Case Study No 13

Best Practice Tips for a Library Enquiry Desk

The Enquiry Desk is the face of the Library, although Library contact is also made through teaching sessions, various media and meetings within departments, the Enquiry Desk is the place that people come to first when they visit the Library and therefore training and maintaining standards of service have a key role within a Library.

At Aston, our enquiry desk, which we call the Help Desk, is staffed by para-professional Information Assistants with Information Specialist Librarians being available if needed for in-depth subject queries during our busiest hours of enquiry desk opening. Our least busy first hour of the day is staffed by our Public Service Assistance as we have found this time of day we have the least amount of detailed enquiries. All Help Desk staff are encouraged to:

- Be aware of and able to use questioning strategies to find out what it is the enquirer really needs, even if this is not exactly what they are asking for.

- Be familiar and comfortable with the content, features and functionality of:
  a. the Library Website,
  b. including the Blogworm
  c. the Library SmartSearch
  d. the LibGuides

- Understand the nature of the Help Desk as to be a teaching opportunity and answer enquiries in such a way as to equip the enquirer with skills to carry out their own information seeking in future.

To assist staff, who as part of their jobs works on the Help Desk on an hourly basis at Aston, we:

- keep staff informed of any current/relevant changes as they occur, by using a white board near the desk to record information such as problems with printers/ Wi-Fi.

- Maintain and keep up to date a desk manual of frequently asked questions i.e. information about applying for interlibrary loans, amount of book loans for all Library users etc. We also maintain and keep up to date forms that may need to be handed out i.e. registration forms.

- keep at hand an up to date list of Library staff and key stake holders email address and telephone numbers.
Aston Library staff who work on the Help Desk have training prior to commencing this part of their job and undertake refresher sessions in working towards positive enquiry outcomes. On the Help Desk, staff are encouraged to consider that:

- Many people will have no idea what to expect when they first come to the Library. They will almost certainly not know what everything there is called, or how to describe everything within their subject area. Libraries also have their own weird processes and jargon- students may not know the processes or terminology, and so the way they choose to describe things may not be the way we would do it. This goes double for international students. Help Desk staff are recommended to make explanations to Library users at a level that is appropriate to that user.

- Academics are also not always au fait with the workings of the library, and may send students off on unobtainable missions: alternatively, misunderstandings and passed on messages may result in Library users having distorted or unreliable information. Help Desk staff are encouraged to use questioning strategies to find out exactly what it is that is required.

- As Librarians, the natural instinct is to be helpful and to try and sort out every single enquiry we get as soon as it is asked, but this is not always the best option. Even when staff work on the desk as a lone worker, they are working as part of a broader organisation: not all the enquiries that come to the enquiry desk actually fall within our remit. Help Desk staff should not feel that they have to always deal with everything themselves: in many cases, they are not in a position to resolve an enquiry- about, say, IT or course admin- the job here is not to solve the enquiry, but to point the enquirer in the direction of someone who can.

- It should be remembered that even if we are the right people to ask, we may not have the knowledge immediately to hand, asking colleagues for advice and support if you are not sure what to do, or simply taking time out to research or think over the problem should not be seen as a failure: but as the best way of getting the job done.

For further information, please contact: Alison Lobo a.lobo@aston.ac.uk
January 2015