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# **'We all work in a library, so what could possibly be done differently?'**

## **A Customer Services benchmarking project**

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Anyone who has encountered the 57 criteria of Customer Service Excellence ([http://www.cse.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/UserFiles/Customer\\_Service\\_Excellence\\_standard.pdf](http://www.cse.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/UserFiles/Customer_Service_Excellence_standard.pdf)) will be aware of the significance of benchmarking. As part of our preparation at Loughborough University Library, the Customer Services Manager and the two Senior Library Assistants visited five other university libraries in the East Midlands to compare their provision of services/procedures with those at Loughborough:

- 20 April: University of Nottingham
- 27 April: University of Leicester
- 7 May: University of Derby
- 14 May: De Montfort University
- 25 May: Nottingham Trent University

Thanks should be given to all the people we visited for kindly sparing us their time for the exercise and for their honest sharing of experience. It was good to see that many of the problems we face at Loughborough are not unique to us, and to see what solutions/procedures other libraries had in place.

To give the meetings some structure we discussed ten topics (see below). It was interesting to spot common themes amongst the five libraries, often in contrast to what we do at Loughborough.

## **CIRCULATION/ SELF SERVICE/RFID APPLICATIONS**

All the universities visited had installed RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) some time previously and were extremely happy with its effectiveness, with all but one achieving self-service issue statistics exceeding 80%. Three libraries had chosen 3M as their supplier, two chose Intellident and one chose SB Electronics.

It is interesting to note that the more advanced possibilities RFID presents were far from universally used. Only one library visited took fines on their machines; two had self-return machines and there was a limited take-up of stocktaking and shelf tidying wands, with only two libraries regularly using them to look for queried/missing stock. At a time when all investment needs to be justified, it would be surprising if more is not made of the possibilities RFID presents in order to justify its still significant cost.

## **POSITION/ STAFFING LEVELS OF ENQUIRY DESKS AND SKILLS MIX ON DESKS**

It seems obvious, but this really depends on layout of building. Four of the libraries had been refurbished in the previous two years and much thought had been given to ideal desk structures, although this was still subject to change, if necessary.

All but one had an initial entry point desk to deal with barrier alarms, entry control systems; a couple of libraries had this merged with their main enquiry points.

There was only one library where academic librarians routinely answered all types of enquiry in a 'one-stop shop' scenario, although three others located a subject specialist on the main desk. The other libraries had separate subject enquiry points, staffed by their specialist teams, who were not expected to answer circulation queries.

There was often an IT presence on the desks (or next to the service points), but again there was a division of duties, with staff on these service points not expected to answer queries outside their area of expertise.

## **ROVING ROLES**

All the libraries visited had some form of roaming/staff presence on the floors ranging from an informal presence next to the self-service

machines to more formal specific roaming duty with staff being identified by tabards/t-shirts. There were some issues with 'invisibility' of staff, so more detailed training of what is expected is being delivered in some institutions. It was felt that success often depends on personality of staff involved, with some staff relishing their role and answering a range of queries from basic IT/directional queries to more detailed ones that need to be referred on.

## **STATISTICAL DATA/ EVALUATION OF CUSTOMER SERVICES**

Apart from the usual SCONUL data, a wide variety of other data were collected: some were very much performance-related, for example, time to re-shelve books, time waiting in queue; most focus only on limited time periods, based on snapshot surveys throughout the year or when evidence was needed for specific projects; at least two libraries used key performance indicators and felt it was important to share the results of these with their users.

There also seemed to be a reduction in the number of subject enquiries at a number of the universities – more analysis was taking place as to why that should be the case – the Google generation, perhaps?

## **ENQUIRY REFERRALS**

All libraries have a referrals procedure in place if staff on the counters cannot answer questions: one library gives email address of subject specialists as most are part time, another has printed flyers with the contact details of all their academic librarians.

There was a feeling that students do not mind being referred to another member of staff if they are given reasons for this. Separate desks staffed by academic librarians (or at least an area where subject enquiries could be discussed in more detail) worked well in three libraries.

## **SYNCHRONOUS CHAT**

Synchronous chat is an online messaging service, where users can contact the library in real time and expect an instant response.

Three libraries felt that their current email/phone systems worked well enough to cope with the demand and that online chat wouldn't be cost effective. One library started a trial at the beginning of the year, but for only 2 hours a day as they were worried they couldn't cope with demand.

One library had embraced it fully; here students made a lot of use of it (although they did sometimes use it to, for example, inform staff that printers needed more paper).

#### **JOB TITLES/ DESCRIPTIONS AND ROLES**

All libraries had undergone some form of change in structure over the last few years, leading to change in job titles/roles; one was about to demerge from their joint IT/library service into separate entities with different reporting structures.

How changes were dealt with took a lot of time and consideration for management and placed additional pressure on team leaders. This was linked to concerns about possible future spending cuts imposed by the government: how can we reduce staffing without reducing services we offer?

People felt that customer care experience was essential when recruiting. At the library assistant level it was generally felt that library skills could be taught on the job, but it was important to employ the right type of person to begin with. There were differences in opinion around employing students. One library had a policy of not employing them at all due to possible conflict of interests, whereas others were very keen. This is certainly the case at Loughborough (where, admittedly, we have a library school based in the building, with a willing pool of students to employ).

#### **COMPETENCIES**

Most libraries had some form of induction checklist that was used as a basis for the competencies expected whilst on duty. A couple mentioned mandatory core competencies such as manual handling and customer care.

One library had created a skills audit of what staff should be able to do depending on length of service. If staff do not meet requisite levels of knowledge this will be linked with annual appraisals and pay.

Two libraries were driven by university policies and competency frameworks, linked to appraisals and pay rises, which made line management extremely difficult as possible tensions arose when dealing with disgruntled staff who had not been successful that year.

#### **TRAINING**

Only one library had a specific training group tasked with providing a framework for all library staff, although another institution was keen to support staff through NVQs. All provided a range of training for library staff.

All institutions mentioned problems with evening and weekend staff; training for daytime staff was not seen to be as problematic as it is possible to attend sessions throughout the year. Evening and weekend staff tend to work these shifts for a specific reason such as having other commitments during the day (for example, lectures, childcare or other daytime employment).

A range of strategies had been developed to counter this: all libraries had some sort of one-off training at the start of the academic year to inform staff of changes over the summer; one library had developed online database tutorials and had begun using lecture capture technology to record sessions run during the day for staff to study at other times; another ran briefing sessions on a regular basis before staff started their desk duties.

#### **FUTURE STRATEGIC DIRECTION**

There is undoubtedly uncertainty in the higher education sector in general because of looming funding cuts. Libraries will face increased pressure to maximise their resources whilst saving money. Some additional factors were internal, such as a change of librarian or demerging of service structure, but there was a feeling that we should get on with doing what we do best – focusing on our users and proving what we contribute to the universities' success. One way of proving this was to gain Customer Service Excellence accreditation. One of the libraries visited had already had this standard for a year and were preparing for their annual review. All the others were in the process of preparing their evidence.

#### **CONCLUSION**

There is never a good time to visit other institutions – there is always a phone call or a report that seems more important, a deadline that must be met or a customer who needs to be served. However, there is a wealth of knowledge and experience out there that can prove extremely valuable, even if it is only to reassure you that people have the same problems as you and struggle just as much to resolve them.

As a bonding exercise between my SLAs and me, the benchmarking exercise was worthwhile for no other reason than that it gave us the chance to discuss things away from the library and share experiences with our peers. It also allowed much of what we discovered to be 'adapted' for use at Loughborough right away or incorporated in our operational plan for this year. I was able to run a follow-up workshop for EMALINK (the East Midlands Library Information Network) at Loughborough University for members to meet and discuss the issues together in more depth. The one thing I would change would be to gather more documentation electronically with permission to share it amongst the group.