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Evidence Summary

Health Centre Staff Are Satisfied with Librarian-Mediated Search Services, Especially When Librarians Follow Up

A Review of:

McKeown, S., Konrad, S.-L., McTavish, J., & Boyce, E. (2017). Evaluation of hospital staff's perceived quality of librarian-mediated literature searching services. *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, 105(2), 120-131. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5195/jmla.2017.201>

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Abstract

Objective – To determine the effects of the professional designation and communication method on clinical, educational, and research activities and related users' reported satisfaction with and perceived quality of a librarian-mediated literature searching service.

Design – Online survey.

Setting – A large teaching hospital in Ontario, Canada.

Subjects – 237 health sciences centre staff who were requesting librarian-mediated literature searching over a one-year period.

Methods – From February 1, 2014 to January 31, 2015, one-third of the health centre staff members requesting searching services, representing a systematic sample of the user group, were invited to participate in the survey. The survey centred on questioning participants on a critical incident, which, according to the critical incident technique, is an actual event upon which recollections are made, rather than hypothetical situations. In the case of this study, the critical incident was the service they received upon requesting

literature searching by a librarian who was blinded concerning the originator of the request. With a 71% response rate, the researchers received 137 responses to the survey by health sciences staff.

Participants were asked how many literature searches they had requested in the previous year, the reason they requested the service, how they submitted the request, and whether the librarian followed up for further clarification of their need. They also reported on the relevance of the results and their method of delivery, along with their perceptions of the overall quality of the service.

Main Results – The results came from 137 completed surveys, for a 71% response rate. Physicians, nurses, and allied health professionals comprised 85% of the responses, at 35%, 27%, and 23% respectively. Scientists, researchers, research coordinators, and other staff made up the remainder of responses. Responses indicated frequent search requests, with the average number of searches being five, and 68% of respondents reported searching for the information themselves before contacting the library for assistance. Most searches were for research/publishing (34%) and teaching/training (20%). Requests were submitted via email (44%), online form (32%), in person (17.5%), and phone (6.5%), and most respondents rated themselves extremely satisfied (54%) or very satisfied (42%). Most respondents (72%) reported that the librarian followed up for further clarification of the request, and staff who received follow-up rated themselves extremely satisfied at a significantly higher rate than those who did not ($p=0.002$). Respondents whose request was submitted verbally (i.e., by phone or in person), in comparison with those whose request was submitted by email or online form, rated themselves extremely satisfied at a significantly higher rate ($p=0.004$) and rated the quality of results as excellent at a significantly higher rate ($p=0.005$).

Conclusion – The need for comprehensive and expert searching when publishing or completing research and the availability of

easy to use point-of-care resources may be why librarian-mediated literature searching was used for research and publishing at a rate much higher than for patient care. In addition, the fact that the institution was also engaged in efforts toward evidence-based standardization of care and electronic health records during that year may have also affected results.

While satisfaction with the service was higher for those communicating verbally with a librarian, it is unclear whether this was caused by other factors or differences between staff members who engage in phone or in-person communication and those who submit forms and online requests. Because following up was correlated with higher satisfaction, adjustments in service encouraging librarians to follow up are recommended. Following up in person and via phone may help further.

Commentary

While some studies have investigated the sources health professionals use for finding information, little research evaluating users' views on the features of librarian-mediated literature searching services exists. The majority of published research that has explored these services measured the number of individuals utilizing the service or the response time (Brettell et al., 2011). Therefore, this article evaluates elements that are understudied. Complementary to research studying librarians' perspectives on literature searching services (Lasserre, 2012; McTavish, 2015), the study investigated the perspectives of health staff, including the professions of respondents, the reasons for requests, number of requests submitted, how requests were submitted, accuracy of results, and respondents' satisfaction with the results and the service.

According to criteria from the critical appraisal tool developed by Glynn (2006), the study was comprehensive and well-designed, with a number of strengths. The survey went through a pilot and multi-prong revision process to ensure its quality. The researchers also used the critical incident technique to determine an appropriate sample size, and they provided

incentives for participation in order to reduce response bias. Furthermore, the methods were clearly described and appropriate for the outcomes being measured, the survey questionnaire was provided in the appendix, and each outcome was measured independently and relationships between outcomes were measured using chi squared testing, which explores correlation between variables. The study design also was approved by the institutional Research Ethics Board. The 71% response rate was also high, according to standards for social research (Babbie, 2004).

The use of figures could be stronger. In Figure 1, the bar chart provided displays the primary purpose of requests, but it is posited by profession, rather than by the request purpose, and a simplified accompanying chart with totals is not provided. That made it difficult to compare the various purposes on the whole. The same is true for Figure 2, which displays the most important aspects of the search requests by profession. Figure 3 compares the varying ratings of search results' quality by how requests were submitted. The purpose is obscured by the chart because of the drastic difference in number of responses for the various categories. Pie charts or a 100% stacked column chart would have been more effective at communicating the differences in perceived quality across mediums.

Social desirability bias may have affected results as respondents may have provided answers they thought researchers would like to hear, especially since many of these respondents have ongoing contact with librarians, as evidenced by their reports of frequently submitting requests. Also, some responses may have been affected by the prompt for explanation if respondents chose the negative of two options; some may have chosen the affirmative for questions like "Were you satisfied with the layout/format of your search results?" in order to avoid having to type. It also was not mentioned by researchers whether the searching service had a cost, a factor which can influence users' expectations. A consideration for further study is the inclusion of non-requesters, or staff who did not submit a request for searching service.

Also, in order to further explore the survey findings, a focus group or targeted interviews with some of the survey respondents could confirm, refute, or further clarify some of the conclusions the authors provided in the discussion of results.

This study provides insight into a number of outcomes. Health sciences librarians may want to consider the inclusion of following up, additional fields on forms, and other aspects in their search service workflows. Personal communication through direct contact should also be explored as a preferred alternative to email for communicating with users. In addition, the study provides numerous opportunities for researchers to study librarian-mediated search services, including methods of follow-up by a librarian and the comparison of the information provided during verbal and written requests.

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