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Reference and Information Services joint with Information Technology

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Technology that Enables, Services that Empower

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Abstract:

Before 2016, the Library offered two different information desks: one for general/circulation enquiry and one for reference enquiry. The problem at that time was quite glaring: we were to open a new library branch, and if we replicated the information desks, we would have ended up with 4 different information desks, causing constraints in human resources and logistics.

The solution seemed obvious: to merge the information desks into a single desk, hence cutting down the needs for staffing. The implementation, however, was not that straightforward. Staff who used to manage circulation enquiry were not comfortable with reference enquiry, and vice versa. Upskilling and training might answer some of the problems, but it was unrealistic to expect everyone to become jack-of-all-trade.

Technology, deployed strategically and used thoughtfully, really assisted the desk merging process. We merged various library's email accounts into a single account and streamlined the email management. Skype for Business was used as synchronous communication tool, hence staff at desk would always have support and escalation points. To simplify statistics collection, we switched from various Excel and Access forms, to a simple Gimlet form. We utilized Springshare's LibGuides and LibFAQ as knowledge bank, and used LibStaffer to create an online desk roster.

These technologies were easy to implement and relatively easy to use. Once staff got used to these technologies, it was much simpler to move forward together. Recently, we have started offering info/reference chat service. This service did not go well in the past, and one of the reasons was the apprehension from staff when dealing with chat technology and handling questions that they might not be able to answer. Now, staff are accustomed to Skype and chat, and fully aware on how to manage and escalate questions while maintaining an excellent service level.

Keywords: reference services, library desk, user friendly technology, tiered desk

Back in 2015, the Library of Singapore Management University was a relatively small-medium size library with 30+ staff, serving around 6,000 full-time-equivalent students. Information services were offered online (through emails), appointment (research consultations) and walk-ins or phones (information desks). Two information desks were available at that time: the Services Desk that manages general/circulation enquiries and Reference Desk that manages reference enquiries. All the activities and collections were housed in a single library building called Li Ka Shing Library.

The change came in a form of a new library building. The Kwa Geok Choo Law Library was scheduled to operate in January 2017. If we were to provide the same level of services, we would have to manage four different information desks, over-stretching the resources and logistics.

The simplest solution seemed to be streamlining the information services: merging the desks and reducing the needs for more human resources.

As expected, changes were not easy to implement. Therefore, prior to the implementation, a series of workshops was conducted and it involved all library staff who manage the information desks. The workshops were not merely discussions or meetings, rather, they were used as a platform to formulate a single desk concept that worked best for staff and users. Everyone in the workshop used the opportunity to highlight possibilities, express concerns and possible risk, and contribute to the single desk concept.

By the end of the workshops, it was apparent that the single desk concept requires a shift in way-of-thinking and approach. The three points below highlighted the shifts.

1. One team: Get the buy-in

The merged desk was not a novel approach. Buss (2016) highlighted several common approaches such as tiered-reference - where physical library services are merged, roving reference, and embedded librarians.

The team, however, had some genuine concerns. Paraprofessionals who managed circulation enquiry were not comfortable with reference enquiry, and vice versa. Training and professional development might somewhat address the issue, but it was unrealistic to expect everyone to become a jack-of-all-trades.

Moreover, the management had to be convinced that paraprofessionals were not "filling-in" the reference librarians, and the merged desk was not "downgrading" the librarians to handling transactional queries only.

2. Scaffold: More than tiered support

The workshops suggested a best possible approach: a tiered-desk approach where everyone attempted any type of queries to their best abilities and appetites. There were sets of basic expectations for paraprofessionals and librarians. However, they could attempt all kind of queries that might be beyond the level of expectations.

An 'on-call' roster was created as a point of escalation, an email escalation structure was formed, and Skype for Business chat was introduced as quick and easy escalation tool. The message was clear: "Sure, you could and should try your best to manage queries at Desk, and there's always a support available."

As the result, the boundaries between types of query seemed to fade. After the implementation, it was heartening to see how the team was willing to learn from each other, asking and willingly gave support. This resulted in fewer hand-overs and less wrong-door scenarios.

3. Technology: Simplify

When the workshops started, the first question was about the various technologies and work processes that have been in place for a long time.

In order to initiate changes, it was important to acknowledge the emotional attachment to existing technology and familiar processes (McGurthy, 2016).

Taking stock of the existing technologies revealed multiple versions of technology with similar functionalities:

- Three user-facing email addresses, each with its own escalation and archival approach
- Two staff rosters, in Word Document and Excel, with two different operating hours
- Three systems for frequently-asked-questions (FAQ): Sharepoint, Sharedrive and Springshare's LibAnswer.
- Two interfaces for desk-statistics-collection: Excel and Gimlet

The situation was eerily similar to what McGurthy (2016) described as "a kitchen with three different blenders". Did we need them all? Could we do with less and obtain more productivity and efficiency?

Consolidation and simplification were needed. The objective was not only to consolidate the technology platforms but also to choose and implement user-friendly yet effective platforms:

- One email address, with folders for escalation. Auto-redirect was applied to email addresses that were made redundant.
- One staff roster, using LibStaffer, an online roster system that could synchronize itself with staff calendar.
- One system for frequently-asked-question, using LibAnswer (we branded it as LibFAQ). The system could be compartmentalized into public and internal FAQs.
- One point of recording desk-statistics, using Gimlet.

Besides the consolidated platforms, the team also agreed to fully utilize the existing platforms;

- LibGuides from Springshare (we branded it as ResearchGuides) as a knowledge bank and research starting point.
- Skype for Business as a messenger tool for quick and easy escalation/support.

Assessment

After the staff has agreed to work as one desk team, comfortable enough to try the tiered-desk model and willing to let go some processes and embraced new processes/technologies, the implementation began in late 2015.

To assess the impact of the merged-desk on services, we took a few measurements from Library Survey. The SMU Libraries has been routinely conducting Library Survey to measure the level of user satisfaction. In 2013 and 2015, the Library used LibQual survey. In 2018, the Library used InSync survey.

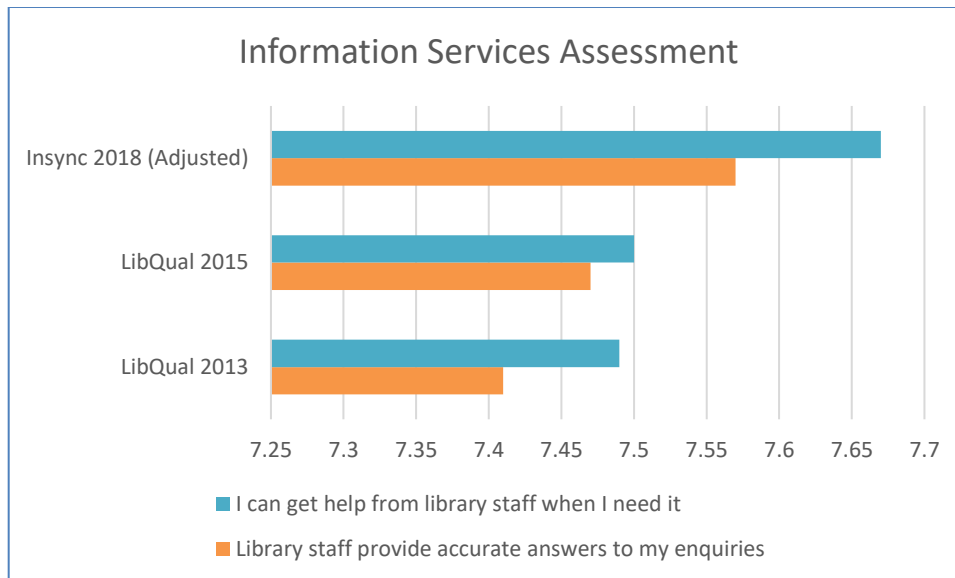


Fig. 1 Library Survey results on information services

The 2013 and 2015 surveys took place prior to merged-desk, whereas the 2018 survey took place after the merged-desk. As the assessment showed, the merged-desk did not impact services in a negative way. Library users (students, faculty and staff) found library's information services performed very well, and Library has been able to maintain that performance even after the merged-desk.

Moving Forward

As Steven Bell (Watstein & Bell, 2008) rightly pointed, "Eliminating or de-emphasizing the desk does not eliminate the service." We should be focusing on developing new models and modes of delivering information and reference services, not eliminating it.

The workshops, the merged-desk implementation, and the assessment afterwards created an empowered service model. Paraprofessionals and Librarians were given opportunities to explore and step out of their comfort zone while having full support from each other.

The technologies used were geared towards self-service, enabling library users to get assistance at their point of needs. On the other hand, the physical desk also benefitted from

the consolidated technologies that enabled staff to focus on the users and queries, rather than the intricacies of systems and processes.

After the merged-desk has run for about one year, the desk team was exploring real-time chat services. This service did not work well in the past, and one of the reasons was exactly similar to what we encountered during the workshops: staff were not comfortable with certain types of enquiry and not sure how to escalate. Probably a clunky technology also played a part in getting staff' buy-in. However, this time around, the chat services seemed to be perceived as just a common type of services – everyone was accustomed to escalation process and the technology was much simpler this time (we utilized LibChat from Springshare).

So, what's next? The service model would continue to evolve. We started developing and upskilling the student assistants who assisted at the Desk. The non-peak period could be assigned to student assistants and library staff could focus on more value-added tasks. One of those value-added initiatives that we are experimenting is embedded-librarian, where librarians make themselves available in school and bring the library's services closer to faculty.

We are now collaborating with another department on campus to pilot chat-bot services. We are also exploring ideas on online payment, interactive directional signage, and other technologies and tools that enable users to perform self-service and enhance their user experience.

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