The self-service debate

Regular readers of this column may remember my summer Frontline where, with tongue firmly in cheek, I suggested what was hot and what was not in libraries for 2004. The reactions were interesting and the two issues that were taken up with some passion by the members of one listserv were generational change and self-service.

I hope that last month's Frontline illustrates some of the challenges we face as us aging baby boomers face our golden years and prepare to hand over to the generation Xers. Certainly in the US the lack of new graduates from library schools who wish to work in traditional library areas is quite alarming. I hear of colleagues who have difficulty attracting what they see as a quality field for their senior positions. The work that ALIA does in facilitating mentoring is vital to ensure that the next generation of librarians have the skills and confidence to assume more responsible and senior roles. And as I wrote last month, the Aurora Institutes have a very important role in this too.

This month I would like to consider the move to customer self-service. If one considers the difficulties in maintaining staffing levels to deal with the increasing amount of manual handling, the aging workforce (again), and the almost universal acceptance in other areas of life of self-service, it seems both desirable and inevitable that self-service becomes the norm in libraries. Indeed in many libraries it is already, and some new libraries, for example the Adelaide City libraries, have been designed around this concept.

Self-service is all about moving staff from low value to high value work. It includes self-checkin, self-checkout, self-service reservations and renewals through online catalogues and self pickup holds. If libraries look at their mission statement, there are not too many that would say: 'manually handle half a million books a year an average of four to five times every time they are borrowed, seven times a year'. Every time we can reduce a process, the payback is significant. I believe our staff are informational professionals, not storemen and packers. As employers we need to be thinking how we can best use our most valuable resource — our staff, and as staff we should be thinking — is there a better/easier/more efficient way of doing this?

The financial benefits are significant if self-service is fully implemented, and those opening new libraries would have found that the numbers stack up in a cost benefit analysis. It is also a way of dealing with volumetric growth in library services where circulation is still growing. It is good management practice to quantify savings and be explicit about the reinvestment in the service, whether it is with more community activities and programs, additional internet training, or longer opening hours.

The non-financial benefits are just as compelling: we need knowledge workers, not checkout operators. By freeing staff from the manual and the mundane, they can put their energies into more productive and valued services, and increase their knowledge and skill base. The concern that some have about interaction with borrowers being lost is really a fallacy, as it frees staff to get out from behind a circulation desk and assist people find good books to read, or the information that they are looking for. Instead of returning books in a back room, staff can run book chats or book clubs or hold evening story times. There is also a much better outcome in terms of workplace health and safety. Borrowers like self-service too, it maintains their privacy. If a well functioning system is in place it is possible in some libraries now to place a reservation online, get an e-mail notifying of its availability, collect it from a self pickup holds shelf and check it out, all without staff interaction.

As we move from the manual aspects of library work we can start to reinvest in workforce shaping, in product and service delivery around areas such as digital information, readers advisory, local history, community engagement, merchandising, children's and teenage services. Once staff have participated in the new way, they find it very hard to go back to where they were before self-service was introduced.

The self-service debate today tends to be not so much around self-service per se, but more when do we go to RFID? Radio frequency identification promises to revolutionise materials handling, not just in libraries but in all aspects of our lives. There have been some concerns raised about RFID and potential implications relating to individual privacy issues as far back as July last year (*Australian*, Tuesday 22 July 2003 p4 IT Business, 'Privacy problems for barcode's heir apparent'). It is important that ALIA keep a watching brief on potential privacy issues as RFID rolls out through library services.

I am fortunate to be travelling to the west coast of the United States in the next couple of weeks to look at libraries using self-service. The report that I will be doing with fellow Bertelsmann networker Ton Van Vlimmeren will be available shortly through the Bertelsmann website, http://www.public-libraries.net/en/, where there are also some new reports on digital libraries, staff development and cultural diversity.   ■

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