Abstract Submitted to the Library Research Round Table for Possible Presentation at the American Library Association Conference, Anaheim CA, June 26-July 2, 2008.

Title: "I Find What I Need" Investigating the Behaviors and Information Seeking Preferences of Non-Users of Virtual Reference

Submitted by:

Lynn Silipigni Connaway, Ph.D. (Contact Person)
Senior Research Scientist
OCLC Programs and Research
6565 Kilgour Place
Dublin, OH 43017
303-246-3623
connawal@oclc.org

Marie L. Radford, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies
4 Huntington Street
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
732-932-7500 x8233
mradford@scils.rutgers.edu

Timothy Dickey, Ph.D.
Post Doctoral Researcher
OCLC Programs and Research
6565 Kilgour Place
Dublin, OH 43017
dickeyt@oclc.org

Jocelyn A. DeAngelis Williams, Ph.D. Candidate
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies
4 Huntington Street
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Jocelyn.scils@rutgers.edu

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www.oclc.org/research/projects/synchronicity/resources/lrrt2008-proposal.pdf

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Abstract (487 words)

Problem Statement and Significance

Why do some people choose to use library services and systems, while others find alternative resources to satisfy their information needs? Little of the library and information science (LIS) literature directly addresses this question, although finding the answer is crucial in order to attract new users and to retain current ones. This research project is among the first to take an in-depth look at the non-users of virtual reference services (VRS). It includes four phases: 1) focus group interviews, 2) online surveys, 3) individual telephone interviews, and 4) VRS chat transcript analysis. This paper will discuss what has been learned about VRS non-users from phases 1-3 with regard to how they meet information needs, why they choose resources other than VRS, what features attract them to these other resources, and what might influence them to try VRS.

Objectives:
- Elicit points of view of VRS non-users especially regarding their information-seeking preferences and behaviors.
- Develop research-based recommendations for LIS education, reference practice, development and sustainability of VRS.

Method

This project features a unique combination of qualitative and quantitative data gathering techniques and a nation-wide sample. Four focus group interviews with forty non-users of VRS were conducted between November 2005 and May 2006. One hundred eighty-four non-users completed online surveys from June through August 2007 and 100 telephone interviews will be completed by March 2008. Building on the results of the focus groups, the surveys and telephone interviews have been designed to collect demographic and quantitative data. In addition, open ended questions are gathering qualitative data through the use of the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954).

Preliminary Results

The screenagers (Rushkoff 1996), the younger members of the Millennial Generation, ages 12-18, and graduate students who participated in the non-user focus groups preferred face-to-face (FtF) interactions, yet reported feeling "embarrassed" about asking librarians for clarification. They also worried about privacy and security issues surrounding chat services. They preferred FtF interactions because of the personal relationships they had developed with individual librarians. They also like to be independent information seekers, trust Google, and have confidence in their searching and evaluation skills. A friend's or trusted librarian's recommendation might entice them to try VRS.

Online surveys confirmed that FtF reference service is popular with non-users. Although they also believed that the FtF format contributed to a successful experience, many remained open to the potential benefits of VRS. Simple lack of awareness of the service, the perception that the VRS librarian is too busy, lack of confidence in the chat librarian's subject expertise, and lack of faith in computer-mediated communication were leading reasons for non-use.

Conclusion

This project is in progress and the final phase, including 100 telephone interviews with non-users, is on schedule for completion in March 2008. Based on the research findings, the authors will discuss implications and provide practical recommendations for LIS education and for development, promotion, growth, and ultimately - the sustainability of VRS.

Cited References:

Flanagan, J. C. (1954). The critical incident technique. *Psychological Bulletin, 5*, 327-358.

Rushkoff, D. (1996). *Playing the future: What we can learn from digital kids*. NY: Harper Collins.