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Evaluation of a Library Outreach Program to Research Labs

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to conduct an outcomes-based evaluation of the National Cancer Institute-Frederick (NCI-F) Scientific Library's Laptop Librarian service, where librarians took a laptop and spent time in research buildings. The authors used statistics from the Laptop Librarian sessions, a NCI-F community-wide online survey, and in-person interviews to evaluate the service. The Laptop Librarian service increased the accessibility of librarians and saved patrons' time. Users gained useful information and expressed overall satisfaction with the service. The Laptop Librarian service proves to be a useful means for increasing access to librarians and providing users with necessary information at this government research facility.

Keywords

Government libraries; Laptop Librarian service; library outreach; outcomes-based evaluation; outreach services; research libraries

INTRODUCTION

Electronic access to journals, books, and databases makes it easy for researchers to get the literature they need from the comfort of their own office or lab. Therefore, fewer people are leaving their research buildings and venturing out to other locations, such as the library. To support these technological times, yet still provide easy access to librarians, the National Cancer Institute-Frederick (NCI-F) Scientific Library, operated by Wilson Information Services Corporation under contract with NCI, implemented the Laptop Librarian service. The idea behind this service was to make librarians more accessible and visible to researchers and to help ensure that researchers were getting the most out of library resources available to them.

Many academic libraries have started providing reference services outside the physical library. In 2006, Saint Louis University began a mobile reference program for their School of Public Health, and they found that "onsite reference services have strengthened the relationship between the public health users and the library."¹ Many libraries, especially academic libraries, have been exploring the concept of mobile librarians.^{1–3} A 2004 survey

conducted by the Association of Research Libraries found that 55% of survey respondents (41 of 75) had at least tried offering in-person library services in locations outside of the physical library.⁴

BACKGROUND

NCI-F, the nation's only Federally Funded Research and Development Center devoted solely to biomedical research, is located within Fort Detrick, a U. S. Army base in Frederick, Maryland. This campus consists of numerous government buildings on the military base plus several locations outside the gates of Fort Detrick. The NCI-F Scientific Library supports the diverse information needs of over 3,000 employees involved in preclinical laboratory discovery, technology development, and clinical trials in search of new preventions, diagnoses, and treatments for cancer, AIDS, and other diseases.

In the fall of 2008, the Scientific Library implemented a Laptop Librarian service, bringing librarians to buildings other than the library. To narrow down locations, two librarians scouted buildings, looking for appropriate places for a Laptop Librarian to set up. Building 560 was the first location and therefore served as a pilot case. It was chosen because it had a highly visible, high-traffic location in which to set up. In addition, this location did not need to be reserved. Before arriving at the current regularly scheduled time at Building 560, several different days and times were tried. Times at other locations were selected based on room availability, as they are held in conference rooms that must be reserved.

Expansion to other buildings began after a month of offering the Laptop Librarian service in Building 560. As of now, the Laptop Librarian service is offered at four locations, two on the Fort Detrick campus and two outside the Fort Detrick gates. The service at the off-site locations began as resource presentations followed by open time for questions and evolved into sessions similar to those at the on-campus locations.

During each Laptop Librarian session, a librarian with a laptop computer and wireless Internet connection is present at a specified location. The librarian is then available to answer questions about library resources and services. Candy was provided at the first few sessions of each new location to encourage people to stop by and learn about the service. Signs are placed at the location during each session to make people aware of the librarian's presence. At times it is necessary for the librarian to go to a patron's desk to answer a question, especially if it involves a resource such as EndNote®. In situations like this, the librarian takes the laptop and leaves a sign to indicate that she will return soon. Generally though, the librarian will attempt to hold these questions until the end of the session and then visit the patron to avoid leaving the Laptop Librarian site vacant.

Prior to the start of the service at each location, announcements were sent via a community-wide e-mail list. Announcements were also sent if the schedule needed to be changed for any given session. These messages promoted not only the new or adjusted location, but also reminded patrons about the other locations. Librarians promoted the service and the library via five-minute presentations at lab meetings. Flyers about the Laptop Librarian service were distributed on campus.

According to a survey by the Association of Research Libraries in 2004, very few libraries had conducted formal evaluations of their remote reference services and 20% had actually done no evaluation at all.⁴ However, the Scientific Library wanted to evaluate its service to determine if it was successful and to support its continuation or disbandment. This service was offered in a government research organization, not an academic environment; therefore, it was important to determine the success of using such a service in a working research

environment, rather than a student-focused academic environment. To evaluate the success of the Laptop Librarian service, an outcomesbased evaluation was conducted.

EVALUATION METHODS

Survey

Using SurveyMonkey, an online survey was developed and distributed to the NCI-F community (see the Appendix). The survey was left open for a total of two weeks and two days, during which time two e-mails containing the link to the survey were sent out via a community-wide listserv. In addition, the link to the survey was placed on the NCI-F Scientific Library's home page. The purpose of the survey was to gauge familiarity and satisfaction with the service. Therefore, it contained questions about knowledge and convenience of the service, in addition to satisfaction with the service. Certain questions were automatically skipped based on whether or not a person had used the service.

Interviews

Six interviews were conducted for this study. This number was chosen to ensure representation by at least one patron from each location, in addition to being based on availability of interviewees. Interviewees were all NCI-F employees who had used the service at least once. Two librarians were present at each interview; one librarian was the primary person asking questions, and the other librarian was the primary note taker. Interviews were conducted at a place of the interviewee's choosing, whether in their office or in the Scientific Library. All interviews were audio recorded to help with note taking. The collective group of interviewees represented every location currently visited by the Laptop Librarians.

At the beginning of each interview, a short statement was read to the interviewee explaining the purpose and process of the interview. In addition, each interviewee signed a consent form agreeing to be interviewed and recorded. Interviews were short, lasting only 10 to 20 minutes.

Analysis

Each information-seeking interaction during all Laptop Librarian sessions was recorded in an Excel spreadsheet with its date and location. Therefore, it was easy to calculate the total number of interactions experienced during Laptop Librarian sessions, along with averages.

SurveyMonkey, the online survey tool used in the outcomes-based evaluation, does a certain amount of analysis for the user. Therefore, statistics for each survey question were readily available using their software.

After each interview, the note taker transcribed the interview using his or her handwritten notes and the recorded audio. Each interviewer then individually coded each interview transcript to identify outcomes. Next, the interviewers met and discussed their individual coding of the interviews. Eventually the interviewers agreed on common outcomes found throughout the interviews and on the data supporting each outcome.

STATISTICAL AND SURVEY RESULTS

Statistics

From September 29, 2008 through December 10, 2009, the Laptop Librarians averaged 1.39 interactions per session (see Table 1). A session is considered to be the individual period of time spent at a location on a given day. Session length is one to two hours depending on

location. An interaction is a contact with a patron that includes some discussion of a library resource or service or of the patron's research or information needs. For the time frame involved in this study, there were 126 sessions and 175 interactions.

Survey

Thirty-one people completed the survey that was distributed to the NCI-F community (approximately 3,000 people) via e-mail. Of these 31 respondents, 90.3% (28 of 31) had heard of the Laptop Librarian service and 29% (9 of 31) had actually used the service. All nine users found the service to be convenient, and they were all satisfied with the information they received during their interaction with the Laptop Librarian. When asked, "What benefit did you receive from this service?," 66.7% (6 of 9) said that the service saved them time, 55.6% (5 of 9) suggested the service was convenient, and 88.9% (8 of 9) said that they gained information from their interaction with a Laptop Librarian (see Figure 1). Most people, 88.9% (16 of 18) of respondents, said that they did not use the service because they had no questions to ask, whereas 27.8% (5 of 18) answered this question by choosing the option that the Laptop Librarian was not in their building.

OUTCOMES DETERMINED FROM EVALUATION

Accessibility of Librarians

Many users commented on the convenience of having the librarian right there in their building, saving them the effort of having to walk to another building (see Table 2). For the off-site locations, they have to travel further and go through a security checkpoint to get to the library, so they are even less likely to make this effort. Several of the interviewees used the Laptop Librarian service, but said that they rarely, if ever, go to the actual library. Therefore, this service provided them an opportunity to have a one-on-one personal interaction with a librarian that they otherwise would not have made the effort to have.

Since the Laptop Librarian is scheduled at regular times in the same location, users know to expect the librarian. Therefore, when they have questions, they know they can simply walk down the hall and ask the librarian. In addition, some users talked about walking by the librarian on their way to the bathroom or getting water, making them aware of the librarian's presence and accessibility. This service increased accessibility of librarians to members of the NCI-F community.

Saving Time

Users of the service were quick to suggest that the Laptop Librarian saved them time (see Table 2). Although walking between buildings may not seem like much, researchers tend to be short on time and highly focused on their work, making every second count. Therefore, having the librarian in the same building saves time. One user commented that he or she had asked the librarian a question but the librarian needed more information, which the user had in the lab, to find the answer. The user was able to simply walk down the hall, get the information, and walk back, all in a matter of several minutes. If the user had to walk to and from the library building, it would have taken much more time. It is true that the patrons could have called the library, or e-mailed, but having the librarian physically present in the building provided a more personal touch and yet was another way for them to access a librarian.

Users Gain Information

During Laptop Librarian interactions, users felt that they frequently gained useful information (see Table 2). Laptop Librarians introduced users to the Reaxys database, provided URLs for informational Web sites, provided tutorials on databases such as Scopus,

and more. Users expressed satisfaction in the information they received and felt that they had gained from such interactions. For example, one survey respondent wrote, “I have asked questions several times and always got the answers I needed.”

Overall Satisfaction with Service

Users were quick to express satisfaction with the Laptop Librarian service (see Table 2). The service provided researchers with immediate, easy access to their librarians. This led to increased interactions between librarians and researchers. In addition, when a user asked a question of the Laptop Librarian, he or she was regularly satisfied with the answers. One survey respondent wrote, “This is a great outreach type program. I think it facilitates great relations between the library and the scientific community with help with online access and resources.”

DISCUSSION

The use of the NCI-F Scientific Library’s Laptop Librarian service is encouraging; the average number of interactions per session seems to reflect numbers seen in the literature. For example, Saint Louis University averaged two interactions per two-hour session,¹ and the University at Buffalo generally had one to two quality interactions per hour.² Although the numbers at NCI-F are a bit lower, this might be expected given that the service was offered at a government research institution that is not highly populated with students, as would be the case in an academic environment. In addition, the raw numbers do not express all the other benefits reaped by working outside the library. As Wagner and Tysick write, “Clearly, evaluating onsite office hours only on the basis of number of transactions per hour is inadequate and misleading.”² For this reason, the Scientific Library conducted a survey and interviews to get feedback beyond the raw numbers.

Overall, researchers that actually used the service were satisfied and spoke positively of the service. They found that the Laptop Librarian service made their librarians more accessible, saved them time, and provided them with an additional means for gaining information. One of the strengths of the service was definitely convenience; being located in a researcher’s building was very important. Even if the building was right next to the library, they still noted an increased convenience to having the librarian right down the hall from them. The NCI-Frederick Scientific Library has a reference desk plus a general e-mail account and phone number, in addition to each librarian having a phone number and e-mail account. However, the Laptop Librarian service provided another method for researchers to access their librarians. The Laptop Librarian provided face-to-face interaction in a way that was convenient for the researchers. One interviewee said, “...having someone there in a one-on-one situation that was specifically there to answer questions made me feel like I wasn’t wasting anyone’s time.”

One thing discovered during this evaluation was that there was a misconception about use of the service. Several comments were made about the service not being used. For example, one person wrote on the survey, “It seems like there is rarely anybody visiting the librarian...” and another wrote, “I have never seen anyone talk to the person who sits alone in the 539 library.” However, statistics show that people do use the service. Many interactions are relatively brief, so unless a person happens to walk by at that moment, it may seem to them that nobody talks to the Laptop Librarian. This knowledge has led the authors to consider new ways to promote the service to help reduce misperceptions such as these.

CONCLUSION

The Laptop Librarian service provided increased accessibility of librarians to researchers. Although the average number of users at each session sounds low, it is similar to what has been reported in the literature. In addition, users of the service had positive reactions and were extremely satisfied and appreciative of the service. One interviewee said that if the service were discontinued, he or she would “feel cheated.” Although many academic institutions have experimented with remote reference at physical locations outside of the library, the service mentioned in this paper is unique because it is not academic, but instead is offered at a government research facility. Therefore, this service shows that the concept of expanding boundaries can be applied to all types of libraries. The Laptop Librarian service proves to be a useful means for increasing access to librarians and providing users with necessary information at this particular government research facility.

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Appendix

Survey Instrument

1. In what building do you work?
2. Have you heard of the Scientific Library's Laptop Librarian service?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
3. Have you used the Scientific Library's Laptop Librarian service?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
4. Was the Laptop Librarian service convenient?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No

Why was it convenient or inconvenient?
5. What benefit did you receive from this service (choose all that apply)?

- ☐ ☐ Saved Time
- ☐ ☐ Convenience (did not have to call or walk to Library)
- ☐ ☐ Gained information

Other (please specify)

6. Were you satisfied with the information you received during your interaction with the Laptop Librarian?

- ☐ ☐ Yes
- ☐ ☐ No

Comment

7. Would you use the Laptop Librarian service again?

- ☐ ☐ Yes
- ☐ ☐ No

Why?

8. If you are familiar with the service, but have not yet used it, why?

- ☐ ☐ Not in my building
- ☐ ☐ No questions to ask
- ☐ ☐ Times are inconvenient

Other (please specify)

9. If it is not already offered there, would you like to have this service in your building?

- ☐ ☐ Yes
- ☐ ☐ No

10. Please provide any additional comments about the Laptop Librarian service.

FIGURE 1.

Answers to the online survey question “What benefit did you receive from this service?”

Table 1

Average number of questions per session at each location.

Location	Bldg. 560	Bldg. 539	Tollhouse	Fairview	All
Number of Sessions	58	52	11	5	126
Number of Questions	89	55	20	11	175
Average # Questions/Session	1.53	1.06	1.82	2.20	1.39

* Numbers are for 9/29/08 through 12/10/09

** Several sessions not included because candy was involved, inflating numbers

Table 2

Outcomes and supporting quotations from interviews.

Outcomes	Representative Quotations
Accessibility of Librarians	“Well, probably that I don’t have to go in [to the library], as it’s difficult for me to get there.” “It was really convenient to have someone right here.” “It is convenient with me being located mainly off post.” “Couldn’t be any more convenient than being right here” “I often see the librarian sitting here when I’m walking by the room...[the Laptop Librarian] has good visibility...[the Laptop Librarian] puts signs on the door, sits near the door...and this is a frequently traveled hallway so everybody up and down the hallway should be aware that [the Laptop Librarian] is there”
Saving Time	“For example, I asked [the Laptop Librarian], for example an article to find it. We were not able to find it given the previous reference. So I was able to come back here [to the lab], like less than a minute, take some extra resource and ask [the Laptop Librarian] again. So [the Laptop Librarian's] in the building rather than going back and forth between the library” “The advantages [of using the Laptop Librarian] are it’s very, um, helpful for time anagement.” “...it saves time. I can get information I want” “If your time is limited for searching, and [the Laptop Librarian's] volunteering [the Laptop Librarian's] services to search something for you, then you might as well utilize the resource. That is what [the Laptop Librarian] is there for.” “It saves time”
Users Gain Information	“Actually the one that was most informative was with [the Laptop Librarian] telling me about the Reaxys. I was able to get more information about that and go to the Reaxys information session” “...[the Laptop Librarian] showed me some websites that I didn’t know about so it was helpful. “I know that I’ve learned things, new things, about some of the searching that I didn’t know” “The biggest interaction I had, I wanted to learn more about the Scopus program, and I got a probably 20 minute tutorial on it, and it was very interesting...”
Overall Satisfaction withService	“Yes, I was satisfied” “absolutely” [satisfied with the information provided by the Laptop Librarian] “I can definitely envision having a future use of the Laptop Librarian.” “I’d feel cheated [if the Laptop Librarian service were discontinued].” Resources the librarian are finding and advertising are “absolutely first class resources”.