

In many libraries, librarians in technical services and reference live in two separate universes. Technical services librarians don't always see the value of knowing how patrons use the library, while reference librarians may not understand how and why the "back room" operates the way it does. This gulf can sometimes create problems within the library in terms of understanding the key roles that both areas play in fulfilling the ultimate goal of the library: serving the patron.

I received more than 40 responses. Of those, about one third were from solo librarians, who had to be eliminated. After creating a fairly short three-section survey, I sent it to the 26 librarians who remained in the pool.

I received seven responses, which I then used to identify type of library, size of library, and rankings of how a split position affected respondents' work and the attitudes of other librarians in their organizations. In addition, I asked for anecdotal information



Across the Great Divide:

On Being Both a Technical Services and Reference Librarian

by Sheila Corman

When I was hired as a librarian at the San Diego County Public Law Library (SDCPLL), it was to fill a unique niche. The position was evenly split between reference and cataloging. I had been involved in this type of position before, usually on a more ad hoc basis, and liked being involved in both sides of the library world. I felt it gave me a better insight into reference/patron needs and made me a better technical services librarian.

The initial expectation at SDCPLL was that I would be the cataloger and also a glorified substitute librarian at the reference desk. After almost four years, I've added more responsibilities in cataloging, as head of the department, and in reference, as government documents librarian and a teacher of classes.

As I went through my daily responsibilities, our assistant director of public services and I began wondering how many other librarians held these "split" positions and how they felt about their situations. To begin to find out, I sent a message on the law-lib listserv, asking for librarians with split positions to participate in a very unscientific survey for this article.

to use as support for their positions. Special thanks to all who responded to the survey, which was taken during the period in which people were preparing for the AALL Annual Meeting.

Part I of the survey's three sections asked for demographic information: primary responsibility; type of library; number of hours in reference; number of hours in technical services; and the number of librarians, full-time staff, and reference librarians.

Of the seven surveys returned: four were from academic librarians, one from a firm librarian, and two from state/government librarians. Five respondents showed technical services as their primary responsibility, one an even split, and one primarily reference. Of the respondents, five spent more than 20 hours a week in technical services. Two librarians were in reference 15–20 hours a week.

Four of the libraries had at least seven or more librarians. Three libraries had three reference librarians and three had more than five. As a side note, four of the librarians indicated that one of their responsibilities was government documents—one of my responsibilities as well. Other duties included updating the library's Web site, Internet

training, interlibrary loan, and serving as faculty liaison.

Measuring Perceptions

The second section of the survey dealt with perception of benefits of the position and attitudes of other staff members toward the person in that position. Participants were asked to rank each statement numerically, from 1 to 5 (least to most relevant). Note that one respondent did not complete this section and another did not answer all of the statements.

Statement 1: As a technical services librarian, I feel I have a better understanding of patron needs by being a reference librarian.

All respondents ranked this 4 or higher. Comments reinforced this statement: One respondent stated, "I learned to be aggressive with subject cataloging and aggressive with speed. Catalog backlogs were a great waste of resources."

Another person responded, "It helps me see ways to make the catalog easier to search."

Statement 2: As a technical services librarian working at the reference desk, I better understand the needs of the reference staff.

The responses were identical to Statement 1, as were the reasons.

Statement 3: Other reference librarians treat me as part of the "team."

It was nice to see that five respondents gave this statement the highest rating. Two of the librarians did feel that because they were not in the reference department full-time, they did not always get the information they needed to perform their reference responsibilities. One survey respondent said, "I often miss information about professors' current assignments."

Another participant felt he/she generally did not feel part of the reference team because of the location of his/her work space. I understand this perception, because I'm at the reference desk in the afternoons and am not there for morning discussions and events. Of course, this also occurs when someone is on vacation, out ill, or working on a special project. Communication becomes extremely important in a library with part-time or split positions.

Statement 4: The other reference librarians feel free to come to me with questions about cataloging or ordering of materials.

Again those surveyed gave this statement high marks, five 5s and one 4. Their responses indicated that one of the benefits of the split position is breaking down the barriers between reference and technical services.

Statement 5: Communication between technical services and reference has improved since I began working at the reference desk.

This perceived goal of improving communication between the two library areas was not widely supported by this survey. Only four respondents answered. Two gave a high ranking and two a middle ranking. Obviously, while communication improved on an individual level as shown in Statement 4, it did not perceptibly increase between the two departments. Good communication in this area is still problematical.

Statement 6: The reference staff's understanding of how the collection is organized has improved since I began working as a reference librarian.

Only five participants answered this question. Most gave the statement a 3. The perception is that reference librarians know where the materials are but not necessarily *why* they are where they are.

Statement 7: I'm able to use what I learn at the reference desk to make me a better technical services librarian.

All respondents answered this with the very high or highest ranking. Comments from the surveyed librarians include: "You can do any job better if you understand all the parts that make up the whole;" and "It allows for a better understanding of the 'complete' picture of how the library functions."

Amassing Anecdotal Feedback

The final section of the survey elicited anecdotal information, using seven open-ended questions for participants to add personal information.

Question 1: How do/did you feel about having a split position?

Answers ranged from "Even though I think it's a benefit. . . . I sometimes feel that I've got either things I need to be doing (in technical services) or don't have the time" to "Enjoy the chance to meet and help our users, but also like the ability to retreat behind the tech services door to get work done" to "Good, I find it's a good

use of my time and helps the library." No one who worked these split positions minded being in two areas. Most of the librarians responding seemed to like the variety and the ability to see both sides of the process. They felt it made them better librarians and provided them with a better feeling of what the library's mission and goals were.

Question 2: How has the split helped you as a reference librarian? As a technical services librarian?

Respondents identified the ability to find things in the catalog because they have a better understanding of how materials are entered and indexed in the system. Some felt, "I expect I dig much more for catalog information, thus expanding the quality of sources." This is tied to the fact that technical services librarians, especially catalogers, feel more comfortable using the catalog and are more familiar with the indexing and coding features of the system.

Question 3: Do you feel other libraries should try this type of arrangement? Why?

Answers supported the benefit of this arrangement. The general consensus was that it would benefit most, but not all, libraries to try this approach. Most felt cross-training is a useful tool but would work better in smaller libraries than in larger, more specialized ones. Another librarian stated, "Cross-training ties services together." An academic librarian said, "Professional librarians should have some understanding and experience of how an entire library runs." Finally, one librarian thought, "How else can you keep up with student and faculty needs or effectively assist your fellow librarians? We work as a team, and we work well together . . . Being territorial doesn't help your institution."

So the librarians who answered this survey all felt that having cross-training helped build a team spirit, which improved the functioning of the library.

Question 4: Do you feel reference staff should work in technical services to get a better understanding of those responsibilities? Regularly? Temporarily to experience it? And Question 5: Should technical services librarians work at the reference desk to gain a better understanding of reference needs? Regularly? Temporarily to experience it?

(continued on page 22)

All the respondents, including me, felt that staff members would benefit by working in the other department. One felt this was especially true for entry-level positions and that subsequent “tune-ups” would be worthwhile. Most felt that “crossing the divide” would benefit all librarians and provide them with a perspective on how the library functions as a whole rather than viewing it as two distinct and separate parts. Even though reference librarians might not have the mindset to be catalogers, they would gain a better understanding of the work by being familiar with it.

Question 6: What is the most important understanding of reference that you have learned by having this position?

The answers given included, “Gaining greater understanding of how access to information overrides the ‘correctness’ of cataloging although ‘correctness’ is still very important.” Another librarian emphasized that it helped in understanding the needs of the firm attorneys and how to catalog materials to integrate it with the firm’s needs.

This is one of the most important things to be learned. Sometimes information must be added or changed to provide access for patrons and staff but within the bounds of maintaining a high level of cataloging. It remains a thin line to walk, at times.

Other librarians emphasized that they’ve learned how to ask the correct questions to assist the patrons, find out what information they are truly seeking, and improve their reference interview skills.

Question 7: What, if any, problems or concerns do you have about this split position?

Most of the people who responded did not have any concerns. One felt that it would make it difficult to move on to a management position, and another emphasized the lack of communication.

The most interesting response came from a librarian who mentioned the “middle-management jealousy over the split employee’s time and loyalty”; this person felt caught in the middle, having to be responsible to two different supervisors, and was concerned about supervisors’ perception of where the employee fits into the individual department and the library as a whole. My own experience: I get two evaluations and have to have two people sign vacation and workshop requests, so there is sometimes a feeling of having divided loyalty.

Writing this article and seeking the responses of other librarians in similar positions made me aware that I have company in crossing the divide. One of my supervisors was surprised by the number of people who had divided responsibilities. Because of the specialized work I do, she felt that I was probably one of an even smaller subgroup than those who answered my query. Cataloging is detail-oriented and reference so people-oriented that my supervisor felt most librarians prefer one or the other and would not feel comfortable in the other “universe.”

I was glad to see I’m one among a select few. It is important for libraries to build a sense of community and teamwork among the staff. The goal is to serve the patron. Building bridges and crossing the divide can benefit the library and provide better service to its patrons.

In our institution, this position has broken down much of the old hostility of catalogers not understanding how patrons look for materials. It’s lessened the sense that the cataloger would not listen but would insist, “This is how the rules are and this is how it will be done.” On the reference side, staff now understands that certain things cannot be modified, but other things, such as added titles, can be used and materials reclassified to provide greater and more logical access.

For the reference staff, being able to talk to a cataloger or acquisitions librarian who is also “one of them” has removed some of the old barriers. They can ask questions and know that that person will listen because they use the catalog the same way the reference staff does.

Will this work for every library? Probably not. It depends on the people and personalities involved and the size of the library. Some catalogers may never want to be behind the reference desk. Many reference librarians would not want to catalog or order materials. But if people are willing, even on a temporary basis, to be on the other side of the divide, it can make the library a more cohesive place.

A library where cataloging and reference work together to make the library a better place for staff and patrons is one that will succeed in providing the service the users need and want. It’s nice to see that there are more libraries out there creating this atmosphere through split positions than I ever imagined.

Sheila Corman (scorman@sdcll.org) is head of cataloging/reference librarian at the San Diego County Public Law Library.