

Guidelines for Implementing and Maintaining Virtual Reference Services

Originally prepared by the MARS Digital Reference Guidelines Ad Hoc Committee

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Introduction

The purpose of these guidelines is to assist libraries and consortia with implementing and maintaining virtual reference services. The guidelines are meant to provide direction, without being overly prescriptive. Variance among institutions will result in differences in the adherence to these guidelines, but the committee hopes to have cast the model broadly enough to provide a framework for virtual reference which can be widely adopted and which will endure through many changes in the ways in which libraries provide virtual reference services. Libraries and consortia may also want to reference the Virtual Reference Companion.

1.0 Definition of Virtual Reference

1.1 Virtual reference is reference service initiated electronically for which patrons employ technology to communicate with public services staff without being physically present. Communication channels used frequently in virtual reference include chat, videoconferencing, Voice-over-IP, co-browsing, e-mail, instant messaging, and text.

1.2 While online sources are often utilized in provision of virtual reference, use of electronic sources in seeking answers is not of itself virtual reference.

1.3 Virtual reference queries are sometimes followed up with telephone, in-person, fax, and regular mail interactions, even though these modes of communication are not considered virtual.

1.4 How Virtual Reference is Different from In-Person Reference

1.4.1 Because virtual reference is mediated through technology there is a loss of visual and voice clues and it can feel less personal.

1.4.2 Virtual reference is sometimes asynchronous which leads to delays and difficulties in communication, especially for conducting reference interviews and providing detailed instructions. The time constraints of the medium, especially with chat and text, can also undermine the reference interview and user instruction.

1.4.3 Differences in technology, access, and experience with technology can complicate instructions and limit sharing of resources.

1.4.4 There are additional privacy issues that can arise in virtual reference with information gathered through forms, contact information, information gathered by third party providers, and via screen sharing or remote access between computers.

1.4.5 The application of RUSA standards may differ from their application in in-person or phone reference.

2.0 Preparing for Virtual Reference Services

2.1 Integration with Traditional Reference

2.1.1 Construct a strategy to integrate virtual reference service offerings within your existing hours of operation, staff, and physical service points.

2.2 Commitment to Virtual Reference

2.2.1 Secure a commitment from a sufficient core of stakeholders at all levels of the institution's management and staff to support virtual reference service from its first planning stages through implementation before any project is attempted.

2.3 Costs of Virtual Reference

2.3.1 Commit, at the administrative level, to long-term provision of resources for virtual reference services.

2.3.2 Outline start-up costs including any software, training, or staff support.

2.3.3 Identify, at the administrative level, the impact to staffing and be prepared to make appropriate adjustments.

2.3.4 Document a clear understanding of the on-going maintenance costs associated with virtual reference, and secure appropriate recurring budget allocations.

2.3.5 Identify and approve the costs related to marketing the virtual reference service.

2.3.6 Determine whether the service is to be free to the patron or fee-based before the service begins and modify as needed.

2.4 The Planning Team

2.4.1 Involve representative members of the administration and public services staff in planning, training, implementation, and promotion of virtual reference services and the selection of virtual reference software.

2.4.2 Involve representative members of the target audience in planning and promotion of virtual reference.

2.4.3 Identify additional areas and services which will be affected by the new virtual service and bring them into discussions and planning as appropriate.

2.5 Selection of Software

2.5.1 Determine system compatibility, reference requirements, and budgetary constraints imposed on the selection of virtual reference software.

2.5.2 Involve relevant information technology staff in the planning, software selection, and purchase decisions.

2.5.2.1 Information technology staff involvement will be critical for the smooth implementation and maintenance of the infrastructure needed for the virtual reference service and determination of its compatibility with existing library software and infrastructure.

3.0 Provision of Service

3.1 Clientele

3.1.1 Define the patron population for whom this service is intended. Make this information readily available wherever the service may be accessed by that population.

3.1.2 Address technical issues of patron authentication or proxy server login as they apply to various groups within the patron population.

3.1.3 Clearly outline to staff how they should apply institutional policies, including those policies for patrons outside of the targeted service population.

3.1.4 Create and share widely guidelines for appropriate behavior that are in alignment with library or institutional policies.

3.2 Parameters of Service

3.2.1 Define and make accessible the level of service to be provided so that staff and patrons will understand the mission of the service.

3.2.1.1 Level of service includes the types of questions the service will answer (or the mission and the scope), the response time, and the intended audience for the service.

3.2.2 Decide before the service begins how and if document delivery will be provided.

3.2.3 For synchronous virtual reference, indicate the times at which the service is staffed. For asynchronous virtual reference, give guidelines for how frequently queries will be checked or how soon an initial response can be expected

3.2.4 For those times when the service is unstaffed or otherwise unavailable, guide users to other forms of reference.

3.2.5 Provide appropriate links to the virtual reference service to direct potential patrons to the service from various online environments (e.g. library web sites, community web pages, learning management systems, etc.).

3.3 Personnel

3.3.1 Based on local need and staffing resources, decide on the needed service skill set and reference knowledge of staff.

3.3.2 Provide time and resources to staff for training and continuing education to ensure effective service.

3.4 Service Behaviors

3.4.1 Virtual reference requires of library staff many of the same communication and interpersonal skills necessary for other forms of reference. The absence of a physically-present patron and the different modes of communication may call for additional skills, effort, or training to provide quality service on par with face-to-face reference services.

3.4.2 Exhibit the professional competencies essential for successful reference and patron services librarians as articulated in the RUSA "Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians."

3.4.3 Maintain standard guidelines of reference service (such as reference interviewing, exchange of questions between services, etc.).

3.4.4 Follow interpersonal communication practices that promote effective provision of reference service as articulated in the RUSA "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals."

3.4.5 Require staff to demonstrate skills in the effective use of online communication, and demonstrate awareness of the common potential problem areas when conducting reference interviews online as compared to the face-to-face reference interview.

3.4.6 Offer initial and on-going training to help staff learn and retain these effective online behaviors.

3.4.7 Treat patrons' and colleagues' online communication, including stored transcripts or records, as private and confidential.

3.5 Collaborative Virtual Reference

3.5.1 Some libraries may choose to provide virtual reference services collaboratively with other libraries for various reasons including: to extend their hours of operation, to distribute staffing of the service across multiple libraries, to extend the expertise available, or to realize cost savings associated with economies of scale. Such collaboration may include working with virtual reference vendors or participation in large regional or national collaborations.

3.5.2 Take into account the interoperability of software platforms for ease of collaboration among virtual reference partners.

3.5.3 Clearly define expectations for libraries participating in a collaborative service before the local library commits to such a service.

3.5.4 Clearly define responsibility for centrally administering and coordinating the service.

3.5.5 Have each library appoint a project liaison to represent the library in the group's activities. Clearly state expectations for the project liaison's duties.

3.5.6 Clearly delineate procedures for communications between and among participants.

3.5.7 Have participating libraries commit to a prescribed minimum level of service.

3.5.7.1 For synchronous virtual reference, set a minimum number of service hours, based upon factors such as size of library or staff, patron population being served, budget, and extent of online reference service desired.

3.5.7.2 For asynchronous virtual reference, prescribe a minimum number of questions to be handled or monitoring of the queue for specific blocks of time.

3.5.8 Centrally administer scheduling of libraries' contributions to the service.

3.5.8.1 For synchronous virtual reference, have each library commit to specific blocks of time. It is the responsibility of the local library to find specific reference staff to fill these blocks of time, and not that of the project director.

3.5.8.2 For asynchronous virtual reference, have participating libraries commit to monitoring question queues for incoming questions in specific blocks of time.

3.5.9 Provide a central source of information on member library policies, operations, procedures, and regulations, so that it is simple for project reference staff to find information about other libraries.

3.5.10 Establish clear guidelines for how patron queries will be prioritized among the collaborating libraries. For example, determine if a patron's library affiliation will impact their priority in the queue, depending on which library or libraries are currently staffing the service.

3.5.11 Establish clear policies and guidelines for using licensed online electronic resources to serve patrons from other participating libraries.

3.5.12 Establish clear policies and guidelines that effectively ensure patron privacy in a multi-library setting.

3.5.13 Establish clear policies and guidelines for assessing quality and consistency of service across participating libraries.

4.0 Training

4.1 Provide staff with training on the software used to provide virtual reference services.

4.2 Provide staff with training on the basics of troubleshooting patron access issues as well as information on when and to whom to refer more complex access issues.

4.3 Provide staff with information about identifying (through IP address or other means) patrons who are abusing the service or behaving inappropriately through the service.

4.4 Provide staff with training about conducting reference through virtual means and how this method can differ from in person reference.

5.0 Management of Service

5.1 Integration of Virtual Reference Service

5.1.1 Virtual reference is an extension of an institution's existing reference services. While staffing models and the location of the service may be different from face-to-face reference services, accord virtual reference service the same status and quality goals as face-to-face reference, and view it as a part of the larger service of reference.

5.1.2 It is a goal of all reference services to be of high quality. Integration of virtual reference into the mainstream of reference services implies that all services (in-person, telephone, and virtual) will be supported at a level to ensure quality service.

5.1.3 Examine staffing models to determine one that is appropriate for each library's organization. While there is not a "one-size-fits-all" service model, choose a model which would support quality reference interactions via all modes of communication.

5.1.4 Make all public services staff aware of the virtual reference service's goals and basic operation.

5.1.5 Establish procedures for referring a virtual patron (i.e., question) to another reference or public services point. Include procedures for both how the referral is presented to the patron and how information about the referral is communicated between the virtual reference desk and referral destination.

5.1.6 Be aware of licensing restrictions of electronic resources in terms of their ability to be shared with users of the service.

5.2 Infrastructure/Facilities

5.2.1 Provide staff with space, furnishings, hardware, and software to accomplish the mission agreed on by staff, administration, and technology support staff.

5.2.2 Update equipment, facilities, and software as needed to maintain efficacy. Take into account the continuing evolution of technology.

5.2.3 Take into account awareness of the patrons' infrastructure and capabilities when planning library capabilities and choosing virtual reference software.

5.2.4 Take into consideration use of the supporting software by patrons and reference staff with disabilities. Some options include choosing software that complies with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act ("Nondiscrimination under Federal grants and programs: Electronic and information technology," Title 29 U.S. Code, Pt. 794d 2004 ed.), software with non-text options such as Voice-over-IP, or providing text on the web site that directs screen-readers to an email form or alternate contact information.

5.3 Finances

5.3.1 Include in the library budget specific allocation of funds to cover the personnel, hardware, software, connectivity, furnishings, training, publicity, and space to support this service.

5.3.2 Include on-going budgeting even when the service is started as a pilot or with seed money from a grant.

5.5 Marketing

5.5.1 Develop and implement a marketing plan as part of the planning and on-going operation of the service.

5.5.2 Determine a target audience or audiences for the virtual reference service and market to that audience appropriately. Include members of the target audience in the planning and evaluation of marketing.

5.5.3 Establish a budget for marketing and assign publicity as a responsibility to a staff member or members.

5.5.4 Routinely evaluate and update marketing to keep the message fresh, reach new audiences, and publicize new developments or access methods for the service.

5.6 Assessment

5.6.1 Plan for regular assessment of the virtual reference program's effectiveness by library staff and administration.

5.6.1.1 Assess virtual reference services in conjunction with the institution's other reference services.

5.6.1.2 Assessment should include both metrics and methods applicable across reference services (e.g. usage counts, patron demographics, "secret shoppers," READ scale analysis, etc.) as well as features unique to the medium, such as transcript review.

5.6.1.3 Consider other guidelines for assessment of reference, such as RUSA's "Measuring and Assessing Reference Services and Resources: A Guide."

5.6.2 Assessments should address service quality improvement for patrons as well as professional development opportunities for reference staff.

5.6.3 Use evaluation to improve the service as needed through adjustment of staffing, levels of staffing, service parameters, training, or other improvements as indicated by evaluation and assessment results.

5.6.4 Follow-through with the commitment to implement adjustments as needed when identified in the assessment process.

6.0 Privacy

6.1 Treat virtual reference communications between patrons and library staff as private except as required by law.

6.2 Protect patrons' confidentiality in data gathered and maintained for the purpose of evaluation.

6.2.1 Strip patrons' personal identifiers, such as name, e-mail, etc., from transaction records. Stripped records may be maintained for statistical and evaluative purposes.

6.2.2 Develop retention schedules and privacy policies for virtual reference transactions. Libraries should review the privacy policy of commercial software used to provide the virtual reference service. Where possible, libraries should work with vendors to bring third

party privacy policies in line with library policies. If this is not possible, the library should inform patrons that their data might be gathered and should link to the third-party vendor's privacy policy.

6.2.3 Advise patrons whether a record of the transaction will be retained, and what, if any, personal information will be stored with the transaction log.

6.2.4 Make privacy policies and transcript retention schedules publicly available.

6.3 Take care when using reference transactions in the creation of databases and FAQs to maintain the privacy of patrons and the confidentiality of patrons' inquiries.

6.3.1 Evaluate transcripts, beyond removal of patron identifiers, when choosing them for inclusion in a database so as not to compromise patron confidentiality.

6.3.2 Inform patrons, through publicly-available policy, that their questions might be included in a database. Provide a means for patrons to request removal of their inquiries from the database.

6.4 Protect patron confidentiality in data gathered and maintained for training purposes and for publicizing the service.

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