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Want to Make Your Website Better? Ask a Librarian.

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Raise your hand if you have served on a committee in your library. If your hand isn't raised, just give it some time ... libraries definitely like committee work. For instance, I recently had the opportunity to work with a committee consisting mostly of librarians. When the committee's goals were accomplished, my non-librarian coworker commented that "Librarians sure have a lot of opinions."

Since this article is about usability testing, and is written by and for librarians, let's test his hypothesis. Let's also test a few other hypotheses about librarians while we're at it. (Disclaimer: In this article, "librarians" include staff who work in libraries, and has nothing to do with degrees or job classifications.)

Washington County Cooperative Library Services (WCCLS) is a Cooperative of 13 member libraries and two special libraries, each uniquely governed and operated. WCCLS is a primary funding source for member libraries, and our WCCLS "Office" provides other support such as daily courier deliveries, cataloging coordination, and e-book collections. The WCCLS website and Extranet are two other ways the WCCLS Office supports member libraries in Washington County. The WCCLS Extranet is a repository of policies, procedures, and committee meeting documents. It also includes training and promotional materials for WCCLS resources, as well as opportunities for sharing ideas.

Hypothesis #1: Librarians have a lot of opinions.

Nod your head if you agree. Shake your head if you disagree. (If you're shaking your head vigorously, you might want to reconsider your answer.)

Full disclosure: I have been a librarian for 18 years. My current WCCLS job title includes the word "librarian," but my day-to-day work focuses on duties related to being half of a two-woman web team. In the past two years, the web team has rebuilt our public



website (www.wccls.org) and our staff Extranet from scratch. These rebuilding processes included usability testing, including gathering opinions and ideas from member library staff.

In rebuilding our public website, we conducted usability testing, with staff and with our patrons. (For full details, read this article from *The Active Librarian*, <http://bit.ly/2iTpdPb>. [Trice, 2015]) In our usability testing, we learned that our member library staff are thrilled to give opinions whenever asked. Each time we've requested responses to surveys, click tests, or card sorts, we have been amazed at how many library staff members share their valuable time and insights with us. For example, the staff survey we sent at the beginning of our Extranet rebuild process had 98 responses, which is almost a quarter of all staff across the county, and approximately a third of Extranet users.

Those 98 opinions told us that what staff liked least about our previous version of the Extranet was the navigation (40%) and search ability (28%). Based on that survey, our mission for the new Extranet was clear: make the new version better organized, and make it easier to find things.

VERDICT: *True.* Never argue with a librarian; they know too much.

Hypothesis #2: Librarians are good at organizing things.

But just how do you organize over 1,000 pages and 3,000 files? Through usability testing! We conducted two types of usability testing to wrangle Extranet content, with the expert aid of librarians at our side. Our cooperative structure means our Extranet holds a unique blend of documents and materials that are tricky to categorize. Part of that difficulty comes from nomenclature. The WCCLS Office might use different names for things than our individual member libraries, and we wanted to find out how member library staff would group and name content.

To accomplish this, we used a kind of usability testing called “card sorts.” In a card sort, participants look at sample content from across a website written on physical cards or the online equivalent. They place the sample content into groups and give names to each grouping. We used the online product Optimal Sort to gather responses for two different card sorts. (See figure 1.)

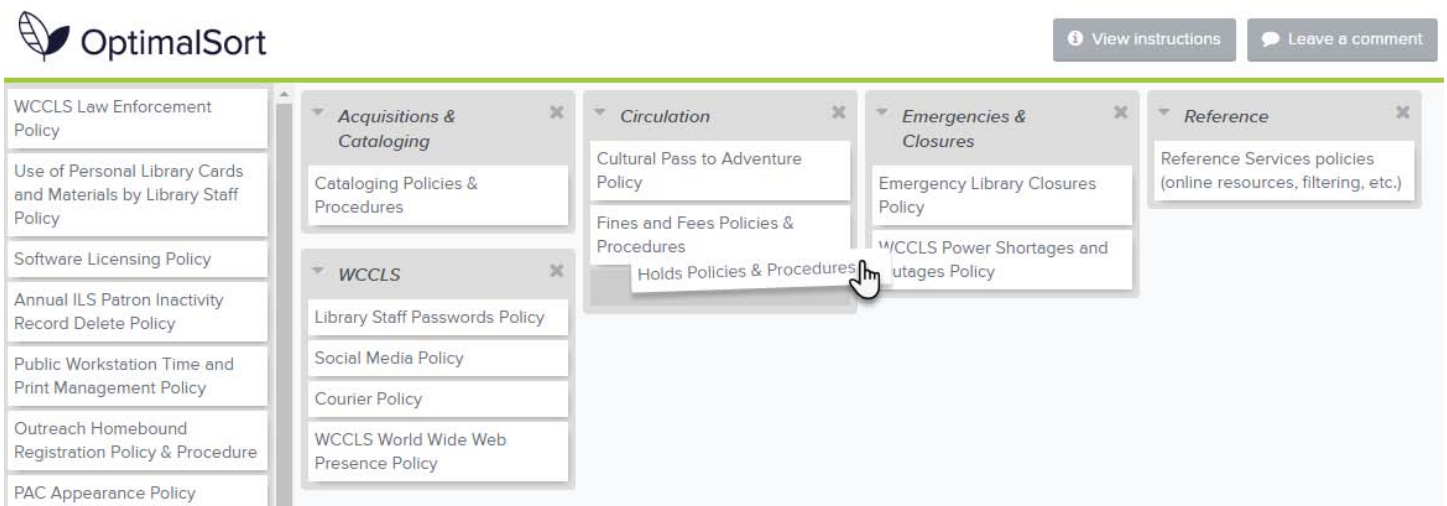


Figure 1

One card sort focused only on Policies and Procedures. Since we have so many P&Ps, we wanted to simplify the categories to help people find the one they need without being overwhelmed. The second card sort focused on any other content on the Extranet—everything from Wi-Fi statistics to storykit information. Twenty-seven brave souls completed this tough exercise for us. Their work helped us reduce the Policy & Procedure categories to five, and helped us create categories for an actual menu on the new Extranet for easier navigation.

Our next round of usability testing was designed to assess our initial groupings and menu names. We had 50 participants in the click test, which is just what it sounds like. Participants click an image of a website or menu to show where they would look for sample content. (See figure 2.) We used a companion online product called Chalkmark to gather responses and help with analysis. The results of this test showed us how to improve our menu names, as well as where we needed to move content from one menu area to another. Sometimes the needed changes were blatantly obvious once we did click testing. For example, we moved the “how to write meeting minutes” guide to the Agendas & Minutes menu area.

VERDICT: *True.* Librarians have novel classification skills.

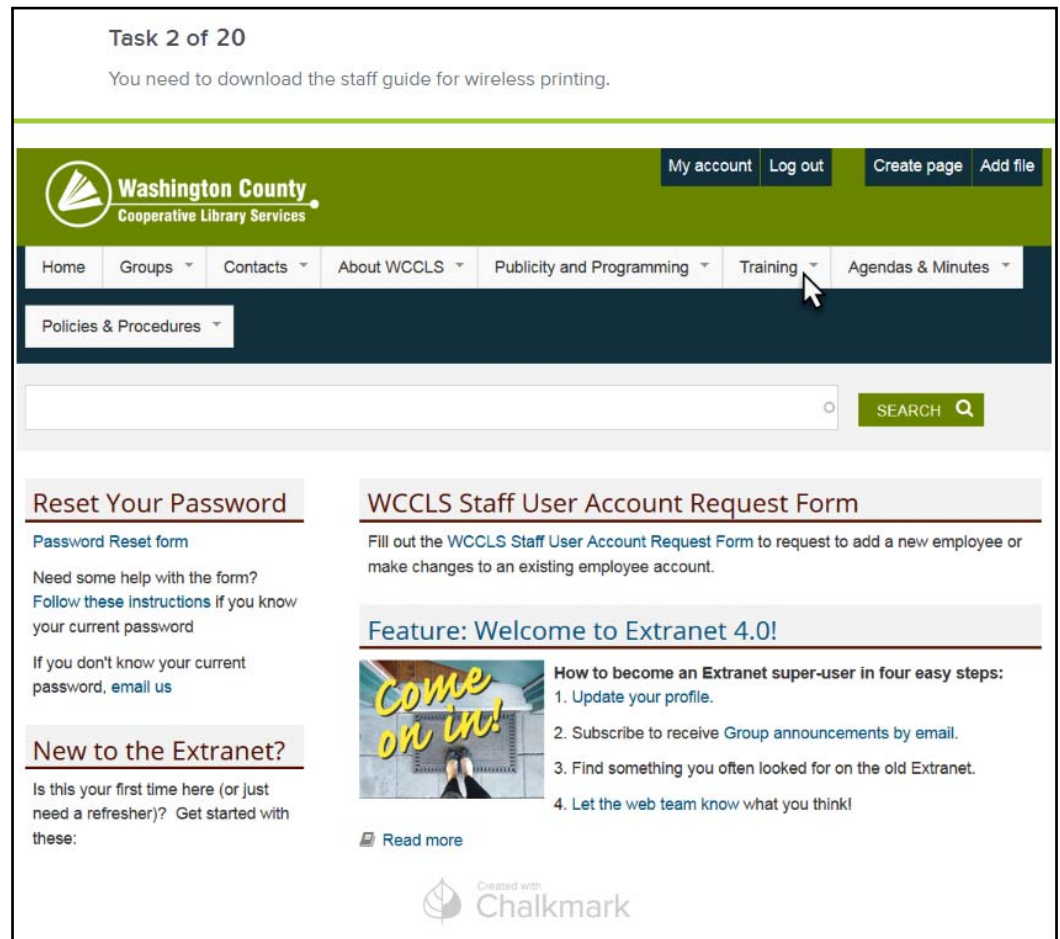


Figure 2



Hypothesis #3: Librarians are expert searchers.

At this point in our development process, we were confident that our navigation menu was ready for staff to use. But what about searching? About half of our survey participants shared that they prefer to search instead of navigate Extranet menus, but many also shared that the search wasn't working the way they expected it to.

We decided to do “rocket surgery” usability testing to test search functionality. Usability testing guru Steve Krug outlines exactly how to conduct this type of do-it-yourself live usability testing in his book *Rocket Surgery Made Easy* (2010). DIY testing is most helpful for sites that are well developed and in need of fine tuning. Research shows that 80 percent of a website's problems can be found by only five testers, a small recruitment for big returns! (Nielsen, 2000)

We developed a set of 20 search scenarios around content people search for on the Extranet. For example, “You are working on programming for your library and need demographic information for your area of Washington County,” or “You need to review the Cultural Pass policy in preparation for a meeting.” During testing, we used a laptop that recorded mouse clicks and voice through QuickTime. After the introductory script adapted from Krug's book, a facilitator read each search scenario and asked the participant to think out loud while searching. Each session took approximately one hour. The web team watched each of these recordings later, pausing to take notes in a spreadsheet and talk about potential solutions to issues found. Watching the recordings took approximately two hours each.

One observation we had during the testing is that librarians seem to learn how to search interfaces by searching. By examining their search terms and results, our testers intuitively adjusted their search strategies to get better results the next time.

VERDICT: *True.* Librarians are the original search engine.

Hypothesis #4: Librarian opinions should always be followed.

Conducting only a handful of live usability sessions gave us sizable results. In fact, we made a total of 39 changes to the Extranet based on the feedback of five people. Some changes were small, like changing page names for clarity or cross-linking between content. Some changes were big, such as adding new content we didn't know was needed or changing the order of sort and facet search options. We focused on search ability for our live sessions, but the usability benefits we gained were not limited to search improvements. In particular, the Extranet homepage was simplified with the addition of call to action buttons, such as “Change your password.” Additionally, the homepage content was re-ordered to match the information needs of staff testers.

The staff feedback we received after launching the new Extranet was quite positive. Without asking specifically about the two big pain points from the “before” survey (navigation and search), our “after” survey shows that many staff mention findability as what they like most about the new Extranet. (View staff comments as a word cloud in figure 3.)

VERDICT: *True.* Librarians have thousands of right answers ... if only people would ask the right questions.



In summary, all of our librarian hypotheses are true. However, librarian opinions are largely untapped in the realm of library web presences. Perhaps it's time to launch some usability testing for staff in your library ... who knows what you'll learn!

Want to share your opinion about this article? Please send me an email. I would enjoy hearing from you. 

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Figure 3

