

KOVACS, Diane K. *The Virtual Reference Handbook: Interview and information delivery techniques for the chat and e-mail environments.*

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Those of us involved in the provision of reference library services will have observed an increasing number of requests for information arriving electronically. In many cases such queries are straightforward to manage, requiring the same reference skills that we traditionally employ in face to face or telephone interactions. Indeed it is arguable that queries by email can be easier to handle, as the medium gives us the luxury of time in which to respond!

Increasingly libraries are offering reference services via chat and instant messaging, a trend which seems set to continue. In such cases the lack of cues present in a face to face interview and the immediacy of the response required may make the process of successfully resolving the query far more difficult.

This useful book seeks to provide the tools necessary to handle such virtual reference queries by establishing the commonalities that exist between physical personal reference interactions and the virtual. Kovacs attempts to define the reference skills that make users rely on librarians rather than Google and its competitors for information.

Key skills of the traditional reference librarian are explored and placed within an overview of the current research literature. The transference of these to the online environment is analysed.

Reference librarians, it is argued, must be distinguished from user self-service by the expectation that they know where information is or may be accessed, how to find it, how to search it and how to teach the user to search it. In exploring the skills reference librarians bring to a virtual reference transaction, Kovacs demonstrates that reference librarianship is much more a science than an art.

An unashamedly practical approach is taken. In doing so, insights are given into the process which takes place by breaking down the information handling process into its constituent elements, from the initial query and trying to gauge exactly what information is required, to the application of reference skills and knowledge.

Great emphasis is placed on the technical and communications skills needed by librarians in the electronic environment and whole chapters are devoted to acquiring and maintaining these skills. Detailed checklists of core competencies are provided: and although some that are listed seem obvious (for example technical competencies include typing on a computer keyboard and making some use of other related input devices, communications include the use of emoticons) overall this approach works by aiming to place the expertise required within a practical context. This approach is supported by the inclusion of both hands on learning activities and by detailed interviews with experienced on-line reference librarians. However it is stressed that without a solid foundation in reference

skills, including searching, critical thinking and information organisation, a librarian is not a librarian.

The book is thoroughly researched with extensive bibliographies and recommendations for further reading provided. This publication is a valuable toolkit for those seeking to transfer their skills to the electronic era.

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