

E-Reference Services Program Weighs the Pros and Cons of the 24/7 Connection

by Christopher Vallandingham



Diane Kresh of the Library of Congress explains the impact of e-reference services.

It's 12:30 a.m. EST. Imagine a law student in New York City frantically trying to do some last-minute research on a seminar paper, due by 9 a.m. the same day. There is not a reference librarian in sight in the Big Apple at this hour. Not a problem. The student simply clicks a button on the library's Web page and up pops a screen prompting the procrastinating student for information about the question. In minutes the question is routed to a reference librarian in San Diego working the evening shift and the librarian saves the student from certain doom.

These days this scenario is hardly far-fetched. With the advent of digital reference, transcontinental exchanges like this may one day be commonplace. Currently, there are e-reference systems out there that do just that. The Annual Meeting program A-1: "E-Reference Services: Collaborating to Make the 24/7 Connection" examined the e-reference system designed by the Library of Congress and the OCLC Online Computer Library Center and analyzed the pros and cons of implementing such a system in a law library.

Carole Hinchcliff of the Ohio State University Moritz Law Library, moderator of the program, began the discussion by introducing the concept of e-reference services and the benefits of participating in this new model for reference.

The Internet boom has forced librarians to redefine themselves, said panelist **Diane Kresh** of the Library of Congress. Even though the increasing reliance on technology requires that librarians learn new skills, the traditional strengths of librarians have not been rendered obsolete. She insists that there will be a role for librarians in the future.

How can librarians maximize the potential of this new technology? One way is by subscribing to QuestionPoint, a collaborative reference service jointly developed by the Library of Congress and OCLC that is based partially on their experiences with the pilot Collaborative Digital Reference Service. Patrons and librarians can access QuestionPoint through their library Web pages. A Web-based form allows users to submit their questions to QuestionPoint, which then matches the reference question to the subscriber

institution best suited to answer the question. Questions and answers are edited and placed in an archive that can be accessed by all subscribers. QuestionPoint even includes e-mail and live chat.

The technology may be dazzling, but **Herb Cihak** of the Louisiana State University Law Library had some doubts as to why his law library should subscribe to an e-reference service like QuestionPoint. When his school participated in the Collaborative Digital Reference Service, no law students used the service during a six-month period. If no one at the law school wanted to use the service, why pay \$2,000 for the "privilege of answering reference questions" coming from other schools, Cihak asked. He also questioned how useful a legal knowledge base would be given that legal information often becomes obsolete in a short period of time.

There are advantages to using an e-reference service, Kresh countered. For example, libraries can benefit from an expanded customer-service base. E-reference also forces librarians to become more involved with technology and allows them the opportunity to hone their reference skills.



Luis Acosta, reference librarian at Howard University Law Library, takes notes about the pros and cons of e-reference services.

Cheryl Nyberg of the University of Washington Gallagher Law Library focused on the impact that digital reference, in all its forms, could have on reference librarians. Though many law libraries already have e-mail reference services, participating in a service like QuestionPoint raises difficult questions. At present, e-mail reference might not be overly burdensome for many libraries, but subscribing to QuestionPoint could substantially increase the workload of the reference staff. If so, then including digital reference as one of the responsibilities of the librarians may force the library to rethink its priorities.

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Pet projects or cherished traditions may have to be sacrificed if they no longer effectively serve the mission of the library. Digital reference may also mean that collection policies have to be redrafted with access to resources through the e-reference system. This access to resources at other subscriber institutions also raises tricky copyright issues. Can a library share information via digital reference obtained from a database protected by exclusive licensing agreements? How will library patrons view digital

reference? Faculty members might not want to share resources with other libraries if it means a decrease in the service to which they have become accustomed.

This informative program thoroughly examined some of the most important issues that crop up when deciding whether to subscribe to an e-reference service such as QuestionPoint. Participants were able to see an e-reference system in sufficient detail to understand how this could revolutionize the way libraries view reference work. There was

a smattering of humor throughout the presentations. One presenter likened the process of matching patron and information provider to matchmaking services — SWF Seeks REC for LTR. Perhaps e-reference will have a better success rate than Matchmaker.com.

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