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The Blended Desk and its Consequences on Collaboration

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Abstract

This article discusses the complications arising from the implementation of the “blended desk” model in an academic library and its influence on intra-organizational collaboration. Blended desks combine the physical spaces of traditional Circulation and Reference desks and staff in an arrangement with a new desk and multi-skilled individuals. Traditionally dissimilar mentalities and skill sets of the Circulation and Reference personnel along with a culture reflecting typical academic hierarchy all create impediments to the success of this service model. Given this, various reconsiderations of the blended desk model are suggested.

Keywords: Blended desk; mixed service model; academic libraries

Introduction

The combination or elimination of service desks in academic libraries is nothing new. Attempts to combine and pool the respective resources of both desks date back about 25 years or so when libraries were attempting to maximize the usefulness of something called the “Internet.” Reasons behind these initiatives include balancing financial shortfall,¹ educated experimentation with the service model,² or simply meeting the changing needs of library users.³ The institution where we, the authors, work has begun the process of combining service points in the university’s main library, a repository of 2.1 million items and the largest of the five separate libraries that comprise the George Mason University Libraries physical spaces. While aspects of these issues also face our institution, the primary reason behind the change here involves the increase in the quality of customer service.

Additionally, a unique feature of this attempt at blending originates from the personnel who were charged with spearheading the initial combinations. These persons included some of the more experienced classified staff who have had the opportunity to move up through the organization from Circulation into Reference. While such staff members are few in number,

they have a body of knowledge and experience that allow them to hit the ground running and serve effectively on the desk during a transitional and experimental period. This wealth of experience also provided for a more in-depth perspective on those possible issues and problems that might not otherwise be immediately apparent to those who crafted recommendations regarding a blended desk without experience in both service points. (Two of these individuals are the authors of this piece.)

Like many library professionals, both authors previously worked in Circulation, first as student assistants then as supervisors. Eventually we both were promoted into Reference. What follows reflects our unique perspectives regarding the ongoing changes to the service model and how the modifications create challenges to collaborative ventures for those involved.

Brief Background

The most recent attempt at our institution is not necessarily to collocate desks but to blend two service points, Circulation and Reference, into one. In a physical library, there basically are three options for the provision of Reference and Circulation services: wholly separate desks, mixed desks where personnel explicitly perform



department-specific tasks, and blended desks where one desk is operated by individuals who each may provide all services offered at that desk. This blended desk would create a single service point rather than a combined or mixed desk with two disparate units operating adjacent to each other. It is the blended desk that our university has adopted. The formal Reference desk is in the process of being eliminated and the Circulation desk is being modified to serve the blended purposes.

The stated intent of this blending is to avoid the “DMV” scenario where patrons at a Department of Motor Vehicles would simply be directed from one point on the desk to another. In doing so, the blended desk would circumvent the horrific parody of bureaucracy gone wrong. In this scenario, all staff working at the blended desk (in theory) has equal capacity to answer and solve patron concerns whilst providing a high level of collaborative baseline service.

The hope is that all workers at this service point will be knowledgeable of all major functions of Circulation, Document Delivery (Interlibrary Loan), and Reference, and have the capacity to perform in all of those duties to a reasonable extent. Customer service and a positive patron experience are held up as key elements of focus. A series of reference training workshops were conducted for those Circulation staff members with responsibilities at staffing the blended desk. The intent was to expand their understanding of research, resources, and basic reference activities. These trainings unwittingly succeeded in illuminating a series of problems facing any utilization of a blended desk, the discussion of which is where the conversation now turns.

Different Skillsets

It should go without saying to an audience reading library literature that Circulation and Reference require different skills from their respective personnel. In a basic understanding, Circulation is characterized by procedures, policies, and protocol whereas Reference operates in a more fluid manner. That is to say; Circulation is routine and very defined in its purpose within the library organization; Reference in turn adapts to

a given situation in interactions with an individual patron and is restricted largely by the limits of the available materials and the feasibility of the patron’s project.

Consider the typical interactions that occur at the Circulation desk. These often are directional or basic, such as “Where is this book?” or “Can I check out here?” However, the more complex interactions generally concern one thing: complaints about fines. In these situations, the staff member will negotiate the grievance to the best of their ability. Still, while the aim is to have a resolution that satisfies both patron and library, established policy may impede the realization of these goals. These inquiries tend to be very fixed, “yes” or “no” transactions.

In contrast, Reference communications have more flexibility. The point of these interactions is to find materials that will support the needs of the patron. Many times an inquirer will arrive without a research question or a framework to tackle a question. The Reference librarian or staff aids the patron in sculpting the request or project in question. While there are “yes” and “no” aspects of the communication (“No, your topic is not realistic,” for example), a resolution is almost always discoverable. The problem rarely is ever kicked up to a supervisor and often not referred to another Reference librarian. Simply put, one does not witness a lot of controversy or drama at the Reference desk.

On the surface, someone with an extensive customer service background will say that all transactions regardless of department or location should seek to please the patron. Realistically though, we all know that this often does not occur even in the best environments. In practical terms, it is important to understand that specific personalities of staff thrive in the different roles. When the desks are blended, the expectation is that each member of the desk will have a mix of both skills to a basic degree.

Compound all of this with the reality that many of the workers at the blended desk will be student workers. Though this may be the case, yet existing and experienced staff are likely to have a very narrow understanding of all library functions and services. Even within a single depart-

ment, in-depth knowledge can take months if not years to fully learn to exhibit proficiencies. The expectation that the high turnover of student workers or lower-ranked staff will have the time in their respective positions to acquire the multiplicity of skills required to be successful in the position is slim. This results in the need for more seasoned staff and/or librarians to serve at the desk. As we discuss later in this piece, that is detrimental to the collaborative spirit that the blended desk hopes to cultivate.

Because these skill sets are different, blending talents of the employees is necessary. Yet that is not necessarily what smart organizations attempt. Bolman and Deal specify two key elements of the organizational structure, namely, differentiating and allocating work, and coordinating and integrating roles and units once responsibilities have been parceled out.⁴ In the course of the differentiation and integration of the various roles within the library system, the rigidity of the classifications tends to impede this type of professional development and growth. While this issue may be recognized by several managers and senior librarians, they may lack the ability to enact true change. As Bolman and Deal further suggest, "Experienced managers...understand the difference between possessing a tool and knowing how to use it. Only experience and practice bring the skill and wisdom to size up a situation and use tools well."⁵ Instead of finding the appropriate department for individuals with varied abilities and personalities, blended desks impose homogeneity on the roles of the personnel.

The structural framework of the blended desk minimizes the efficacy of individuals best suited to work within the functional confines of specific departments. Cross-training staff and librarians will only alleviate some of these concerns because the issue involves personality as well. Some Circulation staff might not excel at research; some Reference librarians might not have a strong capacity for triage or confrontation. The blended desk forces individuals to work out of their comfort zones, which is not always a productive initiative.

Different Mindsets

One of the larger issues with this blending was identified early on. Essentially, the nature of Circulation and Reference are very different, not only in regards to day-to-day work but also in terms of philosophy and the characteristics of their public interactions at a service desk and at most any other point of contact. This disparity is in many ways dictated by their overall service mission, manner of work, and place in the wider library structure.

Reference is meant to be engaged in longer, richer, conversations. The Association of Research Libraries defines a reference transaction as "an information contact that involves the knowledge, use, recommendations, interpretation, or instruction in the use of one or more information sources by a member of the library staff."⁶ The interaction is information-based and involves the exchange of substantive knowledge or information. This differs qualitatively from "Can I check out this book?" or "May I pay my fine here?" kinds of questions.

The premise of the reference interview is to better identify the need of the users, to direct them to the highest-quality material, and to allow for an evolution of the interactive and collaborative relationship between Reference personnel and patrons.⁷ Patrons might arrive with a singular question such as "Where are the art books?" However, this one-minute conversation easily might expand into a 30-minute consultation through the illumination of other resources available to the individual. A different level of consciousness and inquiry is operative here.

On the other hand, Circulation is concerned with the repeated flow of material in and out, the continual maintenance of the collections and physical space, and ultimately the constant human and material traffic into and out of the library. In contrast to Reference, Circulation's environment creates an atmosphere where speed and efficiency take precedent over quality and richness of content. Generally speaking, quantity trumps quality.

As it turns out, in the environment of the blended desk, the most common activity is Circulation-related. The vast majority of activity involves the checking in and checking out of material. As to be expected, in a quantity-quality equation, where both are essential services, quantity enjoys the greater numbers of transactions. Our in-house statistics indicated that during September 2014, with September generally being the busiest month for the libraries at our university, only 11.7% of the questions fielded at the blended desk amounted to our institutions' classification of Reference questions, applying the definition of the Reference and Users Service Association as, "transactions [that] do not include formal instruction or exchanges that provide assistance with locations, schedules, equipment, supplies, or policy statements."⁸ This means that by our statistics, almost 90% of the activities of Reference staff and librarians working at a blended desk would not be defined as actual Reference work.

In addition, the most basic directional questions, simple call-number and title look-ups, and other simple tasks are all within the current bounds of Circulation activity. With the overall nature of activity leaning heavily towards Circulation, so too does the over-riding philosophy that dictates activity on the desk. The intent of Circulation is to address the most immediate need and send patrons on their way. As a result, these relationships are somewhat antithetical to the collaborative spirit in that they simply begin and end too quickly for substantive interaction.

Consider also the different physical space allotted the desk areas. Circulation is a standing transaction whereas chairs at Reference promote a more lengthy interaction. The assumptions and expectations underlying the operations of these two different service points suggest a philosophical difference between the two entities. This is expressed in a practical difference in the intensity and duration of the patron experience, and the impact needed and expected of the service provider.

Use of Personnel in a Hierarchy

Again to preface, we, the authors, both began our careers in the libraries as student employees

in Circulation. We worked our way up through our organizations first to management in Circulation and then after several years in that department we transitioned to Reference. The inclusion of the phrase "worked our way up" is not by accident. The change between positions and departments included added responsibilities that required prerequisite knowledge and experience. In this culture, while Circulation is considered eminently important, the role of Reference retains a higher status due to its closer connection to the mission of the university, namely, the education of the student.

Keep in mind that the critique offered here relates to librarianship and service within an institution of higher education. Like it or not, this is a caste system.⁹ In this realm, collaboration often occurs due to the letters after one's name and the lines on their CV. Image has substance in this environment and the Reference Librarians are at the top of the organizational food chain, as it were, with respect to the various library roles in the academy. The blended desk, though, asks the librarians to occupy the same operational role as a part-time student employee. Separate desks, however, provide for the differentiation of activities and legitimacies.

The argument made here is not that librarians cannot or should not check out books. Nor is it to suggest that Circulation staff do not possess the ability to acquire the skills to perform some Reference transactions. Instead, it speaks to the challenges that a blended desk creates for the mixed staff providing the service on that desk.

First, the employee-level full-time Circulation staff is being asked to perform duties above and beyond their state-regulated employee work profiles. Yet they are not being provided additional compensation or titular recognition. While the role may offer additional responsibilities and experiences for the staff level of employee, such an offer of expanded duties sometimes may be made in a very condescending manner.

Next, the classified staff members attached to the Reference departments are being asked to perform the duties of a Circulation Manager. Their Reference positions require at least a bachelor's degree, although at George Mason all cur-



rent employees in this position have at least a master's, often two or more. Circulation Manager positions do not require degrees, only suitable experience. However, both positions have the same classified staff ranking. The question then becomes which qualification within the hierarchy should be valued more – education or experience? Should the Reference employee with a master's degree with five years' experience have authority over the manager holding a bachelor's degree with 10 years on the job? Any answer is divisive and will produce consternation amongst the affected staff.

The greatest concern is with the librarians themselves. The blended desk holds the premise that all personnel on duty may perform all desk tasks (reference, check-out, fines, etc.) in order to provide one-stop customer service. At the same time, librarians are being asked to develop collaborative relationships with constituents of an academic department in various liaison responsibilities. This is where the different mindsets of Circulation and Reference generate the most taxing complexities. It is difficult for a patron or a faculty member to develop a research relationship with an individual who on appearance has the same duties as a student employee with whom you dispute a \$1.25 overdue fee. The dilemma is this: either the librarians are kept off the blended desk entirely, thereby losing important interactions with members of the university community, or they are being placed in a negative lower level service-oriented light.

Lastly, in a hierarchy, appearance counts. Like it or not, there are expectations for the individual offering research assistance. The connotation of traditional librarian roles and qualifications still permeate the academy even with a population of millennials in our midst championing egalitarian values. If a singular desk occupied by student-workers and minimally trained classified staff is the only resource for immediate in-person research assistance, high-level researchers such as graduate students or faculty (including those who recommend the library to their students and colleagues) may be hesitant to approach the library for support.

Conclusion

The point of this piece is not to suggest that blended desks cannot be successful at all. In fact they are quite effective in some of the smaller libraries in our university system. The difference between these libraries and the library discussed in this report is smaller libraries have smaller collections, far lower gates counts and patronage, and, for all intents and purposes, may be classified as subject-specialty libraries.

In a larger setting, the blended desk fails due to philosophical and functional differences that are very tricky if not impossible to reconcile for the personnel working these desks. As always, libraries and their administrators must consider both the explicit and implicit consequences of major organization changes prior to their implementation. Imaginative and creative ambitions do not always produce positive changes.

Endnotes

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- ⁶ Reference and User Services Association, "Definitions of Reference," American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/definitionsreference>.

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