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Get Your Virtual Reference Skills Through L-Net

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by Emily Papagni
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Areas with growth potential in librarianship

Management and budgeting—even if these areas aren't in your usual duties, people retire, there's turnover and colleagues go on sabbatical—you never know when a librarian will be asked to step up to the plate. When this occurs, it's best to train in these areas so that you have more confidence in completing these tasks. If you can't get this training at your current position, this is where working on a committee in a professional association can give you experience in planning, budgeting, bylaws, board work (incl. fiscal and legal issues) and networking.

—HELEN H. SPALDING
University Librarian/
Professor, Portland State
University Library

You could be a new librarian who is struggling to build strong reference skills and experience in order to get your first library job or you could be an experienced reference librarian working to keep your reference skills fresh while you're facing the challenges of staying on top of the latest technology developments. In either case, developing virtual reference skills will help you and L-net is a place to do it.

What is L-net

L-net, Oregon's virtual reference service, connects patrons with librarians 24/7 via live chat and e-mail. The service has made a tremendous impact on reference services throughout the state. L-net continues to grow its capacity to provide services as more librarians join in, either as library staff or volunteers. The service celebrated its fifth year anniversary this past spring. In these five years, the service has worked towards two goals. The first is to make reference service through online chat and e-mail available to all Oregon citizens, students, and workers. The second goal is to give Oregon librarians the opportunity to develop virtual reference skills.

Why should I care about virtual reference skills?

The second goal of building virtual reference skills often improves a librarian's ability to get a job and to keep a job. Over 100 Oregon librarians from 36 libraries currently staff L-net. Many of them have said that they think of staffing L-net as a form of job enrichment and that they get a sense of professional satisfaction from staffing the service.

Library managers have noticed this enrichment in their staff and would like it to be even more widespread in hopes that all Oregon reference librarians will eventually have virtual reference skills.

Barbara Jenkins, head of reference and instruction at the University of Oregon Libraries, comments on the need for virtual reference skills:

> When I hire, I look for candidates who are aware of the issues in the changing reference landscape (in fact, the job description now lists it as a requirement). If they are familiar with virtual reference, it means that they are usually willing to rethink traditional perceptions of what reference means and be flexible enough to work in a constantly evolving environment.

For library staff who have experienced a decline in walk-in reference questions, L-net offers an opportunity to build relationships with patrons in new ways and answer questions that are increasingly complex. Matthew Yake, a library assistant at Multnomah County Library, shares:

> My feeling is that providing reference via services like L-net is a way of keeping libraries relevant in a changing world … As a reference worker it's my belief that we must meet our patrons where they are and working with L-net is most certainly a part of the process of information access continuing to expand beyond the library's physical boundaries … I very much look forward to L-net being a source of more challenging reference work.

In addition to the librarians who staff L-net at partner libraries, the service also has a group of volunteers. Most L-net volunteers don't have the option of staffing the service at a library either because they work at a library that is not an L-net partner library or their library participates at a limited level. Some volunteers work at

libraries part-time or on-call or are retired librarians. Most volunteers staff L-net from home computers.

Hillary Garrett, who is currently the Reference/Public Relations Librarian at McMinnville Public Library, began staffing L-net as a volunteer:

> As a relatively new Oregonian, volunteering for L-net was the perfect way to meet librarians and learn about all the various services our libraries provide. I now work an L-net shift as part of my paid position, and I believe volunteering for L-net set me apart from other applicants.
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> Being a part of L-net has connected me to other librarians, some in Oregon, some in other states—I love getting to see what other libraries are doing! My L-net experience has been a talking point at job interviews, library functions, and even my kickball games (seriously). Getting involved with L-net should be a top priority for librarians, if not to improve your virtual reference skills, at least to promote how cool Oregon libraries are.

The demand for live reference services through online chat continues to grow. As patrons' lives shift, there is more of an expectation among patrons that services, including library reference services, will be available 24/7. Traffic on L-net has grown 30 percent in each of the last two years. Since its inception, L-net has answered over 70,000 reference questions. This growing demand from patrons for the service indicates the need for more librarians for whom virtual reference is a core skill.

Practice those reference skills

When librarians talk about how developing virtual reference skills makes them better librarians, they often say that their virtual reference skills have improved their face-to-face reference skills. This is especially true for the skill of conducting a thorough reference interview. Because L-net librarians don't have the visual and auditory cues that librarians have while helping a patron at an information desk, there is a strong need to conduct a reference interview to clarify the question. L-net librarians also value reference interviews because the interview is one of the things that distinguishes us from other online resources—Google can't perform a reference interview. No search engine can understand the context of a reference question and find appropriate resources to answer the question within that context. Librarians say that this skill has made them more aware of how to do a comprehensive reference interview while working with patrons in their libraries.

L-net keeps copies of all chat transcripts (scrubbed of any information that might identify a patron) and L-net librarians are encouraged to read one another's transcripts. Doing so gives insight into techniques for communicating online with patrons and also helps librarians to be more aware of the various tools available for answering specific reference questions.

Being a collaborative service goes a long way towards making us all feel connected as a library community. In addition to reading one another's transcripts and learning new techniques for providing reference service online, L-net librarians stay connected via our listserv and our annual Summit conference. L-net recently published the "Field Guide to Oregon Libraries," which highlights the resources and subject specialists at our partner libraries. It's one more tool to help us stay in touch and feel connected with our colleagues around the state.

L-net also offers librarians the opportunity to work with types of patrons that

Advice for new librarians

Constantly question (perhaps mostly to yourself!) the way things are done the way they are in your library. See if the answer benefits your users. If it doesn't, think of a new way to do things. Repeat.

—AARON SCHMIDT,
Director,
North Plains Public Library

they would not normally assist inside their libraries. Librarians at public, academic, and school libraries get to experience working with one another's users and reference topics that they would normally not experience from working with their local patrons.

Hopes and dreams for L-net

As part of our goal to help librarians develop virtual reference skills, L-net is switching to different software in Fall 2008. The new software for chat is based on instant messaging. It has the potential to incorporate text messaging and other forms of communication in the future. The librarian's interface will be much simpler than what L-net librarians have used previously. We expect that this will eliminate a barrier for many. The software will be easy to learn and easy to use. L-net is partnering with the Cleveland Public Library and Ohio's KnowItNow

service to develop the software and provide the service. Besides being a statewide service, L-net will offer our software as a utility to Oregon libraries that would like to use the software to serve their own patrons through a local chat service.

Our hope is that as many librarians as possible will be able to participate in staffing L-net. The simpler interface will make it easier for librarians to get involved with the statewide service and become virtual reference librarians.

As Caleb Tucker-Raymond, Oregon statewide digital reference project coordinator, said, "The world keeps turning. Exploring new models and modes for reference service helps us understand how and why and to provide better library service all around."

Ready to get involved?

Librarians and library school students with reference experience may apply to be L-net volunteers by sending a resume and two references to the L-net Partner Support Librarian at emilyp@multcolib.org. The complete volunteer job description is available at http://www.oregonlibraries. net/volunteers. To learn more about what librarians have to say about their experience staffing L-net, http://www.oregonlibraries. net/joining/testimonials.

All Oregon libraries are invited to become L-net partner libraries. Information on partnering is available at http://www. oregonlibraries.net/joining/responsibilities. By participating, you will be serving your own patrons in a new way and collaborating with other Oregon librarians. In addition, your new virtual reference skills could help you land a different job or help you answer questions at your own reference desk with a new set of tools and a renewed enthusiasm for reference service. ❧