

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becomes a lifeline where the usual resources simply don't exist. What Army librarians have to offer is the shared experience that many have with Soldiers; the knowledge of how the Army does business. Many Army librarians have had assignments at military posts overseas, in Korea, Bosnia, Kuwait, Japan, and throughout Europe. Many are from military families and a surprising number are veterans. By using their contacts in the community, and by building a specialized knowledge base, Army librarians can point Soldiers in the right direction.

QuestionPoint reference service has helped the Army libraries deliver an innovative reference communications tool wherever their customer may be located. Around the clock worldwide coverage, 365 days a year, means that Army users across the globe have relevant assistance when they need it. By participating in the consortium, the Army libraries are drawing from each other's strengths in staff, resources and technology. Librarians are also learning more about using online sources to provide quality reference service. Together they fill an important need as a conduit for information to deployed Soldiers and those without library support.

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For more information about QuestionPoint, visit www.oclc.org/questionpoint/, call 1-800-848-5878, or send e-mail to libservices@oclc.org.